

Kierkegaard's Repetition as a Comedy in Two Acts

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He who knows how to keep silent discovers an alphabet that has just as many letters as the ordinary one; thus he can express everything in his jargon, and no sigh is so deep that he does not have the laughter that corresponds to it in his jargon, and no request so obtrusive that he does not have the witticism to fulfill the demand. (R 145)²

Right in the middle of the opening Report which marks the beginning of the very strange book called *Repetition*, Constantin Constantius sets aside some sixteen pages—much more than he ever devotes to clarifying the technical, philosophical meaning of the concept “repetition,” which is supposedly what the book is all about—to explain to us why he loves to go to the Königstädter Theater to see a good farce. When pressed to account for this strange moment in the text, commentators have almost universally agreed on one thing: it is a digression.³ Constantin Constantius’ love of farce and his long discussion of the way it is performed in the Königstädter Theater is essentially an aside which can safely be ignored. *Repetition* is a serious book with a serious message, commentators have agreed; and if you want to see that serious message you can’t afford to get bogged down in this strange digression about farce.

In this essay I will argue that the failure to take seriously Constantin Constantius’ love of farce is a serious mistake. When the pseudonyms address the subject of comedy their comments tend to hold important insights for understanding the indirect communications of which they are the authors. By offering what appear to be abstract comments on the general theory of comedy, the pseudonyms often provide crucial concrete clues into their projects of indirect communication; clues which could not be provided in any other way without betraying those very projects. Given these facts, it seems very likely that Constantin Constantius’ great love of farce, which leads him to spend a great deal of time in the middle of the narrative of his trip to Berlin singing the praises of this particular form of comedy, can hardly be an accidental detail that is irrelevant to the meaning of the work as a whole.

In fact, I will argue that Constantin’s enthusiasm for farce is extremely relevant to the text of which he is the author, because this text is itself a farce. The farce of *Repetition* has two acts, each of which I will consider more closely in this essay. Before the curtain goes up on act one, however, I want first to look more carefully at Constantin Constantius’ discourse on farce and the joys of attending the Königstädter Theater, because this will serve as a prologue to the whole play. (There will also be a brief curtain call at the end by a certain Mr. X, Esquire, if we can find him by the time the comedy is finished.)⁴

Prologue: Constantin Constantius on the Theater of Existence

Berlin has three theaters. The opera and ballet performances in the opera house are supposed to be *groszartig*; performances in the theater are supposed to be instructive and refining, not only for entertainment. I do not know. But I do know that Berlin has a theater called the Königstädter Theater . . . (R 154)

Constantin Constantius loves the theater because it mirrors the existential process of creating an identity. This process is one of trying on different roles, experimenting with different parts in an imaginative shadow play that (if it is to be successful) has to be protected from the demands of actuality. The theater presents this play of becoming in microcosm. It attracts us precisely because we recognize the activity on stage as a reflection of our own hidden life story—the story of the construction of the self through constant experimentation with different roles. Constantin Constantius views the self as a kind of play, a spontaneous performance where various shadows of an individual's possibility are set in motion under the imagination's direction.

There is probably no . . . person with any imagination who has not at some time been enthralled by the magic of the theater and wished to be swept along into that artificial actuality in order like a double to see and hear himself and to split himself up into every possible variation of himself, and nevertheless in such a way that every variation is still himself . . . In such a self-vision of the imagination, the individual is not an actual shape but a shadow . . . the individual has a variety of shadows, all of which resemble him and which momentarily have equal status as being himself . . . [I]n order not to gain an impression of his actual self, the hidden individual needs an environment as superficial and transient as the shapes, as the frothing foam of words without resonance. The stage is that kind of setting, and therefore it is particularly suitable for the shadow play of the hidden individual. (R 154-156)

For Constantius, the development of an individual identity requires acting. Possibilities need to be enacted on the stage of the imagination before they can have any meaning, before they can become serious candidates for acting out on the stage of actuality. But this kind of role playing requires protection from the world—from the “disquieting supervision of responsibility” that always accompanies the self's actual identity (R 156). The individual needs to be free to wander about in her own possibilities, “discovering now one possibility, now another” (R 155), free to perform these possibilities in her own imagination, but free also from the gaze of obligation which observes the performance of her actual identity. Constantin finds in the theater a kind of virtual reality, an alternative universe, that perfectly embodies a view of life as constant experimentation with your own identity—without, however, sacrificing the demands of responsibility in the process. He loves the theater because it imitates the hidden life of the “cryptic individual” that he wants to defend (R 155).

All forms of theater are attractive to Constantius because they imitate the process of self-creation that everyone follows. But he prefers farce above everything else. What makes farce so perfect in his mind is its imperfection. This imperfection mirrors the

imperfection of life. For this reason, an adult who rekindles his childhood love of the theater will naturally gravitate to farce, Constantius predicts. Such an adult “desires the comic effect and wants a relation to the theatrical performance that generates the comic. Since tragedy, comedy, and light comedy fail to please him precisely because of their perfection, he turns to farce” (R 157-158). An adult will immediately appreciate the “imperfections” of farce for their existential implications. Of all forms of theater, Constantius argues, farce comes closest to the theater of human existence in the demands that it makes on both the actors and the spectators.

To be a successful farce actor, Constantius argues, one must be fundamentally unreflective. The greatest actors, like Beckmann and Grobecker, are not intellectual geniuses, but rather “generative geniuses” (R 161) who create comedy without foresight or planning and without any reference to concepts.

They are not so much reflective artists who have studied laughter as they are lyricists who themselves plunged into the abyss of laughter and now let its volcanic power hurl them out on the stage . . . they have not deliberated very much on what they will do but leave everything to the moment and the natural power of laughter. (R 161)

Such an actor creates comedy spontaneously and almost effortlessly. His “generative genius” is his ability to create *ex nihilo*. “He does not need the support of interaction, of scenery and staging . . . he himself carries everything along. At the same time that he is being inordinately funny, he himself is painting his own scenery as well as a set painter” (R 163).

Constantius emphasizes that this kind of acting can’t be blocked out in advance. It will only succeed if it is genuinely spontaneous, and therefore surprising to both the performer and her audience. Actors who are capable of farce “know that their hilarity has no limits, that their comic resources are inexhaustible, and they themselves are amazed at it practically every moment” (R 161). The lack of rational control that characterizes farce brings this form of comedy dangerously close to offensiveness, and even to insanity. The way that an actor in a farce provokes laughter “requires the authority of genius; otherwise it is most repellent” (R 164). “He is an incognito in whom dwells the lunatic demon of comedy, who quickly extricates himself and carries everything away in sheer abandonment” (R 164). Such an actor has “the courage to venture what the individual makes bold to do only when alone, what the mentally deranged do in the presence of everybody, what the genius knows how to do with the authority of genius, certain of laughter” (R 161). The proximity of offense and madness infuses farce with a sense of danger that adds energy to the actor’s performance, and makes the audience all the more appreciative of the ease with which the actor navigates the tightrope between these two potential disasters. But this kind of tightrope walking is only possible if the actor remains firmly rooted in the moment, trusting in his spontaneity.

