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Catherine Pickstock

# REPETITION and IDENTITY

THE LITERARY AGENDA

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CATHERINE PICKSTOCK

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*for* Alexander, Alfred, and Flora

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## Series Introduction

The Crisis in, the Threat to, the Plight of the Humanities: enter these phrases in Google's search engine and there are 23 million results, in a great fifty-year-long cry of distress, outrage, fear, and melancholy. Grant, even, that every single anxiety and complaint in that catalogue of woe is fully justified—the lack of public support for the arts, the cutbacks in government funding for the humanities, the imminent transformation of a literary and verbal culture by visual/virtual/digital media, the decline of reading...And still, though it were all true, and just because it might be, there would remain the problem of the response itself. Too often there is recourse to the shrill moan of offended piety or a defeatist withdrawal into professionalism.

*The Literary Agenda* is a series of monographs that believes there is a great deal that needs to be said about the state of literary education inside schools and universities and more fundamentally about the importance of literature and of reading in the wider world. The category of 'the literary' has always been contentious. What *is* clear, however, is how increasingly it is dismissed or is unrecognized as a way of thinking or an arena for thought. It is sceptically challenged from within, for example, by the sometimes rival claims of cultural history, contextualized explanation, or media studies. It is shaken from without by even greater pressures: by economic exigency and the severe social attitudes that can follow from it; by technological change that may leave the traditional forms of serious human communication looking merely antiquated. For just these reasons this is the right time for renewal, to start reinvigorated work into the meaning and value of literary reading for the sake of the future.

It is certainly no time to retreat within institutional walls. For all the academic resistance to 'instrumentalism', to governmental measurements of public impact and practical utility, literature exists in



and across society. The 'literary' is not pure or specialized or self-confined; it is not restricted to the practitioner in writing or the academic in studying. It exists in the whole range of the world which is its subject matter: it consists in what non-writers actively receive from writings when, for example, they start to see the world more imaginatively as a result of reading novels and begin to think more carefully about human personality. It comes from literature making available much of human life that would not otherwise be existent to thought or recognizable as knowledge. If it is true that involvement in literature, so far from being a minority aesthetic, represents a significant contribution to the life of human thought, then that idea has to be argued at the public level without succumbing to a hollow rhetoric or bowing to a reductive world-view. Hence the effort of this series to take its place *between* literature and the world. The double-sided commitment to occupying that place and establishing its reality is the only 'agenda' here, without further prescription as to what should then be thought or done within it.

What is at stake is not simply some defensive or apologetic 'justification' in the abstract. The case as to why literature matters in the world not only has to be argued conceptually and strongly tested by thought, it should be given presence, performed, and brought to life in the way that literature itself does. That is why this series includes the writers themselves, the novelists and poets, in order to try to close the gap between the thinking of the artists and the thinking of those who read and study them. It is why it also involves other kinds of thinkers—the philosopher, the theologian, the psychologist, the neuroscientist—examining the role of literature within their own life's work and thought, and the effect of that work, in turn, upon literary thinking. This series admits and encourages personal voices in an unpredictable variety of individual approach and expression, speaking wherever possible across countries and disciplines and temperaments. It aims for something more than intellectual assent: the literary sense of what it is like to feel the thought, to embody an idea in a person, to bring it to being in a narrative or in aid of adventurous reflection. If the artists refer to their own works, if other thinkers return to ideas that have marked much of their

working life, that is not their vanity nor a failure of originality. It is what the series has asked of them: to speak out of what they know and care about, in whatever language can best serve their most serious thinking, and without the necessity of trying to cover every issue or meet every objection in each volume.

Philip Davis

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## Preface

In his famous opusculé *Repetition*, Søren Kierkegaard suggested that the category of repetition was the modern equivalent of Platonic recollection, and that it was the category upon which a future metaphysics, taking into account the inescapability of subjective ‘interest’, would have to be built. And yet, he also said that it was ‘the indispensable condition for every issue of [Christian] dogmatics’.<sup>1</sup> He here implied that the task for future thought was to develop simultaneously an ontology and a theology of repetition.

