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Noemi Evangelista

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Kierkegaard's *Repetition*: An Essay in Understanding

NOEMI EVANGELISTA

Believing that truth is an objective uncertainty inwardly appropriated by the individual with the passion of the infinite, Kierkegaard thinks that the way of communicating truth which is subjective is by addressing it to the subjectivity of another individual.¹ If it is inwardness which is being communicated, it cannot be done through direct means. In direct communication, one can make monumental pronouncements under the label of truth, and what he says can be easily repeated by just anybody — with or without acknowledgement — and it would perhaps sound dazzling, but the message would most likely be lost. What is said directly may be sure to impress, but it is apt to touch the ears, not the heart. The beauty of expression can be endlessly reproduced and admired, but the hearer remains as he is, he does not undergo the change the speaker intends to effect. Direct communication lacks the double reflection found in indirect communication. In the former, the concern is with the word which expresses the thought; in the latter, the relation of the author to the idea.² If one is concerned with his relation to the idea being communicated, he would be concerned about how his reader or hearer is related to the same idea — inwardly or outwardly — and how he can communicate the idea not in a way that it becomes a mere collection of beautiful sentences, but in a way whereby the reader or hearer can arrive at the same idea in much the same way he arrived at it. Others can get his

1. Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 51.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

message without being able to quote him, since there is hardly any "wise saying" to be quoted in the first place — there may be some but they are usually so contextual that practically no one would parrot them for fear of being misunderstood. People may conclude that somebody is intelligent and profound after reading or hearing some quotations from him, but in the case of Socrates whom Kierkegaard emulates, people in his time knew he was wise although they could hardly find any direct statement of his which they could echo. The method Kierkegaard advocates in communicating the truth as he conceives it is indirect communication.³ He uses indirect communication to convey the meaning of repetition; the task of deciphering what it means demands the reader's active participation.

Nowhere in his works does Kierkegaard give a direct definition of repetition, not even in his book with the word itself as its title.⁴ The book gives us two kinds of personality, two kinds of struggle, two kinds of repetition, and two levels of satisfaction. Within these differences, however, is a common point which may prove to be a key in unraveling the meaning of repetition: there is despair in both cases. From this common point springs a basic difference: the attitude to despair. Since there are two kinds of repetition illustrated, the key to the attainment of the satisfying repetition and of the unsatisfying one may be the contrasting attitudes to despair.

DESPAIR IN REPETITION WHICH DOES NOT SATISFY

In both the case of the young man and that of Constantine Constantius, different personalities and sets of circumstances lead to a consciousness of despair. Constantine could very well be the aesthetic personality criticized by Judge William in *Either/Or*.⁵ The aesthetic person talks or reads about the highest things but does not live them; "nothing results but a knowledge

3. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

4. *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology* trans. by Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, 1941).

5. Kierkegaard, "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage," *Either/Or*, vol. II, trans. by Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

of them." Likewise, Constantine gives a beautiful discourse on repetition without knowing what it means or where to look for it, as he has not experienced it himself, failing to find it to the end. The aesthete is an observer, a manipulator, and this is probably one of the reasons why he cannot reveal himself. Alongside this observant nature is a "hypochondriac curiosity;" it is not surprising that he constantly "worms his way into the confidence of people." When he has wormed his way into their confidence, he wants to be fate itself in relation to them, while he despises human and divine law. Constantine, too, makes a habit of observing people in a cool, detached way. The only time he forgets to observe is when he gets overwhelmed by the depth and intensity of the emotions of a young man in love. He remarks, "Only when there is hollowness, or where they (feelings) are coquettishly concealed has one a desire to make observations."⁶ After he gets over this, Constantine, in the manner of the aesthetic person, worms his way into the confidence of the young man who is in dire need of a confidante. In suggesting intricate ways of deceiving the girl when the young man despairs, Constantine seems to want to be fate itself in relation to him. The aesthetic person Judge William talks of loves the accidental, just as Constantine depends on accidental circumstances for an experience of repetition. The Judge may just as well be referring to Constantine when he says that in him (his young friend), repetition is "warded off and is impossible."

