

POETS, CYNICS AND THIEVES: VICIOUS LOVE AND DIVINE PROTECTION IN KIERKEGAARD'S WORKS OF LOVE AND REPETITION

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When we speak this way, we are speaking of the love that sustains all existence, of God's love. If for one moment, one single moment, it were to be absent, everything would be confused (*WL*, p. 301).¹
Underneath it all, there must be a misunderstanding (*R*, p. 136).²

Introduction

In retrieving *Works of Love*, newly translated by the Hongs in the Princeton series, readers must not miss the opportunity with Kierkegaard to interrogate our secular confusion and misunderstanding regarding intimate love. M. Jamie Ferreira, a moral philosopher, has initiated a new round of interpretation by defending Kierkegaard against those who read his call to "blindness" in *Works of Love* as advocating distanced indifference.³ Reading Ferreira's apologetic for proximity and attention, we may too readily overlook Kierkegaard's depiction of distorted and predatory interest as well as his particularly theological answer to the sins internal to intimacy. By Ferreira's interpretation, God's rigorous command that we love the other first as our neighbor is not to "delineate a substantive response to the other" but to "delimit a category", to ensure that "no one can be excluded" from the span of neighbor-love.⁴ Yet the "common watermark" of the term "neighbor" in God's commandment is, *pace* Ferreira, to "indicate what particular response

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is appropriate".⁵ While a broadening of the lover's purview and a deepening of the lover's commitment to forgive the beloved are clearly facets of Kierkegaard's rendering of the command, he also insists that in order for love to be true the lover must actively acknowledge God as the disconcerting "third party" for all human engagements (*WL*, p. 121). Our faithful, focused attention toward the beloved is to bear the stamp of this interminable, chastening encounter with God as the judge privy to all engagements. Kierkegaard's metaphor of blindness illustrates a key facet of God's command: the lover who would idolize, assess or steal from the beloved is to pluck out the eye that so beholds her. Kierkegaard compels Christians to recognize that love is intrinsically conflicted and treacherous, and that a truly faithful attention is precarious—necessitating prayers of confession and God's grace. Thus while *Works of Love* may indeed carry import for moral philosophy, Kierkegaard's call to self-examination in that text is best heard within the context of theological ethics.

In order to note this premonitory and decisively theological strain in *Works of Love* we will back up and relate it to one of Kierkegaard's indirect works on vicious attention: *Repetition*, an exchange between two erring men. In this story, "the girl" on whom the young man focuses his gaze and esteem quickly becomes an encumbrance from which the older cynic must rescue him, and the ensuing narrative reveals several facets of love's demise. Using *Works of Love* as the tome through which we judge these men allows us to consider false love's perfidious perception of and parasitic relation to the (here female) other.⁶ Kierkegaard's sobering rendition of the love commandment in *Works of Love*, wherein the beloved is more than merely the beholder's vision of her, exposes that there is indeed a "girl" in the story and two men who would idolize, trick or banish her. *Repetition's* poetic young man embarks on an informatively futile endeavor by choosing Constantin rather than God as the "third party" for his own engagement, and the warped perspective through which he chooses to see her stands in instructive contrast to the humbled vision of *Works of Love*. In the latter text, Kierkegaard distinguishes true love from the poetic perspective, which distorts the other to fit the lover's ideal; from the vampiric gaze, which devours her; and from the sage's inspection, which deems her blameworthy and disposable. Love unguarded by God's command endangers the beheld as well as the overlooked, and Kierkegaard skillfully depicts each of these three distortions in *Repetition*. The failure of this earlier, pseudonymous text to cohere, Constantin's failure to achieve repetition, and the young man's failure to sustain his commitment to the girl are all carefully constructed to be, in Louis Mackey's words, "an invitation to an indefinitely postponed atonement", goading the reader toward God as the only true confidant in love.⁷ The poetry, cynicism and thievery in *Repetition* help narratively to depict the perils of human interaction and reveal the necessity of love's humbled "blindness", as described in *Works of Love*.