To suggest this was to turn away from a simple division between the philosophical and the theological task, and to affirm that the mark of the ‘modern’ advance, beyond and yet in continuity with Greek thought, would be the peculiar contribution of Christianity. By contrast, for Kierkegaard, doom would follow upon any dismissal of both Plato and Christianity, for he submitted that it would perforce cause philosophy to relapse, like Spinozism, German idealism, and the darker side of German romanticism, into a pre-Socratic paganism more ‘static’ than paganism itself. Where divine transcendence is occluded, one finds oneself in the domain of buttressed immanence, in which nothing new can occur, since the ontological bounds of finitude have been transcendently set once and for all. Here there is no finite event which can exceed those bounds:

[M]odern philosophy makes no movement; as a rule it makes only a commotion.

By contrast, repetition, which for Kierkegaard can only be non-identical, ‘is and remains a transcendence’.<sup>2</sup>

The following essay assumes Kierkegaard’s challenge. It hazards an articulation of the real as repetition, and will metamorphose into a sideways articulation of Creation, redemption, apocalypse, and God as repetition. In doing so, it will draw a connection between the reflections of the nineteenth-century Danish thinker with those of two of the earliest Christian thinkers, Irenaeus and Origen, who considered Christian teaching in terms, respectively, of recapitulation and

reconstitution. The present work seeks to approximate non-identical repetition to later attempts to articulate a Christian 'meta-logic': Augustine's account of time and the soul as participating in the Trinity, and Aquinas's metaphysical framework of an 'analogy of being'.

The third term between reason and revelation, for Kierkegaard, was 'the moment', or the ineffable point of transition between rest and motion, which one could describe as the historical event. To say that every thing, every *res*, only exists when it has already been (non-identically) repeated is to say that all beings flow unpredictably forwards in serpentine lines which bear and receive new disclosures, and yet sustain, refine, and extend consistent identities. Because the transition from rest to motion, as from potential to act, and from unity to variety, is not itself exhausted (as Kierkegaard after Plato advised) by these alternatives, it would seem to have the character of a fictional doubling of reality.

It is for this reason that the entry of the historical into the ontological via repetition is all of a piece with the entry of literature into the historical and the ontological spheres. The invocations of literary texts and themes in what follows are by no means intended in an illustrative or exemplary fashion. Rather, it is an imperative that literature, besides history, assist in making philosophical argument, since the doubling of reality as fiction is, as we shall see, problematically, a fundamental aspect of reality itself. The ensuing temptation is (as for modernism) to reduce fiction either to reality or subjective fantasy, or, alternatively (as for postmodernism), to vaporize reality in favour of a universal reign of fiction, which, in turn, becomes a skittish or whimsical game, as devoid of the comic (whose irony is anchored to the real) as it is of the tragic.

But, again, following Kierkegaard's lead, besides that of others, this essay will argue that it is the idiom of religion that it should not submit to the dominion of this alternative, by invoking the transcendent, and participation in the transcendent, as the sphere which outwits the separation of the real, the historical, and the fictional.

For this reason, religious discourse summons the assistance of all three registers, and yet, by outwitting them, prevents their imperial scouring and confiscation of each other's dominion. In the case of Christianity, the notions of incarnation, atonement, and the Trinity heighten the paradoxical coincidence of transcendent reality with

historical transition, and of meaningful sign and narrative with ‘bleared, smeared’ contingent fact.

