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THE MOMENT OF PERFORMANCE

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If you think you know what repetition is, the work of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz may give you pause. Leibniz is remembered today as a philosopher and mathematician, but he made his living as political secretary to the Ducal court of Brunswick, and forty years of courtly routine gave him ample experience of what the rest of us might call repetition. But Leibniz did not permit himself to be bored. Boredom was against his metaphysical principles: any appearance of repetition must be an illusion, he argued, because it was absolutely impossible for the same thing ever to happen twice. 'There is no such thing,' as he put it in a letter to an English colleague shortly before his death in 1716, 'as Two Individuals *indiscernible* from each other.'

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Leibniz illustrated the point by recalling a walk in the park with Princess Sophia, who was a devoted disciple of his, as well as mother to King George of England.

An Ingenious Gentleman of my Acquaintance, discoursing with me, in the presence of Her *Electoral Highness the Princess Sophia*, in the Garden of *Herrenhausen*; thought he could find two Leaves perfectly alike. The Princess defied him to do it, and he ran all over the Garden a long time to look for some; but it was to no purpose.

Leibniz might well chuckle: he knew the search was not going to yield any evidence that would make him change his mind. Suppose the Ingenious Gentleman went on searching till he found two leaves that looked exactly the same, Leibniz could simply place them under his microscope, perfectly confident that they would then ‘appear distinguishable from each other.’ But this was another tease: Leibniz would not have conceded that the two leaves were ‘perfectly alike’ even if his microscope failed to disclose any difference between them. The leaves must have been picked up at different times and places, after all, and one must be located above the other, or north of it or south or east or west: they would have followed distinct paths through space and time, in short, and so, as Leibniz saw it, each must have a distinctive life-story of its own.

The Ingenious Gentleman would have felt ill-used, and with reason. He had scuttled round the royal park on an earnest philosophical errand only to be rebuffed with a pedantic quibble. And yet ... Leibniz seems to have been on to something. Foraging for leaves was a distraction, and so was his microscope: his argument was an application of his much-vaunted ‘principle of the identity of indiscernibles,’ which makes the purely logical point that where there is no difference there is perfect sameness – from which it follows that no two things could be indistinguishable since if they were they would not be two things but one. Or, as Bishop Butler would put it a generation later: ‘everything is what it is, and not another thing.’

Leibniz died in Hanover in 1716. Nearly a hundred years later, in Copenhagen in 1813, a boy was born who was to become, you might say, his exact negative counterpart. Søren Kierkegaard was the most uncourtly of logicians, and the most impolitic of philosophers, but he and Leibniz had quite a lot in common. Both of them had a habit of constant scribbling, leaving behind thousands of pages of manuscripts that have called forth Herculean labours of posthumous editing. But whilst Leibniz managed to publish only one solitary volume of philosophy (anonymous) in his lifetime – and he lived to the age of 70 – Kierkegaard turned out no less than 34 (many of them pseudonymous, and some enormously long) by the time he died in 1855, at the age of 42. And whereas Leibniz was deadly earnest about the search for philosophical truth, Kierkegaard never took it quite seriously.

Unlike Leibniz, who meant to be rational in all things, Kierkegaard sided with wild paradox in its battle with the conventions of reason. He was also a self-conscious literary inventor, an exuberant comedian

and a dandified ironist who liked to play cat-and-mouse with his readers. He hit his stride as an author in 1843, when he turned 30 and published no less than six books: three explicitly Christian sets of ‘edifying discourses,’ and three experiments in narrative fiction. The first of these experiments was the enormous *Either/Or*, supposedly an edition of two mysterious bundles of papers found in a second-hand desk. Then there was the relatively brief *Fear and Trembling*, which takes the form of a kind of diary recording repeated attempts to understand the story of Abraham and Isaac – none of which is very successful. Finally there was a novella – published on exactly the same day as *Fear and Trembling* – with the title *Gjentagelsen*.