Constantine is like Johannes the Seducer⁷ in being intelligent, observant, shrewd, and calculating, as shown by his (Constantine's) experimentations and suggestions to the young man. He is indeed an experimenter like Frater Taciturnus,⁸ who would experiment with life rather than live it. As an experimenter, he is more concerned with results rather than the inner

6. Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 36.

7. Soren Kierkegaard, "Diary of a Seducer," *Either/Or*, vol. I, trans. by David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959).

8. Kierkegaard, "'Guilty?/Not Guilty?'" *Stages on Life's Way* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967).

struggle, and, since he depends on external circumstances in his experimentations, he develops by necessity, not by freedom. Being externally-oriented, he is interested in life only insofar as it can be interesting to him.

At this point, one would still wonder how such a personality is related to repetition; all he knows is that *this* personality leads to a repetition which does not satisfy. Taken by itself, the book (*Repetition*) says only this much. As an indirect communication would, it leaves to the reader much of the struggle in finding the connection. Only after he has understood the meaning of repetition, for which the book alone may not be sufficient, can the reader see the connection, if at all he does.

Along with his personality, Constantine's experiments lead him to the abyss of despair. Having lost contact with the young man after the latter turned down his suggestion, he sets out to see if he can discover repetition for himself. He has gone to Berlin before and he goes there again to see if repetition is possible. In the Konigstater Theater, the farces had delighted him in his first sojourn; some of the actors, the theater itself, and the audience, had a charm of their own which had fascinated him to a great degree. He again takes a seat in the section for exclusive boxes, but he finds that it is crowded this time — a point against repetition. The play begins, but after only thirty minutes, he leaves. The same things which had delighted and entertained him before could not now elicit the same response from him. Obviously, he conceives of repetition as the renewal of an aesthetic experience, and he fails to find it as such.

When Constantine was in Berlin before, it was winter; now it is a dusty, hot Ash Wednesday; this, too, frustrates him. In his old lodging place, he is surprised to find out that his landlord has gotten married; the vigor with which he had defended bachelorhood is now the same vigor with which he defends the married state. In his exasperation, Constantine concludes that repetition is not possible. The following day, his hopes come alive again on the way to a restaurant he had frequented. He does notice that the people are wearing clothes different from what they used to, but when he arrives at the restaurant, he

hears the same music, eats the same kind of food, and hears the same laughter. Here, at last, is repetition, he exults. In this, it is evident that he conceives of repetition as physical, mechanical, and natural, after he fails at the aesthetic level.

It must be noted that Constantine's experiments depend on accidental, external circumstances: people wearing the same clothes they wore the year before; the weather, the music, and the food served being the same; bachelors remaining bachelors; and the like, at this particular time when he is here with this particular project in mind.

It does not take long for Constantine to realize that the repetitions he encounters are indeed repetitions, but, alas, repetitions which are not satisfying, not the kind of repetition he has been seeking.

Constantine goes back home. At home, he hopes he could finally stumble upon the repetition which has, so far, proved elusive of him. To his chagrin and dismay, he finds out that his servant, who had not expected his sudden arrival, has turned everything upside down. Repetition in the sense of sameness of external conditions could not be found even in his own home. Now, he is tempted to revert to his old view that repetition is not possible. Whether at home or abroad, Constantine sighs, the only thing which is continually repeated is the impossibility of repetition.

The result of Constantine's repeated failure and small, unsatisfying successes on the mechanical level, is despair. Before he experiences despair, something unusual happens. At one o'clock in the morning, he wakes up with a feeling of utter contentment, of oneness with his environment. Almost at the same instant that he feels this unusual degree of contentment, he topples down from his imaginary pinnacle and feels the lowest depths of despair. Contentment could not be repeated. In his despair, he reflects on existence and concludes that it takes everything away and does not give anything back in the form of repetition. He had believed that the only salvation which lies for man to be saved from an "endless cycle of change and a hopeless past" was repetition, but he has failed to find it.