Constantius' characterization of the farce actor has very clear existential overtones. This actor "is not great in the commensurables of the artistic but is admirable in the incommensurables of the individual" (R 163). Such an actor succeeds by enacting the same qualities of spontaneity and responsiveness to the moment that are required of every existing individual. Both the actor on the stage and the existing individual are incapable of fully understanding what they are actually doing in any given moment, since life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards. Neither of them can base their performance on reflective concepts, but instead they must act as "generative geniuses," creating subjectively in a way that has the potential to surprise everyone, even themselves. So the requirements that farce places on an actor give this form of theater unique existential dimensions, which helps to close the gap between the Königstädter Theater and the theater of existence in which everyone lives.

The existential dimension of farce is apparent also on the other side of the stage, in the demands that the play makes of the audience. In this respect, what Constantius loves most about farce is that it cannot be brought into a general system of categories. Farce resists conceptualization. It demands that the spectator approach it strictly as an individual, without making any appeals to the general public or to accepted rules of aesthetic judgment. In this way farce constrains the audience member, just as it constrained the actor, to be a self-active "generative genius" who has forsaken the "commensurables of the artistic" in favor of "the incommensurables of the individual."

Every general esthetic category runs aground on farce . . . Because its impact depends largely on self-activity and the viewer's improvisation, the particular individuality comes to assert himself in a very individual way and in his enjoyment is emancipated from all esthetic obligations to admire, to laugh, to be moved, etc. in the traditional way. For a cultured person, seeing a farce is similar to playing the lottery, except that one does not have the annoyance of winning money. (R 159)⁵

Because farce cannot be judged by the consensus of the general public, the general public disdains it. When the general public attends the theater, "it wishes to have had—or at least fancies that it has had—a rare artistic enjoyment; it wishes, as soon as it has read the poster, to be able to know in advance what is going to happen that evening" (R 159-160). But "[s]uch unanimity cannot be found at a farce, for the same farce can produce very different impressions, and, strangely enough, it may so happen that the one time it made the least impression it was performed best" (R 160).

Consequently, when farce is performed at the Königstädter Theater the general public stays home. Those who do attend must accept the fact that, even though they are surrounded by people, in their judgment of the play they are essentially on their own. The non-reflective spontaneity and naïveté of the actor bypass all the viewer's conceptual constructions and appeal directly to each audience member's own spontaneity and naïveté. The spectator will discover the humor in the farce only if she

lowers her rational defenses and allows this direct appeal to happen; and if she allows this to happen she is also exposing herself to the risk of upsetting the expectations of her peers, (and perhaps even breaking, my goodness, the social bond).⁶ “Seeing a farce can produce the most unpredictable mood, and therefore a person can never be sure whether he has conducted himself in the theater as a worthy member of society who has laughed and cried at the appropriate places” (R 160). “Thus a person cannot rely on his neighbor and the man across the street and statements in the newspaper to determine whether he has enjoyed himself or not. The individual has to decide that matter for himself” (R 160). Since the enjoyment created by farce “consists largely in the viewer’s self-relating to the farce, something he himself must risk . . . he seeks in vain to the left or the right or in the newspapers for a guarantee that he actually has enjoyed himself” (R 160).

The individuality that farce requires of its audience leaves most members of the audience anxious or confused. They’re not sure if they liked it, and if they did like it, they’re not sure why. What farce requires of an audience member is “sufficient unconstraint to dare to enjoy himself entirely solo, sufficient self-confidence to think for himself without consulting others as to whether he has enjoyed himself or not” (R 160). Such a viewer, Constantius suggests, will discover in farce a form of comedy whose meaning will remain impenetrable to anyone who doesn’t approach the work strictly as an existing individual.

The “imperfections” of farce, which make it existentially demanding for both the actors and the audience, and which make it the preferred form of theater for Constantin Constantius, are readily apparent in *Repetition*. Like every good farce, *Repetition* has a small core of actors who are unreflective, generative geniuses. “A completely successful performance of a farce requires a cast of special composition. It must include two, at most three, very talented actors” (R 161). “Two such geniuses are enough for a farce theater; three are the most that can be used advantageously, for otherwise the effect is diminished, just as a person dies of hypersthenia” (R161). In the farce called *Repetition* there are two primary actors who support the weight of the farce: the narrator, Constantin Constantius, and the anonymous young man who engages Constantin’s services. Both of these actors perform their parts brilliantly, and the consequence is that the general public has no idea what to make of the book. It would like to know that it has enjoyed itself, or been edified in some way, or learned something important, but it can’t be sure that it has. Everyone is left to himself in his attempt to understand the comedy, (which apparently is just what the author wanted [R 149-150]). *Repetition* forces its audience to set aside its reliance on general rules and the general public if it is to appreciate the comedy that it stages for their benefit. That almost all readers of the book have failed to do so is witnessed by the history of its interpretation, wherein there is very little laughter to be heard. On the other hand, for one who has “sufficient unconstraint to dare to enjoy

himself solo, sufficient self-confidence to think for himself without consulting others as to whether he has enjoyed himself or not” (R 160), this farce still has the power to create “a very singular meaning” (R 160)—and also to be very funny.⁷

To recover the singular meaning and the farcical dimension of *Repetition*, I will turn now to its two principal comic actors and the two moments of comedy that they bring to the play.

Act One: Constantin Constantius and the Trials of the Experimental Psychologist

. . . thus do I admire you, and yet at times I believe that you are mentally disordered. Is it not, in fact, a kind of mental disorder to have subjugated to such a degree every passion, every emotion, every mood under the cold regimentation of reflection! Is it not mental disorder to be normal in this way—pure idea, not a human being like the rest of us, flexible and yielding, lost and being lost! Is it not mental disorder always to be alert like this, always conscious, never vague and dreamy! (R 189)

Constantin Constantius is a spy. The author of *Repetition* regards his book as a case study in what he calls “experimenting psychology.” He has convinced the anonymous young man to consider him his confidant, and to share with him his most secret thoughts and moods (R 134). Constantius uses the information he receives to construct experimental situations so that he can study his subject better (R 137). And the young man is not his only experimental subject—Constantius claims to have a similar relationship “with several like him” (R 140), a few of whom are discussed in passing (e.g. R 147, 167, 181). The young man suggests that Constantius has sacrificed his humanity for the sake of his observations (R 189). “Are you not afraid,” he writes, “of running headlong into a dreadful passion called contempt for men?” (R 192) But Constantius is unmoved by these criticisms. He takes great pride in being someone who has trained himself “every day for years to have only an objective theoretical interest in people” (R 180), and who has mastered the art of disguising himself so that his subjects will drop their own disguises and reveal themselves completely. This means transforming himself into a scientific instrument in order to obtain the material evidence that he is looking for, which is nothing less than the content of his subjects’ consciousness.