The late Stephen Medcalf suggested that this fusion of existence, event, and fiction as myth was enacted by Christ himself, who can for this reason be taken as the highest imaginative artist of all, working ideally with the real because he worked really with the ideal, and always in the fray a particular moment; all too much so:

De la Taille said that at the last supper Christ ‘placed himself in the order of signs’. David Jones, who loved that phrase, and built his *The Anathemata* round it, opposed to signs the *utile*. And it is clear that Jesus built his death, the terrible inexhaustible death of the king, out of the *utile*. On the one hand, the myths of willing sacrifice and of ‘reigning from the tree’ express something perfectly real about his approach to death; on the other, there is the basest utility, the political decision: ‘It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people’ (John 11:50)—although that too, as St John saw, can be made symbolic—and a death in which the sufferer is peculiarly the passive object. He made the one from the other.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, the construal of reality as repetition can be seen as inseparable (as Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* indicates) from the shadowy haunting of reality by sign and allegory. In consequence, the bringing together of metaphysics and theology in what follows itself offers a theory of literature, in the sense that the bringing together can only be fashioned as a work of literary artefaction.

Catherine Pickstock  
Cambridge

## Notes

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition: A venture in experimenting psychology* by Constantin Constantius, in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, tr. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 149.
2. Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 186.
3. Stephen Medcalf, ‘The Coincidence of Myth and Fact’, in Brian Cummings and Gabriel Josipovici (eds.), *The Spirit of England: Selected Essays of Stephen Medcalf* (London: Legenda, 2010), 20–40.

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## Acknowledgements

Over the last twenty years, I have scarcely escaped the category of repetition. In two juvenile essays, I explored the contrast between identical and non-identical repetition. In my doctoral dissertation, later published as *After Writing*, this contrast helped me to articulate the lineaments of various other contrasts. The category of repetition has underpinned much of my other work, such as that concerning the relationship between the One and the Many in the Platonic dialogues, the concept of recollection, and the asymmetrical yet never random relationship which pertains between the transcendent and phenomenal realms, whether for Platonic philosophy or Christian metaphysics. It has been a consideration in my work on liturgy, music, aesthetics, subjectivity, rhythm, and postmodern conceptions of nothingness.

Because the roots of this project reach back so far, I have many people to thank: my earliest teacher, Daphne Llewellyn; Don Cupitt, who taught me philosophical theology (and who generously commented on a draft of this book); John Milbank, my doctoral supervisor, for countless discussions of repetition, and for several of his essays in particular;<sup>1</sup> Paul Connerton, for conversations in the early 1990s concerning ritual, memory, cultural amnesia, museumification, psychoanalysis, and other topics, as well as his written work;<sup>2</sup> Gary Ulmen; the late Paul Piccone; Rowan Williams; Alison Milbank; David Ford; Russell Berman. My gratitude also to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Philipp Rosemann, for their comments upon the present work, and for their own work and friendship over a long period.

More recently I have turned to consider the category of repetition directly. Robin Kirkpatrick has clarified my understanding of many things, repetition included, and given this project energy; I have likewise learned much from Vittorio Montemaggi, Hugues Azérad, and Jeremy Thurlow. Philip Davis invited me to contribute this essay to his series at a timely moment, and helped throughout to give the book its shape. I am profoundly grateful to all of these



friends, and to the institutions which have provided a context: Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and especially to the late Lord St John of Fawsley, Lord Wilson of Dinton, and the Fellows for their support and stimulus; and the Faculty of Divinity, not least Douglas Hedley, John Hughes, Janet Soskice, Andrew Davison, Samuel Kimbriel, Simon Ravenscroft, and Alexander Hampton. An M.Phil. seminar and reading group on the theme of repetition served as a diorama for the present work, and I am profoundly grateful to the students who participated in these, especially Simone Kotva, now undertaking her own doctoral research on repetition. My thanks also to Jacqueline Baker and to Jack Whitehead of Oxford University Press for their supervision of the various aspects of the production process.