In being conscious of despair, Constantine is a step ahead of Johannes the Seducer. The latter goes through life without being conscious that he is in despair. This may be the first time Constantine is conscious of despair, but, as Kierkegaard would say, despair has been there since the beginning, only, he was not conscious of it.⁹ It was this initial despair to which he reacted when he set out experimenting on the possibility of repetition. His attitude to his original despair has been flight — flight from himself to the external. What Kierkegaard seems to be showing here is that there *is* repetition on different levels, but that repetition on the level of the finite does not satisfy. There is repetition in the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the enjoyment we get from an artistic presentation, the arrangement of our furniture, the lodging we take, the state of bachelorhood, etc. — there may be repetition in these as much as it is possible that there may *not* be. These depend on chance, on accidental, outer circumstances, and they give only superficial, temporary satisfaction which easily vanishes, leaving the person the same as before, if not more desperate. The person who has sought what satisfies in what could not satisfy and does not find it there (naturally) would think that this failure is a confirmation of the idea that there is really no hope for satisfaction and, thus, the deeper he would plunge into despair.

DESPAIR IN REPETITION WHICH SATISFIES

As in the case of Constantine, the personality of the young man along with external circumstances lead him to a consciousness of despair. The young man is a poet and, as such, he has the poetic temperament that goes with it, with all its emotional intensity and sensitivity, the constant engagement in recollection, reflection, and soul-searching. Unlike Constantine, he does not make an experiment out of his life, he does not live with repetition as an expressed goal. He feels, thinks, and lives life as he finds it.

9. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1941). p. 177.

The other major propelling condition for the repetition the young man experiences in the end is an experience deeply felt, the experience of falling in love. He falls in love so deeply that all he can do the whole day is contemplate his love and, with tears in his eyes, recite a verse of Paul Moller again and again. He dares not see his loved one for fear she would tire of him. What he needs most in such a situation is a confidante whom he finds in the person of Constantine. Constantine does not need to divert him, for he is sufficiently preoccupied with his thoughts and feelings about his beloved. In this state, a melancholy concern fills him.

In one of the first days of the young man's engagement, he already spends the whole day thinking of his beloved, recollecting their experiences together, wallowing in shared memories. It is as if he has suddenly become an old man recollecting the life he has lived. Constantine hypothesizes that even if the girl dies tomorrow, it would not make any difference, he would still be doing what he is doing today, for "Substantially, he was through with the whole relationship."¹⁰ In his act of recollection, however, the young man is getting farther from the girl. He recollects because he is *away* from the girl, a separation he has imposed on himself due to his own fears. In recollecting his love affair, the young man has indeed "leapt through the whole of life."¹¹ Distance has been created.

Recollection leads to reflection, and reflection leads to an uncertainty. The girl becomes a burden to the young man's heart. The more he longs for her, the more melancholy he becomes. This is complicated by doubts. Does he love her? Or does he only long for her? Further complicating the situation is his increased poetic productivity. Is she only a "muse" for him? Is he looking for a higher ideal of which she is merely the symbol? Is she merely the instrument which awakened his poetic talent? The young man deliberates: Since it is only she who can arouse his poesy, it is only she whom he can love. Yet, he merely longs for her. He could not translate his longing into a

10. Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 38.

11. *Ibid.*

real love relationship. His melancholy rising to a higher pitch due to the awareness of his guilt about making the girl unhappy through his melancholy, the young man tries to limit his poetic productivity. He offers his verses to her and uses them to delight and entertain her. The more poetic he becomes, the more lovable he becomes in her eyes, and the more desperate his situation becomes.

One choice left for the young man is to confess to the girl that she is only the occasion for his emergence into a poet. This solution presents problems. It would be like telling her she is incomplete, that he has outgrown her. It would be unfair, since he would appear to be the better of the two of them, and she would be left "deeply mortified and humiliated." This, the young man is too proud to allow. In this "poetic collision,"¹² for the young man to continue being a poet would be to cut off his relationship with the girl since he would not be able to actualize it; on the other hand, marriage would mean the death of his poetry. The choice left for the young man is: either to be honest and thereby unfairly humiliate the girl and abandon his love for her, or to deceive her and, in the process, himself by not being true to his poetic calling.