An observer knows how to appear easygoing; otherwise no one opens up. Above all, he guards against being ethically rigorous or portraying himself as the morally upright man. There is a degenerate man, one says, he has taken part, has had some wild experiences, *ergo*, I certainly can confide in him, I who am far superior to him! Well, so be it. I ask nothing of men but the substance of their consciousness. I scale it, and if it is weighty, no price is too high for me. (R 183)

The observer’s vocation, according to Constantius, is purely scientific. His goal in studying his subjects is to uncover the objective truth of the world, the hidden reality behind the masks of human behavior. His desire is to use his relationship with his

subjects as an occasion for attaining a more complete relationship with the Idea. Constantius describes this occupation in a remarkable passage whose unmistakably sexual character suggests that the observer's deepest intimacy is reserved not for his subjects but rather for the ideas which are put into play in their lives:

So I am by nature: with the first shudder of presentiment, my soul has simultaneously run through all the consequences, which frequently take a long time to appear in actuality. Presentiment's concentration is never forgotten. I believe that an observer should be so constituted, but if he is so constituted, he is also sure to suffer exceedingly. The first moment may overwhelm him almost to the point of swooning, but as he turns pale the idea impregnates him, and from now on he has investigative rapport with actuality. If a person lacks this feminine quality so that the idea cannot establish the proper relation to him, which always means impregnation, then he is not qualified to be an observer, for he who does not discover the totality essentially discovers nothing. (R 146)

On this account, the goal of Constantin Constantius, the observer and experimenting psychologist, is an explicitly Hegelian one: to discover the objective whole, the totality, which is behind the particulars of human behavior and human history. This vocation is both passionate and demanding, but Constantius regards it as a noble calling because everything is done for the greater good of science. "[I]t is often distressing to be an observer—it has the same melancholy effect as being a police officer. And when an observer fulfills his duties well, he is to be regarded as a secret agent in a higher service, for the observer's art is to expose what is hidden" (R 135).

The role of the scientific, experimenting observer, as Constantius describes it, is no doubt worthy of a certain admiration and praise. The only problem with it is that it is completely out of place when one is attempting to understand repetition. The nature of repetition, as Constantius explains it, and the function of the experimenting observer, as Constantius explains it, are completely at odds. And this is precisely the source of the comedy. Constantin Constantius turns *Repetition* into a farce and becomes a great comic actor when he attempts to discover by means of objective, experimental, scientific observation whether or not repetition is possible.

To see how funny this really is, we need to piece together Constantius' various remarks on repetition in order to create at least a rudimentary picture of what he is looking for when he conducts his experiments. Then the comic incongruity between what he is looking for and how he is looking for it will become apparent.

In his discussion of the nature of repetition Constantius follows the same pattern which he alludes to in a passing remark on the pseudonym "A" from *Either/Or*: as an author he is "at times somewhat deceitful, not in the sense that he says one thing and means another, but in the sense that he pushes the thought to extremes, so that if it is not grasped with the same energy, it reveals itself the next instant as something else" (R 133). While Constantius seems to believe that he himself knows what repetition is,

he doesn't bother to tell us everything that he knows. The "question of repetition" that Constantius poses for himself in the very first paragraph of the book is limited to "whether or not it is possible, what importance it has, whether something gains or loses in being repeated" (R 131). We are left to piece together a theory of the nature of repetition from scattered remarks that Constantius makes in the course of his experimenting, and then to interpret these fragments with the same passion and energy with which Constantius has infused them, in order to arrive at something approaching a complete picture or theory of the meaning of repetition. Once that is in place, we can then consider whether or not that theory of repetition is compatible with Constantius's own attempt to verify whether or not repetition exists.⁸

Constantius defines repetition by contrasting it with recollection. Recollection and repetition are mirror images of each other. "Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward" (R 131). Both recollection and repetition are attempts to take the present moment seriously, by forming some connection between present and past (recollection), or present and future (repetition). The "now" of the present is always a singular instant, a blink of the eye which immediately disappears and in itself has no preestablished or lasting meaning. Consequently, without either recollection or repetition to give meaning to the present moment, "all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise" (R 149).

Recollection was the preeminent category of Greek philosophy. For the Greeks recollection gave meaning to existence by connecting it with a past that is always already beyond one's reach. In Greek thought there is nothing new under the sun; no genuine discoveries are possible. To know is not to create or uncover but to remember, and this memory provides an anchor of stability and significance to the fleeting moments of one's experience. In this way recollection bestows meaning on the present, but because that meaning is rooted in a past that is always unrecoverable, it is tinged with sadness (R 132). Recollection makes security and sadness inseparable. "Recollection has the great advantage that it begins with the loss; the reason it is safe and secure is that it has nothing to lose" (R 136).

What recollection was to ancient philosophy, Constantius argues, repetition will be to modern philosophy, even though modern philosophy is not yet aware of this (R 131).⁹

At present, Constantius writes, philosophy remains ignorant of repetition. It "makes no movement; as a rule it makes only a commotion, and if it makes any movement at all, it is always within immanence, whereas repetition is and remains a transcendence" (R 186). But Constantius predicts that this ignorance of repetition will be replaced in the future. "Repetition is the new category that will be discovered," he predicts (R 148). If his prediction is realized it would mark a radical paradigm shift for philosophy, because it would transfer the source of meaning out of the past and into the future.

The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new. When the Greeks said that all knowing is recollecting, they said that all existence, which is, has been. When one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence. (R 149)¹⁰

The paradigm shift involved here is not complicated, but its consequences for philosophy are enormous. Shifting the source of meaning into the future creates a fundamentally new relationship to time, and a fundamentally new relationship to the idea of the new. Repetition is an attempt to bring together both new and old in a movement that—like existence—always faces the future.

To explain this, Constantius uses the analogy of a marriage:

repetition is a beloved wife of whom one never wearies, for one becomes weary only of what is new. One never grows weary of the old, and when one has that, one is happy. He alone is truly happy who is not deluded into thinking that the repetition should be something new, for then one grows weary of it. It takes youthfulness to hope, youthfulness to recollect, but it takes courage to will repetition . . . he who does not grasp that life is a repetition and that this is the beauty of life has pronounced his own verdict and deserves nothing better than what will happen to him anyway . . . (R 132).

The only way for a marriage not only to endure through time, but also to be a continuing source of happiness and growth, is through repetition. The partners in the marriage are the same people every day of their lives, and they wake up each morning to find themselves married to the same person they were married to yesterday, and the day before that. All of these components of the marriage are the same, but the relationship itself—if it is to be a happy and fulfilling relationship—must be constantly made new. In one sense the relationship is always old, in that it is based on a commitment that was made long ago, but in another sense it can be always new, in that it is renewed with each new day, and willed into existence with a courage that insists on discovering greater depth and uncharted territory in what is—apparently at least, on the surface of things—the same as it ever was, (except for the fact that everyone involved is getting older). Repetition seeks innovation and novelty within the borders of the same. It seeks to prove that a single personality has infinite depth,¹¹ which means that a relationship between the same two people can be continually, inexhaustibly new as it grows old, while at the same time remaining always, in appearance at least, the same. A relationship of repetition brings together change and continuity by moving the source of meaning into the future.