‘Gjentagelsen’ is, we are told, a ‘good Danish word,’ and ‘the Danish language is to be congratulated for giving birth to such a fine philosophical term.’ It is probably untranslatable, but something of its meaning can be rendered without too much violence as ‘the reprise,’ ‘taking back,’ ‘recollection’ or ‘restoration,’ or, easiest of all, *Repetition*.

The title page of *Repetition* did not carry Kierkegaard’s own name but a reassuring Latin pseudonym: Constantin Constantius, who sounds like a reliable fellow with a steady pair of hands. There is also a businesslike subtitle – *An essay in experimenting psychology* – and the opening paragraph is reassuringly brisk.

Modern philosophy will teach us that the whole of life is repetition. The only modern philosopher to have any inkling of this is Leibniz.

That seems so clear that your eye may glide over it without a second thought. But if you come to think about it you will stop with a jolt. If repetition is the great lesson of modern philosophy, how come only one philosopher has had so much of an inkling of it? And of all the philosophers in the world, surely none could have less affinity with the idea of repetition than Leibniz, whose principle of the identity of indiscernibles implied that everything is uniquely itself, and that nothing could possibly be a ‘repetition,’ least of all ‘the whole of life.’

But Constantin is a man in a hurry, and he is not half way through his first paragraph before he makes a rash promise to investigate repetition by means of a practical experiment.

When I had occupied myself for a long time, at least occasionally, with the problem of whether repetition is possible and what significance it has, and whether things gain or lose by being repeated,

it suddenly occurred to me that I could take a trip to Berlin – I had been there before – to find out whether repetition is possible and what its significance might be.

You would have to be a very passive reader not to be howling with dissatisfaction by now. Apart from getting Leibniz wrong, Constantin has failed to explain what the supposed problem of repetition can be; and in any case, whatever it is, going back to Berlin is hardly going to shed any light on it: no one, not even Leibniz, would deny that people can visit the same city twice. If he needed an excuse for going to Berlin (and Berlin was a popular destination for fashionable young Danes at the time: for example Kierkegaard) he could surely have done better than making up some hare-brained research project about the nature of repetition.

On the other hand, that same opening paragraph did make an intriguing suggestion: that ‘repetition’ (or rather *gentagelse*) is another word for what the Greeks called ‘recollection’ (or *anamnesis*) – in other words Plato’s doctrine that genuine knowledge (acquaintance with eternal verities) arises not so much from discovering something excitingly new as from recovering something reassuringly old. (Plato made his point by telling the tale of a slave boy who is led to understand a geometrical theorem not by being taught it directly, but by being asked a series of questions which prompt him to discover it for himself.) The trouble with Platonic recollection, according to Constantin, is that it makes us turn towards the past rather than the future; and the excellence of the modern notion of repetition is that it puts the Platonic procedure into reverse. ‘Repetition and recollection are the same movement,’ he says, ‘only in opposite directions; for what is recollected is repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards.’ Recollection, it seems, confines us to what is already over and done with, but repetition opens us to the unknown.

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For Constantin, as for Plato, what was true of knowledge was true of love as well. But if there were two forms of knowledge – one based on recollection, the other on repetition – then there must also be two forms of love; and the question was, which of them is better? ‘I remember reading that recollection’s love is the only happy love,’ he says. He could hardly have forgotten it, since the sentence was to be found in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*. On the other hand, the author of *Either/Or* was hardly to be trusted: ‘from what I know of him,’ Constantin wrote, ‘he can sometimes be a little deceitful.’

For in truth, repetition's love is the only happy love. ... It does not suffer from the wistfulness of recollection. It has the blessed security of the moment. ... Recollection is like old clothes which, however beautiful they are, do not fit us any more. But repetition is an everlasting garment that is always soft and comfortable. ... Recollection is a fine lady, who never quite lives up to the moment; but repetition is a beloved wife who never grows wearisome, for one can only be wearied by the new. ... Repetition calls for courage ... if you will repetition you are a human being, and the more forcefully you achieve it the more deeply human you are. If you do not grasp that life is a matter of repetition, and that this is its beauty, then you are doomed. ... Those who choose repetition – they will truly live. They are not like boys chasing butterflies, or standing on tiptoe to stare at the glories of the world, for they are already familiar with such things. Nor do they resemble the old woman who sits at the spinning-wheel of recollection all day long; they go calmly on their way, cheerful in repetition.