Constantine advises the young man in his agitated state, "In every love relationship which cannot be realized although it has begun, delicacy of behavior is the most offensive thing."¹³ He advises him to act like a scoundrel, and his suggestions on how to act like one is a good example of a devilish cunning comparable to that of Johannes the Seducer. Constantine instructs the young man to be neither inattentive nor solicitous, but indifferently concerned; to be casual in his relationship with her; to be aloof without being obvious about it, since girls are extremely sensitive to what is genuine and what is merely play-acting. He suggests these and many more intricate details which could add to the realism. He describes just the right amount of moderation to make the whole thing more believable. In this way, he tells the young man, the girl would appear to be perfectly

12. Kierkegaard, *Stages*, p. 367.

13. Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 44.

in the right, and he, perfectly in the wrong; her face and self-esteem would be saved. For Constantine, the way out of despair is shrewdness.

Honesty, deception, and a shrewdness which reconciles the two, are ways out of despair suggested to the young man. He refuses these suggestions. Instead, he does not go away and he does not do anything externally. He stays where he is, accepts his situation, and struggles within himself with Job as his model.

The Book of Job found in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible tells of a man who has been generously gifted by God both materially and spiritually. To try him, that is, to see if his faith depends on earthly blessings, God lets Satan take away his wealth; this fails to destroy his faith. Next, God lets Satan take away his children; Job remains firm in his faith. Then, even his health is taken away from him; his body is dreadfully swollen from head to toe. Job's wife loses her faith and she asks him to renounce God; Job's faith remains intact. His friends try to convince him that suffering is a punishment for sin, that he may have committed sins which he has to atone for. The only way out suggested to him is to repent for his sins, confess his guilt, and ask for the forgiveness of God. Job asserts his innocence, saying that outer fortune or misfortune is not the measure of a man's inner state. Before men, Job is damned, but in himself, he believes that he is in the right and that he is on trial before God, no matter how absurd it may seem to others. In autonomous freedom, he asserts himself while placing everything in the hands of God. What happens? God appears, vindicates Job, and doubles his fortune.

The young man tells Constantine he experiences a similar happening. In his first letters, he talks of the despair and suffering he undergoes. After he reads about Job, he feels that a thunderbolt is about to come of a nature he does not know yet. He does not say how it comes; all of a sudden, he just says that a repetition did take place, that he is again himself, that he has recovered his self in its original pristine state, and that he has received everything back double.

Whereas Constantine chooses shrewdness as a way to repeti-

tion, the young man elects to accept his despair. While Constantine remains on the finite level, the young man advances to the religious. Whereas Constantine seeks repetition in external things, the young man seeks it inwardly, deeper down in his being. Constantine thinks at first that he has to go abroad to discover if repetition is possible, only to find out later that he does not have to budge from the spot where he is in order to find out that repetition as he conceives it is not possible. On the other hand, the young man stays where he is and discovers and experiences true repetition.

TECHNIQUE AS A WAY OF BRINGING OUT MEANING

In *Repetition*, technique plays a major role in conveying the message. As has been said, two sets of personality, experience, attitude, struggle, and repetition run alongside one another, like a plot and a sub-plot running together, one serving as a foil to the other. There is a diametrical difference; the two could not both hold true. One ought to be a parody of the other, but which is the parody of which?

Certain elements may point to Constantine Constantius as the norm for the meaning of repetition. He is supposed to be the author of, and the narrator in, the book, so how could he contradict himself by implying that repetition is not what he says it is? How could the young man who is supposed to be only a character and therefore only a creation of the supposed author be more right than the author himself? Besides, it is Constantine who has repetition as a definite object of an experimentation; he only chanced upon the young man who never mentioned repetition in the beginning, so preoccupied was he with his love. It is Constantine who delivers a beautiful discourse on repetition. Constantine's supposed authorship and his conscious pursuit of repetition are factors which may lead the reader into looking up to him for the meaning of repetition.