Textual Intentions

The interplay between *Repetition* and *Works of Love* may helpfully elicit the common textual momentum toward humility that those who read either book alone might miss. This cross-textual reading thwarts the efforts of those who find within *Repetition* (and Kierkegaard's other poetics) a call to play rather than to confession. While Kierkegaard does endeavor continually to dismantle and splinter our easy use of language, the most fitting activity within that leveled space is not a freed exploration of human possibility, given Kierkegaard's sobering description of sin. One is to experience the textual confusion in the former text as a reproving prerequisite to Kierkegaard's description of engagement in *Works of Love*. The stakes facing the other warrant, at the very least, contrition.⁸ Derridean renderings of Kierkegaard's poetics do, however, aptly deny that the authorship leads the reader cursorily through repentance toward a confidant confession of faith. Christians who would skim with doctrinal hubris through the authorship to the more straightforward prose of *Works of Love*, seeking to find there support regarding their own life and love, are given in *Repetition* a necessarily humbling precursor. As Frederick Sontag suggests, "*Repetition* appears not to be an advance, yet, without its chastening effect, no real advance is possible."⁹

The poet, cynic, and thief are manifestations of iniquity out of which one cannot even falteringly emerge without an active choice to repent and to live in debt before God. The epigraph to *Repetition* about trees, flowers, and fruit was originally to end "but the fruits of the spirit are love" and Kierkegaard considered titling *Repetition* "A Fruitless Venture".¹⁰ While these textual prompts might have been overly directive, they might also have prevented a common misreading of *Repetition* as a text describing an individual's progress from one stage to another. With *Works of Love* (rather than *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) in view, we may read *Repetition* as a text narrating failure (rather than about religious or existential development) and take note of the insurmountable rift between the Young Man's collusion with Constantin and the faithful love to which we are called.¹¹ The young man comes to depend on Constantin as the one in whose presence he will "talk aloud to himself", and he seals the fate of his idolizing and evaluative love (*R*, p. 135). Kierkegaard uses the same image in *Repetition* and in *Works of Love*: each of us ineluctably chooses a "third party" to be our "confidant" in matters of love (*WL*, pp. 165, 416). Kierkegaard insists, in *Works of Love*, that if we are to perceive the other truthfully we must will to exist within an alternative context, and he describes in detail the deluded manner with which we encompass and then test the other when we make the decision instead to remain within "merely human" love. Our judgment of *Repetition's* lovers is to prepare us to acknowledge the distorted vision with which we view and through which we judge the worth of our own loved ones, and to provoke

us to choose differently. The culminating sterility of this “fruitless” text is to elicit nothing less than our quest for the one, true source for love.

Although the focus of one’s attention brings with it perpetual occasion for sin, one cannot, according to Kierkegaard, best love either humanity in general or the beloved from a distance. Here, within a context of repentance and humbling grace, Ferreira’s interpretation of *Works of Love* as Kierkegaard’s call for us truly to “see” and attend to the one before us may return. Her rebuttal to those who would find in *Works of Love* a call to retreat from one’s neighbor-in-the-flesh is apt even though incomplete. While God’s guardianship does require of us a respectful distance, we may instructively distinguish between the young man’s escape from the actual girl at the end of *Repetition* and the humbled engagement to which Kierkegaard calls us in *Works of Love*. At the conclusion of the young man’s correspondence, he is flung “above the stars”, distanced indeed from his actual beloved (*R*, p. 222). No longer will her faults vex him, because she marries another, saving him from love’s tedium. This false resolution does save the girl from the poet’s distorting gaze but also spares the poet from the difficult task of loving faithfully the one whose perfection or frailty tempts him to theft or irony. We have in *Works of Love* an alternative account of humbled, attentive love wherein I acknowledge my beloved as truly other, but seek, in the midst of my own infinite debt to God, to see through the forgiving, charitable, attentive eyes of faith.¹² Whether saved from the temptation and frustration of intimacy through death, thunderstorm, or severed betrothal, the one who loves safely from a distance misses half of what God’s presence requires—a true engagement with the beloved. A close reading of the two texts may humble and inspire us to take up Kierkegaard’s complicated charge to love with closed, and open, eyes.