Afterwards, Constantin starts telling the story of a young man who has been swept off his feet by the wrong kind of love – love in the mode of recollection – from which he, Constantin, now proposes to rescue him. But before he comes to the details, he interrupts himself to report on his research trip to Berlin. The journey was accomplished without difficulty – steamship to Stralsund, and fast stagecoach to Berlin – which seemed to reassure Constantin that repetition was possible. But then he found that his old suite of rooms on the Gendarmenmarkt was no longer available ('no repetition here') so he had to make do with one small room by the entrance hall. ('Alas! can this be repetition?') To distract himself, he decides to visit the theatre: – not the Schauspielhaus, which was too earnest, nor the Opera, which was too grand, but the cheap and cheerful Königstädtertheater, where there was to be a performance of Nestroy's *Talisman*, one of his favourite plays, starring one of his favourite comedians, Friedrich Beckmann.

Constantin then sets off on a digression about the 'magic' of theatrical performance – the mysterious process by which we lose ourselves in a world of make-believe where we can identify with one character after another, so that we 'see and hear ourselves like some *Doppelgänger*, splitting ourselves into every possible variation of ourselves, but without ceasing to be ourselves in every variation.' The special charm of farce as opposed to more sedate forms of theatre is that it depends not only on the actors and orchestra, but on the audience too, especially the raucous plebeians on the cheap benches upstairs: the gallery, indeed, is like a

second orchestra, except that it ‘does not follow the conductor’s baton but only its own inner impulses.’ It follows that each performance will be a singularity, a unique adventure, a gamble belonging to its own moment: this audience, this evening, and you. Plans are pointless – there will never be any ‘match between plan and execution’ – and readiness is all.

When he gets to the theatre, Constantin finds that his favourite box is already occupied, and he ends up sitting amongst a group of bores who seem determined not to be amused. Nothing works.

Beckmann did not strike me as funny, and after enduring it for half an hour I left the theatre, thinking: There is no such thing as repetition. ... The next evening I went back to the theatre, but there, the only repetition was the impossibility of repetition.

The experiment in repetition peters out, leaving Constantin none the wiser.

Constantin seems to realise he has made a fool of himself. ‘There was no need for me to travel in order to discover that there is no such thing as repetition,’ he declares: ‘my journey was a waste of time.’ So he goes back to Copenhagen and resumes his attempt to rescue the friend who is trapped in the wrong kind of love. We readers, however, are free to recollect his discarded reflections on theatrical performance, and to wonder if they may not contain the materials we need in order to clarify the problem of repetition.

If we want to know about repetition, perhaps we should stop consulting the philosophers and ask an actor instead. Every performance Beckmann gave was, Constantin has told us, an individual response to a particular theatrical occasion. And yet we know that Constantin went to the Königstädter in order to see a play he had seen several times before; and this suggests a principle that may prove more useful to us than Leibniz’s ‘identity of indiscernibles’ – the principle that *every performance is a performance of something*. In the present case, the identity of the *something* seems obvious: it was a text – the text of Netstroy’s *Talisman*, possibly available in a printed libretto inside the theatre – that was being performed every night. But Constantin’s interest need not have been so text-bound or so literal: he might also have been looking for ‘farce’ in general, or ‘Netstroy farce,’ or ‘Königstädter farce,’ or a composite of them all, or something rather different: the question which of the range of possible *somethings* should be taken as authoritative may not be open to a definitive settlement but it could be a matter of vital critical debate.