In spite of the factors in favor of Constantine, why is it that the distinction of victory is awarded to the young man? Why is it that it is he who finds the repetition which Constantine has sought in vain?

Several conclusions can be made regarding the book. If a reader makes the mistake of reading only the first part, he may be led to conclude either that repetition is impossible, or repetition was sought in the wrong place, or the wrong kind of repetition was sought. If the reader goes on to read the second part, he may conclude either that the young man is under the illusion that he has attained repetition, or that repetition is possible only on the religious level. The conclusion depends on what kind of a person the reader is.

If the reader chooses the last conclusion — that repetition is possible only on the religious level — then he would have to confront the problem of authorship: how can this conclusion be reconciled with the authorship of Constantine Constantius? Perhaps, even if the reader has never heard of the existence of Kierkegaard, he would be able to conclude that Constantine is not the author but, like the young man, he is only one of the characters of the real, hidden author whose conceptual control Constantine is subject to like any other character. It is a story within a story with the difference that, figuratively, the story enclosing the other story has been torn off.

The uninitiated — if he is not careful — could easily fall into the trap of being misled by the supposed author, gulping in whatever he says. One illustration of the danger of being misled is when Constantine dazzles the reader with his discourse on repetition. If the reader is not on guard, he may easily be carried away. The initial awe can easily lead him to an unquestioning attention to the rest of Constantine's views. He may forget that Constantine has not lived what he preaches, in fact, fails to find what he has extolled, to the point of despairing about it. He may forget the Constantine is only a character — and not the hero at that — and as such, all his statements have a purpose other than what is actually contained in them. The real author, Kierkegaard, has taken pains to give the reader a chance to relate himself to the idea through his (the reader's) active participation in much the same way that he (Kierkegaard) relates himself to it. This is an excellent illustration of double

reflection and the dynamics involved in, and the effects of, indirect communication.

After reading *Repetition*, the reader may still be at a loss as to what repetition means. All that the book says about it is: it is that which Constantine seeks and fails to find, and that which the young man successfully discovers, in which he regains his self in its original pristine state and gets "everything back double" as what happened to Job.

Kierkegaard does not leave the reader hopelessly confused. No matter how cleverly he conceals himself, his presence can definitely be felt if the reader goes out of the circumference of the book and reflects on its design. Kierkegaard does not merely let Constantine and the young man live their lives regardless of his (Kierkegaard's) beliefs. The fact that victory is awarded to the young man is an indication of his presence, since it tells the reader that judgment has been passed on which is the true way — a judgment coming from someone other than the young man or Constantine: the real author, Kierkegaard himself. It is an indication that there must be a ripened concept of repetition which goes beyond the sphere of the fictitious author, Constantine Constantius. By contrasting two personalities, two attempts, and two results, and by letting one of them find the true, satisfying repetition, Kierkegaard shows under what conditions this repetition is possible and under what conditions it is not.

Thus, the reader sees that the guide to true repetition is the young man, and he may surmise that the key to an understanding of it is the common point of departure from which divergence results. The common point is despair. The divergence lies in the attitude to despair. Which attitude leads to the true path? Since it is the young man who succeeds in finding repetition, naturally, the reader will conclude that it is his attitude.

It can be said that Kierkegaard's *Repetition* is an invitation to his works as a whole. It seems to be just a summary which can only be understood in the light of his other works, particularly, those on despair, what leads to it, where it leads to, how it can lead to false repetition, and how it can lead to the true one. What *Repetition* says is not meant to be mechanically repeated;

its meaning is meant to be struggled for by the individual reader. For the effect to be deeper, the involvement must be more than intellectual. This deeper effect is what *Repetition*, an example of indirect communication, tries to elicit.

To present something whose meaning the reader still has to struggle for, the author must have arrived at the meaning first. What Kierkegaard has arrived at with difficulty, he presents again as difficult. He has arrived at repetition as a ripened fruit and he looks back to see the conditions which have brought it about and to parody those which have not; and, in looking back, he takes us, the readers, with him, perhaps to have us share in his own difficulties in reaching for the coveted fruit.