Loving as the Poets Do

Poetic love, out of a mixture of fear and self-indulgence, misses the intricate reality of the beloved. As Kierkegaard characterizes him in *Works of Love*, the poet has the tendency to write large one or another pleasing quality he has found while eyeing the beloved, and then love that portrait rather than the messy reality of his lover. The beloved is a projection of the “passionate preference” of the lover (*WL*, p. 53), and Kierkegaard implies that all erotic love (*elskov*) involves this poetic leap over the complex, actual beloved in order to love instead one or several specifically pleasing facets (*WL*, p. 19). Within poetic love, the lover indulges in “the beautiful dizziness of infinity”, becoming “intoxicated” by his own manifestation of the beloved (*WL*, p. 19). We thus most often do not love the other herself, but instead use her as an opportunity for our own self-defined purposes or desires. As *Repetition* opens, the young man comes to Constantin at the height of his infatuation with his own beloved. Constantin Constantius (the book’s author and himself a character in the story) likens the young man to one who “is praying

with his whole soul" (*R*, p. 134). Such love appears initially to Constantin as "wholesome, pure, and sound", as it might to us (*R*, p. 135). Given that the lover seems to lose himself in the other, first love may at first glance appear quite beautiful. But what Kierkegaard (in *Works of Love*) and Constantin know is that young love most often escapes actuality by way of a self-interested fantasy rather than by real attention to the multi-faceted other herself. Both Constantin and Kierkegaard attempt to disabuse young love of its illusion. The corrective procedure for Kierkegaard is the term "neighbor", which interrupts the lover's gaze with the truth that my beloved is other-than-me and distinct from my wishes (*WL*, p. 55). Constantin's prescription to undermine the poet's fantasy is a discriminating inspection of the girl herself.

This state of young love is unstable (by both Constantin's and Kierkegaard's count) in part because it cannot be sustained in proximity with the other. At some point the beloved punctures the constructed image either simply by varying from that image or by refusing to conform to the lover's aims. While the poet thinks he "loves the person even more than himself", he will not tolerate the beloved's distinguishing herself from his purposes for or images of her (*WL*, p. 21). This distorted form of love is self-absorbed and cannot endure the impinging existence of the other. Under Constantin's tutelage, the young man wavers in his appreciation of his beloved; within two weeks "the adored young girl was already almost a vexation to him", Constantin reports (*R*, p. 137). Pacing back and forth, the young man resorts to poetry, repeating to himself verses about longing for a love past (*R*, p. 136). This move saves him from dealing with the girl herself in that he propels her poetically into the past, as again an ideal to be loved and recollected from afar. At this point Constantin's and Kierkegaard's perspectives join to acknowledge that "the young girl was not his beloved: she was the occasion that awakened the poetic in him and made him a poet" (*R*, p. 138). Constantin concludes that the young man "does not know the girl at all", but instead willfully sees her through a poetic, melancholy haze in order to maintain his self-serving construal of her (*R*, p. 185).

One clue as to why the young man so quickly retreats from his love involves his relationship to the passage of time. We must distance ourselves considerably in order not to see the effects of time on our loved ones. Even if one can maintain his illusion about his beloved at this moment, time will eventually challenge that mirage. It is in part his fear of impending change that leads the young man to distance himself from his beloved in the recitation of poetry:

Then, to my easy chair, Comes a dream from my youth. To my easy chair.
A heartfelt longing comes over me for you, Thou sun of woman (*R*, p. 136).