Once you start to look for it, you will notice that every theatrical performance, however unconventional, displays the same *dual structure* – a structure involving an abstract type on the one hand and an indefinite series of possible enactments on the other. That abstract type – the thing-to-be-repeated, or what might be called the *repetitandum*, if there can be such a word – could be defined by a written libretto, but it need not be. Even when Beckmann launched into spur-of-the-moment improvisations, provoked by a shout from the gallery, his performances would still have been performances of some *repetitandum* that could have been realised in other ways: the routine with a ladder or an umbrella or the old man’s wig, for instance, or a caper, a patter song, or a funny walk. We may disagree over them, but we can never get away from the principle that such general types are at work in our appreciation of every theatrical performance; or in other words, that every theatrical performance is *a repetition of something*.

The same principle seems to apply to musical performances: every performance is a repetition of something. Some kinds of music depend on notations and detailed scores, and some do not, but all of them involve patterns of repetition, often superimposed on one another. The *repetitandum* could be a particular score-defined work, like Bach’s first solo cello suite; or it could be something more generic, like a sonata, a blues, a gavotte, or an air. And *repetitanda* will be found within individual works as well. Classical compositions are full of ‘repeat’ signs, or instructions like ‘*da capo al fine*,’ telling the performer to go back to the beginning and start again, and all kinds of music make use of units of repetition such as the bar, the tune, the rhythm or the chorus. The same thing comes round again and again, maybe dozens of times; usually it will be repeated with variations – at different speeds or pitches, or with different embellishments or dynamics – but even if the same objective pattern of sound is repeated, it will not have the same meaning the second time round.

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Musical repetition, together with repetition in theatre and for that matter in dance, can perhaps be seen as a derivative from repetition in language. No one can understand a language without realising, implicitly at least, that every linguistic sign is a *repetitandum*, open to being uttered in infinitely many ways. A rose can be called ‘rose’ in every vocal style you can imagine, and in every local accent, but every version needs to be understood as a pronunciation of one and the same word. (If you prefer, you could say that the same phoneme can have an infinite number of phonetic realisations.) No doubt the workings of the linguistic arts – from theatre and epic through prose to lyrical poetry – depend in

part on this principle; and so do philosophical performances, as when Kierkegaard, or rather Constantin, takes a theme from Leibniz or Plato, turns it inside out and makes it his own. And perhaps the same thing can be said about experience as a whole: that it always involves acts of repetition – not a passive past-oriented reception of a stimulus, but the positive and forward-looking act of classifying it in terms of general types or *repetitanda*, such as leaves, oak leaves, or leaves that look like the one I found earlier.

Performers of all kinds have always been prey to vanity: audience admiration can go to their heads, sometimes disastrously. But the remedy lies within performance itself – in the humility (not humiliation) bred by the principle that every performance is a repetition of something. The greatest performers are those who know that their performance is not about themselves, but about whatever it is they are repeating – the ‘work,’ however it may be defined, that transcends the occasion in the sense that it could be performed again but in different ways: a *repetitandum* before which performers and audience bow their heads in humble recognition. The art is in the repetition, and everything else is celebrity and spin.

However wide-ranging the principles of repetition and performance, they might be thought to lose their validity when it comes to the so-called visual arts, where a special premium is customarily placed on uniqueness and originality. The old-fashioned art-world is obsessed with the unique authenticity of the original drawing or painting or sculpture as it issued from the artist’s hand; and the world of contemporary art, though it may scorn old-fashioned authenticity, is haunted by a similar fascination with the uniqueness of particular artistic occasions, often associated with the idea of ‘performance.’ Not that there is anything new in the association between performance and visual art. Eighteenth-century critics, for instance, would freely describe a sculpture, a painting, or a building as a ‘performance,’ with the implication that it was to be appreciated in terms of *repetitanda* that could be enacted in many different ways. I suspect there might be something to be said for resuscitating this way of talking about art, if only because it calls for a certain modest circumspection on the part of the artist: a sense of being dwarfed by the array of works – past, present and future – in which one dreams that one’s own may eventually find their place.