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## Notes

1. John Milbank, 'The Sublime in Kierkegaard', in Phillip Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998), 131–56; 'The Double Glory', in Creston Davis (ed.), *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 110–233.
2. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); *How Modernity Forgets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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## *The snowdrop sequence*

In the first month, when ribbed scrubland  
Confronts the vaulted light,  
He came, with nowhere to hide away.  
He built a house of ice,  
Like annealed glass, laid bare;  
How he cleaned his flasks!  
And arraigned his minuscule alembics  
In lines, keeping empty the lambent  
Diagonal. Then his messages  
Appeared, as if uncoded, in pure  
Syllables of white and green.  
Their threads and sheaths,  
Pointers and reminders on the  
Headland of blank candour,  
Gave no apparent depth, nor  
Other place to lead one's eye  
Behind. Just for themselves,  
No other, it seemed, they came,  
Pushed by absurd luck  
Through the tundra.

Who is there can tell  
What happened in the  
Narrow space of the  
Second month?

Did his theatre of little signs  
(now lost) pearl against the  
Arc of sky their accentuated  
Sense? Was their secret better  
Shown for the foil of bitter  
Wind which swore its dominion,  
And in seeking to quell, found truth's  
Tepals nod and wave, suspended,  
As if taunting in their frailty, by  
A pedicel, scarce there at all?

Winter's own garden of letters, like to his  
 Serifs of scape and spathe,  
 Slants before the vernal equinox  
 Its frangible sense:  
 How the gardener reads and re-reads!  
 How the surripes ribbon about her  
 In circles! Slight  
 Pleat of green, prophet of  
 Greengage, whose hidden fold's  
 Chamber a world conceals,  
 Myself silently spells.  
 In their careless kerning,  
 Whose scrupulous kinship of elements  
 Is borrowed? And who has garnered these  
 Graphemes, these papery bracts, to widen and  
 Strive into signs, white-green bell-shaped valves  
 Stretching into the space of the code?

Who indeed? asks the third month.  
 And bows her head to her own span's  
 Ides, to seal her pact with time's corners:  
 That what she might seem to  
 Forego would be wrought ahead in  
 Yesterday's prehending, and tomorrow's  
 Collections of sorrow, of which these flanked  
 Stems, these nothings, are themselves  
 A part.

The signs abase themselves,  
 Plume-rise to hollow skies  
 Above; life-thrall blade-threads  
 Forfeit the cowslip by one day,  
 Recede; yet are not their pollen-blown  
 Promises strewn through each  
 Ellipse? What overlooked veneration, hidden  
 Even here, from glancing eye!  
 How in their *volte* round and  
 Round, perivolute steps betoken and press  
 To the half-spheres of today,  
 Ascend and stave, collect and  
 Divide, troth their margin's  
 Plight! How they turn and turn

Around! Lined and curved  
Facsimile, predicament of  
Delight. Tarry in this middle space,  
Applanate, daylong grafting  
Of type and trace; what sweet  
Disappearance, except in her obscure  
Confinement, a keener dilation  
Should bind.

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# 1

## Identifying Things

We negotiate the world through the process of recognition. This means that we must, at every turn, identify anew everything that we encounter.

When this process is impeded, we are lost in a confusion that is tragic and comic: we cause offence by mistaking one person for another, or by assigning them the wrong name or title. We turn down an alleyway that looks just like the one that we should have taken; we go astray, are set upon and done for. We lose the foothold of familiarity; we wander about and forget why we are here.

At the most extreme, this leads us to a loss of sense of self or self-identification. Without knowing who we are, we cannot know which paths to take, which turn is ours, nor what we are to do when we arrive. And without a sense of the roles that we are to borrow or the masks we are to assume, nor the anticipatory maps of space to be encountered and scripts to be performed at future moments, constantly in our heads, we cannot reflexively identify our own subjectivity and perhaps can have no sense of self-identity at all. To inhabit our finitude and be reconciled with it, we need to identify external objects (including other subjects), and we have, in a mirroring manner, to identify ourselves. The external acts of recognition, and our internal access to a specific identity, seem to depend upon one another.

If we cannot stay within this circuit, we are abandoned by reality and become like to Kierkegaard's primordial wind, which, before it settled down into 'playing the same invariable theme' among the mountains,

came as a stranger to this area, plunged wildly, absurdly through the canyons [...] produced now a shriek almost