In contrast to a relationship of repetition, typified by marriage, consider a relationship of recollection, typified by the young man's "poetic relationship" to his beloved. The young man who is the subject of Constantius' observation is "deeply and fervently in love," and yet after just a few days

He was essentially through with the entire relationship. In beginning it, he took such a tremendous step that he leaped over life. If the girl dies tomorrow, it will make no essential difference; he will throw himself down again, his eyes will fill with tears again, he will repeat the poet's words again. What a curious dialectic! He longs for the girl, he has to do violence to himself to keep from hanging around her all day long, and yet in the very first moment he became an old man in regard to the entire relationship. Underneath it all, there must be a misunderstanding . . . His mistake . . . was that he stood at the end instead of at the beginning. (R 136-137)

In the young man's case the relationship has been poeticized right out of existence. The girl has been reduced to a memory, and her actual existence is now an obstacle to the recollected relationship. The young man must find a way to get the actual, existing girl out of the picture so that he can pursue his relationship with the idealized, remembered girl without any interference from the demands of actuality. Because it fixes its gaze strictly on what is past, recollection's love cannot really be love, Constantius argues. It can only be a longing for that which is past and gone, forever out of one's reach (R 137).

Since the girl has been removed from the picture the young man's love is really a kind of self love. There is no relationship because there is no other party to share in the relationship. "The young girl was not his beloved: she was the occasion that awakened the poetic in him and made him a poet . . . she had made him a poet—and precisely thereby had signed her own death sentence . . . In a sense, her existence or non-existence was virtually meaningless to him" (R 138). "It was impossible for him to create a real relationship out of this misunderstanding" (R 141). Having transformed the relationship with the girl into a poetic longing, idealized in a memory, the only one left in existence to be an object of the young man's affection is himself.

Repetition emphasizes this point with an abundance of masturbatory imagery. For example, writing of the young man's intellectual abilities Constantius notes:

The young man was so constituted and endowed by nature that I would have wagered that he had not been caught in the snare of erotic love . . . He had unusual mental powers, particularly imagination. As soon as his creativity was awakened, he would have enough for his whole life, especially if he understood himself properly and limited himself to a cozy domestic diversion, together with mental activity and pastimes of the imagination, which are the most perfect substitute for all erotic love, are not at all accompanied by the inconveniences and disasters of erotic love, and have a definite similarity to what is most beautiful in the bliss of erotic love. Anyone with that nature does not need feminine love, something I usually account for by his having been a woman in a previous existence and his having retained a recollection of it now that he has become a man. (R 184)

More imagery of auto-eroticism is found in the young man's letters to Constantin Constantius, especially in the final letter. After the young man learns that the girl has

married someone else, the language of self-absorption and self-love intensifies dramatically. He writes:

Let existence reward her as it has, let it give her what she loved more; it also gave me what I loved more—myself. (R 220)

I am myself again; the machinery has been set in motion . . . the magic formula that hexed me so that I could not come back to myself has been broken . . . My emancipation is assured; I am born to myself, for as long as Ilithyia folds her hands, the one who is in labor cannot give birth. (R 221)

It is over, my skiff is afloat. In a minute I shall be there where my soul longs to be, there where ideas spume with elemental fury, where thoughts rise uproariously like nations in migration. (R 221)

Finally, at the end of this letter, the masturbatory self-absorption that has been apparent throughout the book finally climaxes in a paragraph that seems very much like the textual equivalent of an orgasm:

The beaker of inebriation is again offered to me, and already I am inhaling its fragrance, already I am aware of its bubbling music—but first a libation to her who saved a soul who sat in the solitude of despair: Praised be feminine generosity! Three cheers for the flight of thought, three cheers for the perils of life in service to the idea, three cheers for the hardships of battle, three cheers for the festive jubilation of victory, three cheers for the dance in the vortex of the infinite, three cheers for the cresting waves that hide me in the abyss, three cheers for the cresting waves that fling me above the stars! (R 221-222)

The bottom line in this comparison between a relationship of repetition, (such as marriage), and a relationship of recollection, (such as the young man's poeticized relationship with the girl, which in the end is really just a relationship with himself), is that repetition is capable of discovering meaning in a future which has not happened yet, and which therefore leaves room for change and becoming, while recollection can only find meaning in an unchangeable past, a relationship in which one is inevitably removed from the present moment of existence. Both recollection and repetition bring meaning to existence, and if neither of them is present, "all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise" (R 149). But recollection can give meaning to existence only at the cost of transforming the existing individual into "a memorial volume of the past" (R 133). Repetition, on the other hand, gives meaning to existence without contradicting the relationship to time that the existing individual finds herself in. Repetition allows the individual to continue to live her life forward, but without thereby becoming "a tablet on which time writes something new every instant" (R 133).

The theory of repetition that Constantin Constantius articulates is clear and existentially coherent. What is incoherent, and therefore very funny, is the attempt

that Constantius makes to study repetition through scientific observation. Constantin Constantius becomes a comic actor, and *Repetition* becomes a farce, when he juxtaposes a theory of repetition which is subjective and a method of observation which is objective.

To see the comedy of such a juxtaposition, consider Constantius' trip to Berlin. The trip is conceived as a scientific experiment that will prove once and for all whether or not repetition is possible. Such a plan assumes that repetition is something that is publicly observable, subject to objective measurement and analysis. Not surprisingly, with this goal in mind Constantius is disappointed at every turn. All the external details of his previous visit to Berlin, which he longed to find repeated again, have changed. His landlord is now married, the city lacks the beauty he remembers from his last visit, and in the Königstädter Theater, the performance of *Der Talisman* is not as enjoyable as before, (and he can't even get the same seat that he had last time). He had hoped to verify the possibility of repetition by repeating the same satisfactions of his previous visit, but the experiment fails miserably. Nothing is the same, except for the features of the trip that he wanted to change; everything else that repeats repeats differently, and Constantin Constantius can get no satisfaction.

Constantin's assumptions about satisfaction play an important role in the Berlin experiment, and they serve to clarify further the comedy of his approach to repetition.¹² The only repetition he finds is not the kind that brings happiness, but rather the kind that brings frustration and annoyance—such as the repetition he discovers in the restaurant he used to frequent: “the same witticisms, the same civilities, the same patronage; the place was absolutely the same—in short, the same sameness . . . What an appalling thought—here a repetition was possible!”(R 170). Constantius assumes (correctly) that repetition should bring a certain kind of happiness, but his conception of that happiness as undisturbed tranquillity and satisfaction show that he is still under the spell of recollection. Consider the bitter conclusions about the possibility of happiness that Constantius tosses out at the end of the Berlin experiment:

The older a person grows, the more he understands life and the more he relishes the amenities and is able to appreciate them—in short, the more competent one becomes, the less satisfied one is. Satisfied, completely, absolutely satisfied in every way, this one never is, and to be more or less satisfied is not worth the trouble, so it is better to be completely dissatisfied. Anyone who has painstakingly pondered the matter will certainly agree with me that it has never been granted to a human being in his whole life, not even for as much as a half hour, to be absolutely satisfied in every conceivable way. (R 172-173)

It follows that life is a swindle (R 172). Everything that it gives it also retakes, without providing any repetition (R 172).

Constantius then proceeds to tell the story of the one day in his life when he got closest to perfect satisfaction, and actually began to think that it was possible—when suddenly everything was ruined by a slight irritation in one of his eyes: perhaps an eyelash or a speck of dust (R 173). “[I]n the same instant I was plunged down almost into the abyss of despair” (R 173). It is clear from this story, and from all of Constantius’ complaints about the impossibility of satisfaction, that he is in the grip of a certain utilitarian fantasy wherein happiness consists of the complete elimination of all pain and the institution of pure unadulterated pleasure. This is a conception of happiness as *stasis*, as the maintenance of a previous—now past—state of happiness, all of which boils down to a theory of happiness as recollection. Constantius is not prepared to accept the true happiness of repetition which he himself explained prior to his second trip to Berlin (R 131-133), and consequently he believes that his experiment has demonstrated the impossibility of happiness. He finds repetition only in the miserable and painful details of the trip, such as the stagecoach ride, where, unfortunately, everything repeated itself (R 151). This is not terribly surprising, given that Constantius is a person who dislikes all change, even housekeeping (R 171). After enduring such undesirable repetition for several days in Berlin, Constantius writes: “I became so furious, so weary of the repetition, that I decided to return home. My discovery was not significant, and yet it was curious, for I had discovered that there simply is no repetition and had verified it by having it repeated in every possible way” (R 171). This comical conclusion to Constantius’ Berlin experiment is the direct result of the comical assumptions that the experiment was based upon.

But the comic performance that Constantin Constantius gives in act one of *Repetition* plays a valuable part in the book’s indirect communication of the meaning of repetition. It brings into relief one aspect of repetition which is essential, and yet very easy to overlook or even to contradict in a text that aims to tell the truth about this concept. The meaning that repetition finds in the future can only be a personal meaning.¹³ Repetition creates meaning by discovering newness in what is apparently (and as far as any observer can detect, since an observer is only capable of observing exterior surfaces) old.¹⁴ Therefore, what Constantin Constantius says of the young man actually applies with perfect accuracy to his own project of observation: It is characteristic of the young man, however, precisely as a poet, that he can never really grasp what he has done, simply because he both wants to see it and does not want to see it in the external and visible, or wants to see it in the external and visible, and therefore both wants to see it and does not want to see it. (R 230)

True repetition gives significance to the present moment by discovering depth beneath the surfaces that are objectively apparent. A form of repetition that is observable would lead to what Constantius explicitly says true repetition is intended to avoid: transforming an individual into “a tablet on which time writes something new every instant . . . susceptible to every fleeting thing, the novel, which always enervatingly

diverts the soul anew” (R 133). The task of the book of which Constantin Constantius is the author is an impossible task: explaining the meaning of a concept whose meaning is never general, but rather always particular and individual, and therefore always hidden from objective observation. Given this impossible task, the only way for Constantius to succeed is to fail. By assuming the role of a comic actor, Constantius fails in the task that he sets for himself—to verify the possibility of repetition by objective, scientific means—but succeeds, indirectly, in communicating something important about the essentially subjective nature of repetition.

Act Two: the Anonymous Young Man and the Trials of Job

I do not converse with people, but in order not to break off all communication with them, as well as not to give them blather for their money, I have collected quite a few poems, pithy sayings, proverbs, and brief maxims from the immortal Greek and Roman writers who have been admired in every age. I have added to this anthology several superb quotations from Balle’s catechism published under the license of the orphans’ home. If anyone asks me anything, I have a ready answer. I quote the classics as well as Per Degn, and as a bonus I quote Balle’s catechism. “Even if we have attained all desirable honor, we ought not to let ourselves be carried away by pride and haughtiness.” Then I deceive no one . . . What could be gained if I did say something? There is no one who understands me. My pain and my suffering are nameless, even as I myself am nameless. (R 203)

The second comic actor in the farce called *Repetition* is the anonymous young man who is the subject of Constantin Constantius’ scientific observation.¹⁵ The young man is in love with the story of Job. He is, in every way, a Job-intoxicated man. “Although I have read the book again and again,” he writes, “each word remains new to me. Every time I come to it, it is born anew as something original or becomes new and original in my soul. Like an inebriate, I imbibe all the intoxication of passion little by little, until by this prolonged sipping I become almost unconscious in drunkenness” (R 205). Having fled from his beloved, and from the scientific gaze of Constantin Constantius, the young man isolates himself from the world, with only Job as his companion.

In Job he finds a voice for his suffering, and also a model to follow in leveling a complaint against the universe. “[Y]ou did not disappoint men,” the young man says of Job, “when everything went to pieces—then you became the voice of the suffering, the cry of the grief-stricken, the shriek of the terrified, and a relief to all who bore their torment in silence, a faithful witness to all the affliction and laceration there can be in a heart, an unfailing spokesman who dared to lament. . .” (R 197). “I need you, a man who knows how to complain so loudly that he is heard in heaven” (R 198). (“[B]ut woe also to him,” the young man adds, “who would cunningly cheat the sorrowing of sorrow’s temporary comfort in airing its sorrow and ‘quarreling with God’” [R 197]). Cut off from the rest of the world, the young man reads and re-reads

the Book of Job, finding endless shades of meaning for himself within its pages (R 204). He devotes two of his eight letters to expressing his unbridled enthusiasm for the Book of Job in general, and two more letters to giving his interpretation of the text.

That interpretation focuses on freedom. “Job’s greatness is that freedom’s passion in him is not smothered or quieted down by a wrong expression,” the young man writes. “In similar circumstances, this passion is often smothered in a person when faintheartedness and petty anxiety have allowed him to think he is suffering because of his sins, when that was not at all the case” (R 207). Job demonstrates that—in spite of all human frailties—“in freedom [humanity] still has something of greatness” (R 208).

The Book of Job is, no doubt, a very mysterious and powerful story, and no one can read it without being moved by its depiction of humankind’s ultimate vulnerability. But when the young man adopts Job as his role model, and tries to imitate his complaint to heaven, everything is transformed into farce. The source of the comedy in the second act of the farce called *Repetition* is the incongruity between the trials of the young man and the trials of Job. While the young man sees a perfect fit between Job’s loss and his own, their stories actually diverge at two important points.

First of all, it’s impossible to keep a straight face when comparing the suffering of Job and the suffering of the young man. In one day, Job loses five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred she-asses, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, seven sons, three daughters, and an unspecified number of household servants. Finally, he himself is smitten with boils from head to toe, which he has to scrape off with a potsherd (Job 1-2).¹⁶ To add insult to injury, these disasters are not just the result of bad luck; they are deliberately inflicted upon him by God, whom Job has feared and worshipped all his life in a perfectly upright manner. On the other hand, what exactly is the young man suffering from? He’s involved in an unhappy love affair, which he wants to end, even though the girl still loves him, but he can’t quite bring himself to do it, and it irritates him that this has become his responsibility. Constantin Constantius notes that the first time he met the young man he immediately knew he was a poet because “a situation that would have been taken easily in stride by a lesser mortal expanded into a world event for him” (R 230). The young man’s suffering is so trivial in comparison to the trials of Job that even mentioning the two of them in the same breath is hilarious.¹⁷ All of the young man’s protestations, his complaints about the injustice of the universe, his terrible cries, which frighten even the birds at the fishery when he meets Constantin Constantius there at dawn (R 140)—the triviality of the young man’s complaints make all of these seem like nothing more than self-indulgent parodies of Job’s story of genuine suffering.

Consider, for example, perhaps the most famous text in all the young man's letters—his tirade against the meaninglessness of existence in letter number three:

I am at the end of my rope. I am nauseated by life; it is insipid—without salt and meaning. If I were hungrier than Pierrot I would not choose to eat the explanation people offer. One sticks a finger into the ground to smell what country one is in; I stick my finger into the world—it has no smell. Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? What is the meaning of that word? Who tricked me into this whole thing and leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks as if I had been bought by a peddling shanghai of human beings? How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn't it a matter of choice? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager—I have something to say about this. Is there no manager? (R 200)

This text has been invoked repeatedly as the paradigm of the existentialist principle that humans are thrown into a world that, in itself, is meaningless.¹⁸ That's a very serious principle. But in this context the young man's appeal to that principle is impossible to take seriously because it is so clearly a parody of Job's speech about the injustices inflicted on him—which begins in chapter three with the words, "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived" (2:3) It is comical that the young man is so lost in his poetic existence that—unable to see the tremendous gulf that separates the unhappiness of his imperfect love affair from the pain and suffering of losing seven sons and three daughters (not to mention quite a bit of cattle)—he calls upon Job, of all people, as the only person who can possibly comprehend his misery, and then tries to imitate the Book of Job with his own juvenile rant against a universe that has not granted all his wishes.

Letter number three also brings to the foreground the second, and most important, disconnection between Job and the young man. As the young man affirms, Job becomes great through the use of his own freedom (R 207-208). In spite of all the tragedies that have befallen him, in spite of the terrible circumstances to which he has been reduced, Job still asserts himself as a person who is free and responsible. The young man, on the other hand, consistently refuses to exercise his own freedom. His overriding obsession is the fact that he might be considered guilty for the way he behaved with the young girl, and he finds this extremely annoying. To avoid being called guilty, he casts about for every possible excuse. Someone or something else, he argues, must have been to blame:

My mind is numb—or is it more correct to say I am losing it? One moment I am weak and weary, yes, practically dead with apathy; the next moment I am in a rage and in desperation rush from one end of the world to the other to find someone on whom I can vent my anger. My whole being screams in self-contradiction. How did it happen

that I became guilty? Or am I not guilty? Why, then, am I called that in every language? . . . Has something happened to me, is not all this something that has befallen me? (R 200-201)

Who is to blame but her and the third factor, from whence no one knows, which moved me with its stimulus and transformed me? After all, What I have done is praised in others. —Or is becoming a poet my compensation? I reject all compensation, I demand my rights—that is, my honor . . . must I perhaps repent that the world plays with me as a child plays with a beetle? (R 202)

The young man insists upon his innocence in the strongest possible terms. Like Job, he argues strenuously with anyone who would say that he is at fault (although, unlike Job, it's not at all apparent to whom he is speaking). “Even if the whole world rose up against me, even if all the scholastics argued with me, even if it were a matter of life and death—I am still in the right. No one shall take that away from me” (R 201). On this point, as on all others, the young man aligns himself with Job, who “despite everything, is in the right” (R 207). But on this point, once again, the identification is absurd. While Job is innocent, the young man clearly is not. He has walked out on a relationship without any explanation, leaving the girl alone and confused, and even before that he was guilty of concealing his true feelings from the girl, which ultimately did neither of them any good. Clearly, these are not capital crimes, but their triviality only underscores the depth of the young man's stubbornness in refusing to accept responsibility for his own actions. But when this effort to evade his own freedom and responsibility leads him to adopt Job, of all people, as his guide and role model, the misunderstanding becomes hilarious.

Perhaps the height of the comedy that results from the young man's refusal to acknowledge his own freedom is the moment in letter number seven when he announces that he is waiting for a thunderstorm (R 214-215). For an entire month he sits and waits, “*suspensio gradu*,” for the thunderstorm which will remake his entire personality (R 214). “What will be the effect of this thunderstorm? It will make me fit to be a husband. It will shatter my whole personality... It will render me almost unrecognizable to myself” (R 214). The young man models his expectation of such a thunderstorm on the climactic ending of the Job story, where Job gets back everything that the Lord took from him—but here again the inapplicability of Job's repetition to the young man's situation is the source of much laughter.¹⁹

Job asserts his freedom and demonstrates his integrity by holding fast to his claim that all of the disasters in his life cannot be divine punishments because he has done nothing to deserve such punishment. In the end God commends him for this, and gives him back twice as much as he had before (42:7-10). “So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning” (42:12). This is Job's story of repetition, and it turns on the fact that he clings to his freedom even when everything else is taken from him. He uses that freedom in the only way that he knows how: to ask why all of this

has happened to him, since the God that he believes in does not punish the just. The young man's misappropriation of Job's story of repetition underscores the fact that every story of repetition is a personal story whose meaning cannot be separated from the particular, subjective context in which it occurs.

The only thing that can be generalized from Job's story of repetition is the centrality of freedom and responsibility to any story of repetition. The young man's relationship problems are not going to be resolved by the Lord speaking to the unhappy couple from the whirlwind. The repetition that the young man claims to want, a life of ever-deepening love through marriage, can only be achieved when he uses his own freedom to transform his personality in order to make such a repetition possible—something he claims he is helpless to do (R 214-215). Waiting for some objective event, like a thunderstorm, to transform him subjectively, creates a strange comic picture—somewhat akin to the picture that Constantius paints of the person who can find happiness only by “standing on one leg in a picturesque pose” (R 158). While the young man waits passively in this strange pose for repetition to happen to him, the girl marries someone else, and the possibility of repetition passes him by forever. The young man celebrates this fact and (ecstatically) claims that this is the thunderstorm for which he was waiting, and the repetition that it has accomplished is to give him back what he loved most of all: himself (R 220-222). But the comedy of this climax is obvious. The young man is left, like Narcissus, admiring his own gaze in a relationship of recollection which has given up on finding any meaning in the future.

Like Constantin Constantius in act one, the young man's comic performance in act two plays an important part in *Repetition's* indirect communication of the meaning of repetition. While Constantius clarified the subjective nature of repetition, by attempting to comprehend it objectively, the young man demonstrates the centrality of freedom and responsibility in repetition, by attempting to evade them both.²⁰ In each case, one essential dimension of repetition is made available to the reader by means of a farcical presentation of its absence. This indirect method ensures that whatever is understood about repetition is understood through the effort of the individual herself, so that the understanding gained is a purely personal understanding which is independent of both the author and of the general public.

So in the end *Repetition* does not tell us very much about the idea to which its title refers. The farce that Constantin Constantius and the young man act out for us provides only a preliminary sketch of repetition, leaving the details to be filled in by each individual as she acts out the story of repetition in her own life.²¹ By the end of the book (and the end of the farce) all we really know about repetition is that it is a method of bringing meaning to the present moment by means of referring the present moment to the future rather than the past, and that both subjectivity and freedom are essential to it. Other than that, the meaning of this strange quasi-concept remains to be discovered by each individual. The full significance of repetition, like the full

significance of the life of the individual who seeks to realize repetition in existence, waits to be discovered in the future.

This strange conclusion is very effectively communicated by this very strange book, but most readers have failed to receive this communication because they have failed to see that the book is a farce, written by an author who has a great love for this particular form of comedy, and who has crafted his text in this way to ensure that “the heretics are unable to understand it” (R 225).

Curtain Call: Paging Mr. X, Esq.

Let everyone form his own judgment with respect to what is said here about repetition; let him also form his own judgment about my saying it here and in this manner, since I, following Hamann’s example, express myself in various tongues and speak the language of sophists, of puns, of Cretans and Arabians, of whites and Moors and Creoles, and babble a confusion of criticism, mythology, rebus, and axioms, and argue now in a human way and now in an extraordinary way. Assuming that what I say is not a mere lie, I perhaps did right in submitting my aphorism to a systematic appraiser. Perhaps something may come of it, a footnote in the system—great idea! Then I would not have lived in vain! (R 149-150)

Who, then, is the real reader of *Repetition*?

“Who in our day thinks of wasting any time on the curious idea that it is an art to be a good reader?” (R 225). The general public has no time for such things. Almost everyone, Constantius claims, approaches a book “for one or another superficial reason unrelated to the book” (R 225).²²

He goes on to enumerate several specific types of readers who will find his book a great disappointment. These include: the inquisitive female, the concerned family man, the temporary genius, the convivial family friend, the vigorous champion of reality, the experienced matchmaking woman, His Reverence, and the ordinary reviewer (R 225-226). The last of these will have the dubious privilege of explaining to the world everything that the book is not, namely: “it is not a comedy [or so he thinks, and almost all reviewers to date would agree with him], tragedy, novel, short story, epic or epigram”—and to make matters even worse, it is not susceptible to the Hegelian dialectic (R 226). This unfortunate reviewer “will also find it difficult to understand the movement in the book, for it is inverse; nor will the aim of the book appeal to him, either, for as a rule reviewers explain existence in such a way that both the universal and the particular are annihilated” (R 226).

The movement of *Repetition* is inverse in the sense that instead of leading the reader out into the world—to Berlin, for example—to discover the meaning of repetition, it inverts that movement and leads the reader back into herself. Repetition, if there is such a thing, can only be found in the unique, subjective experience of an individual

who freely and subjectively enacts that role on the stage of her own existence. And the text is exceptional in that it does not try to reduce the existence of such an individual in order to bring it within the bounds of general categories, but instead aims to defend the subjective and extraordinary character of repetition in the face of an omnivorous demand for universality which is the spirit of the times. “Eventually one grows weary of the incessant chatter about the universal and the universal repeated to the point of the most boring insipidity,” Constantius writes. “There are exceptions. If they cannot be explained, then the universal cannot be explained, either” (R 227).

The real reader of *Repetition* must be someone who does not read book reviews, but instead reads and understands the book for herself, and is capable of seeing the farce that is staged on its pages by Constantin Constantius and the young man. Such a reader is, of necessity, “fictional” (R 225) in that Constantius must conjure her up in his imagination, like a work of fiction, since it is impossible for him to have a direct relationship with her. The meaning of repetition, if it is not going to be contradicted by the method of its presentation, must be communicated indirectly.

All of this is very serious business. The repetition that Constantius is pointing to amounts to nothing less than the possibility of happiness and progress in existence. But this fact can only be appreciated when one learns to appreciate *Repetition* for the very funny, very exceptional work of farce that it is.²³

Endnotes

1 I hereby immediately apologize for calling the book “Kierkegaard’s” *Repetition*, since the book wasn’t written by Kierkegaard, but rather by Constantin Constantius. My only purpose was to get your attention, and to make sure that the article got indexed correctly.

2 I will use the following abbreviations for works by Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms:

C *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, (by Johannes Climacus) trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992). Citations are from volume 1 unless otherwise noted.

CA *The Concept of Anxiety*, (by Vigilius Haufniensis) ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert Anderson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980).

JP *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1967-1978). I will cite the volume number followed by the entry number.

R *Repetition*, (by Constantin Constantius) trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983).

3 For example, Roger Poole makes the following argument:

Set into the middle of the Berlin section is a long disquisition about the theater. The design of this section is to frustrate the reader (who is presumably interested in repetition) as much as possible. The disquisition about the nature of farce deliberately holds up the advance of the argument in a series of deferrals. The description of the great actor Beckmann and his gait upon the stage seems to wish to bog the reader down with details in what is already a parenthesis... All this brilliant display of belles lettres is there for a single purpose: to divert the attention of the reader from the concept of repetition (*Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993) 69-70).

See also: Louis Mackey, "Once More with Feeling: Kierkegaard's *Repetition*," *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986) 69, 78-81.

In most cases, commentators have simply had nothing to say about Constantin's discourse on farce, thereby establishing indirectly their conviction that these pages are irrelevant to the text as a whole. One notable exception is Sylviane Agacinski, who argues that, "[i]t is not by accident that the theater can be found at the very heart of *Repetition*," though her interpretation of the overall meaning of the text is significantly different from mine. See her *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Kevin Newmark (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1988) 159-167.

4 One thing that I will not do in this essay is offer any opinion on the possible connections between the text of *Repetition* and Søren Kierkegaard's relationship with Regine Olsen. The following three quotations summarize my feelings concerning such an approach:

[N]o one will find in my writings the slightest information (this is my consolation) about what really filled my life. (JP 5:226)

[I]n the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them . . . My facsimile, my picture, etc., like the question whether I wear a hat or a cap, could become an object of attention only for those to whom the indifferent has become important—perhaps in compensation because the important has become a matter of indifference to them. (C 626)

Were there no hell, it would have to be made in order to punish the professors, whose crime is such that it can scarcely be punished in this world (JP 3: 3589)

5 Adorno insists that this text proves that the theory of farce in *Repetition* is "a theory in which not only Kierkegaard's doctrine of art, but his entire systematics of the concept of existence disintegrates" (*Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor [Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989] 129). This might be a very interesting argument, if Kierkegaard had anything like a "doctrine of art" or a "systematics of the concept of existence."

6 Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988) xv.

7 With regard to the farcical dimension of *Repetition*, the comments of Vigilius Haufniensis, author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, on his reading of *Repetition* are very interesting:

This is no doubt a witty book, as the author also intended it to be. To my knowledge, he is indeed the first to have a lively understanding of ‘repetition’... But what he has discovered he has concealed again by arraying the concept in the jest of an analogous conception. What has motivated him to do this is difficult to say, or more correctly, difficult to understand . . . Since he wanted to occupy himself with repetition only esthetically and psychologically, everything had to be arranged humorously so as to bring about the impression that the word in one instant means everything and in the next instant the most insignificant of things, and the transition, or rather the constant falling down from the clouds, is motivated by its farcical opposite. (CA 17-18n)

8 Mark Lloyd Taylor does a good job of pulling together Constantin’s three main discussions of the meaning of repetition. See his, “Ordeal and Repetition in Kierkegaard’s Treatment of Abraham and Job,” *Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard*, ed. George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1992) 36-37.

9 One notable exception to contemporary philosophy’s ignorance of repetition is Heidegger, who ontologized repetition and recast it as “authenticity” in *Being and Time*, though he was not very forthcoming about the inspiration for his ideas. A good summary of how Heidegger was influenced by the concept of repetition he found in the Kierkegaardian texts is offered by Patricia Huntington in her essay, “Heidegger’s Reading of Kierkegaard Revisited: >From Ontological Abstraction to Ethical Concretion,” *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matustik and Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 44-47. For a more complete account of Kierkegaard’s influence on Heidegger, above and beyond *Repetition*, see: John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993).

10 A musical metaphor found in the Journals and Papers of Søren Kierkegaard sheds some light on what Constantin Constantius is saying here about repetition: “The threshold of consciousness or, as it were, the key, is continually being raised, but within each key the same thing is repeated” (JP 4:3980).

11 Gregor Malantshuk emphasizes the theme of depth in his interpretation of repetition. He writes: “Kierkegaard wishes to say that development in the individual life consists of a steadily deeper and more concrete knowledge of oneself. One is not to look at himself abstractly but ‘ought to use a special map’ and thereby clearly recognize the numerous factors and motivations in his life. Kierkegaard believes that by taking this path a person can obtain, on the human level, an insight into his own

inadequacy.” (*Kierkegaard’s Thought*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971] 136.)

12 T. F. Morris discusses the aesthetic assumptions behind the failure of Constantin’s Berlin experiment in his essay, “Constantin Constantius’ Search for an Acceptable Way of Life,” *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer UP, 1993) 309-334.

13 Pat Bigelow makes this point in his book, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Writing* (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1987): “[R]epetition is the name for what irresistibly tries to become an object of a science but necessarily can never become an object for any science . . . repetition can neither be said nor shown but can only be performed” (163). Because repetition can never be demonstrated objectively, Bigelow argues, “it is essentially undecidable whether or not we can understand repetition” (167).

14 David J. Gouwens examines the role played by observers in both *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling*, focusing in particular on the incongruity of assigning to those observers the task of understanding somebody else’s subjective experience. See his, “Understanding, Imagination, and Irony in Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*,” *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer UP, 1993) 283-308.

15 While some commentators have been willing to view Part One as a comic interlude, most have continued to insist that when the young man takes over in Part Two the book turns serious. One recent example of this way of breaking down the text is the first chapter of John Caputo’s *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987). Caputo argues that Part One of *Repetition*—the story of Constantin Constantius’ trip to Berlin—is indeed a parody, but Part Two—the story of the young man’s love affair, as explained in his letters to Constantin Constantius—is not a parody, but rather a serious “drama of the ethico-religious fate of the nameless young man” (23). (Caputo makes the same claims in his essay, “Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and the Foundering of Metaphysics,” *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins [Macon: Mercer UP, 1993] 201-224.)

16 All citations of the Book of Job are taken from the King James translation.

17 The young man anticipates and protests my criticism thus: “But one who owned very little may indeed also have lost everything; one who lost the beloved has in a sense lost sons and daughters, and one who lost honor and pride and along with it the vitality and meaning of life—he, too, has in a sense been stricken with malignant sores” (R 198-199). This comment only serves to accentuate the comedy inherent in the young man’s attempt to make himself Job’s equal in suffering. There remains a tremendous gap between the irritations that the young man suffers in his romantic life and losing all your children and being stricken with malignant sores. This comedy is

lost completely on Andrew J. Burgess in his article, “*Repetition—A Story of Suffering*,” *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer UP, 1993) 247-262.

18 Of course, this is just the beginning of an existentialist theory of meaning. As Sartre has argued, ultimately an existentialist has to accept responsibility even for her own birth. See for example: *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library Publishers, 1943) 406-408.

19 Niels Thulstrup doesn’t appreciate the humor of the young man’s insistence on a thunderstorm. He declares that the only genuine repetition that occurs in *Repetition* occurs in the form of a thunderstorm. (See his *Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel*, trans. George L Stengren [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980] 349.) Constantius, on the other hand, apparently does see the comedy in the young man’s account of waiting to be struck by lightning. “It is impossible to get involved with him,” he writes, “because to correspond with a man who holds a trump card such as a thunderstorm in his hand would be ludicrous” (R 216).

20 For a terrific application of some Kierkegaardian arguments about the centrality of subjective freedom to contemporary culture, see: Hubert Dreyfus and Jane Rubin, “Kierkegaard and the Nihilism of the Present Age: The Case of Commitment as Addiction,” *Synthese* 98 (1994) 3-19.

21 Louis Mackey articulates this thought concisely when he writes: “Repetition cannot be written. *Repetition* is a way of writing this.” (“Once More with Feeling: Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*,” *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* [Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986] 100). Stephen Crites concurs: “There are occasional hints about the meaning of repetition, but we are never permitted to see the movement itself except in the distorting mirror of the esthetic.” (“Pseudonymous Authorship as Art and as Act,” *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Josiah Thompson [Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1972] 217.) David Cain argues that *Repetition* needs to be understood in the context of “revocation”—an idea that the pseudonyms return to time and again. See his, “Notes on a Coach Horn: ‘Going Further,’ ‘Revocation,’ and ‘Repetition,’” *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer UP, 1993) 345-350.

22 This shift in emphasis from the writer to the reader occurs in many Kierkegaardian texts. For more on this theme see: George Pattison, “If Kierkegaard is Right about Reading, Why Read Kierkegaard?” *Kierkegaard Revisited: Proceedings from the Conference “Kierkegaard and the Meaning of Meaning It” Copenhagen, May 5-9, 1996*, ed. Niels Cappelørn and Jon Stewart (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997) 291-309.

23 The inability to see the comedy in *Repetition*, or in the other Kierkegaardian texts, has created some moments of comedy that are rather remarkable in their own

right. For example, consider the comments that Emmanuel Levinas made after reading a paper at a Kierkegaard conference in 1964. Levinas suggests, in a very ominous tone, that Kierkegaard's "reckless" style may even be partly to blame for the appearance of national Socialism:

[W]hat shocks me about Kierkegaard is his violence. An impulsive and violent style, reckless of scandal and destruction, was added to the philosophical repertory by Kierkegaard, even before Nietzsche. Philosophers could now philosophize with a hammer. The new style aspired to permanent provocation, and the total rejection of everything, and I think we can see it as anticipating certain other verbal violences that once passed themselves off as pure and considered. I refer not only to National Socialism itself, but also to the various ideas that it promoted. (Emmanuel Levinas, "Existence and Ethics," trans. Jonathan Rée, *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain [Oxford: Blackwell, 1998] 34)

For more on the differences, and the similarities, between the philosophy of Levinas and Kierkegaard, see: Peter Kemp, "Another Language for the Other: From Kierkegaard to Levinas," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 23.6 (1997) 5-28; and also, Merold Westphal, "The Transparent Shadow: Kierkegaard and Levinas in Dialogue," *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matustik and Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) 265-281.