The young man "leap[s] over life" straight to the loss of his love, scarcely after it has begun, because "in the very first moment he [becomes] an old

man in regard to the entire relationship" (R, p. 136). As Constantin suggests, this "recollecting" allows the young man to be "safe and secure" in that, because the young man "begins with the loss", he actually has "nothing to lose" (R, p. 136). Constantin remarks that the young man does not have the "ironic resiliency" that would allow him to look the inevitable in the face and live still with a focused interest in others. As we shall see, this response to temporality leads Constantin also to an "easy chair", but one from which he can observe, scoff, and occasionally indulge. When a lover sees rightly that the other, as a temporal being herself and not merely an illusion, will change over time, the lover may attempt to save himself through various methods. Kierkegaard speaks of an alternative to the young man's plight, in *Works of Love*, when he commends the commandment as that which alone may "secure" temporal love (WL, p. 40). It is only within the very different context of God's command that the lover may view time and the beloved as transformed by eternity and thus resist the temptation to flee.

But the girl continues to exist in this narrative of fruitless repetition, and the young man eventually comes to "curse life, his love, the girl he loved" (R, p. 139). Trapped in a closed circle of recollection, the young man wishes to but cannot escape the girl herself. Within this context, the young man has two choices. Either he can heed Constantin's call cleverly to trick the beloved (who Constantin will soon "demonstrate" is scarcely worth the young man's concern) by pretending that he is an irresolute seducer, or he can find an alternative route back to the fantasy from whence his love came. If the latter is to be a possibility, the young man will have to make some sort of movement out of his current quagmire. Because the perpetuation of his ideal cannot succeed without considerable distance from the actual girl, the young man must rid himself of her.¹³ But this must be done in such a way that neither the poet nor the one poeticized is deeply implicated, less the ideal be tarnished. We will return to this pristine escape route, which the young man eventually takes, after considering with Constantin the alternative. Constantin's cynical option colludes with the ethereal movement above in that he convinces his young charge that loving the girl in proximity is not an option. The clever detection to which Constantin introduces the young man deems the *girl* to be the selfish one, and Constantin vows to "give [himself] the pleasure of letting her incur revenge or laughter" (R, p. 143). It is not until God enters the relationship, with *Works of Love*, that the poetic lover is called to turn Constantin's scrupulous perspective inward, finding himself guilty and thus a third way out of his ordeal.

The Tough Slime of Sagacity

Neither Kierkegaard nor Constantin will brook the poet's idolization of the other, but Constantin embodies what, in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard warns against as the "third party" that corrects youthful enthusiasm with a critical,

all-encompassing eye for the beloved (*WL*, p. 165). With this perspective, the lover is constantly “testing, searching, criticizing” the other, although the lover knows such a view will ruin his love and would “upset the beloved if [she] knew that this third [were] present”; even when the two lovers are alone, this detecting vision intrudes and informs the way the lover perceives his beloved (*WL*, p. 165). After the young man reaches the point of cursing himself and the girl, he swears that he will no longer associate with Constantin and his circumspect observation of her. To Constantin’s amusement, this resolution does not last long, and the young man begins to meet with him again “in out-of-the-way places” away from the unsuspecting girl (*R*, p. 140). The perspective with which the young man has begun to see his beloved becomes more explicit and insidious as Constantin seeks to assure the young man that marriage to the girl is an impossibility. The young man becomes increasingly mired in Constantin’s view, unable to commit to his beloved but still unwilling to break from the ideal to which he has poetically secured himself. He cannot bear to alter the “purely poetic relationship” he has with her, but neither can his commitment withstand his increasingly critical vision of her (*R*, p. 143). Kierkegaard explains in *Works of Love* that with this bifocal vision the lover seeks to secure himself against the potential worthlessness of his current obsession (*WL*, p. 166). In this case, the young man seems at war with himself, increasingly “disgusted with himself and his love because of being fastidious”, as Kierkegaard words it in *Works of Love*, but nonetheless unable to break his ties to Constantin or to the girl (*WL*, p. 165).

As we become acquainted with our narrator, Constantin Constantius, we learn that he understands himself as a “secret agent” who can “expose what is hidden” (*R*, p. 135). With a “critic’s screen that tests every sound and every word”, Constantin intends to inspire one “calmly [to] put one’s eye to the microscope” (*R*, p. 134). He admits that this perspicacious vision may cause one initially to “suffer exceedingly” but argues that eventually one may be strong enough to gain “an investigative rapport with actuality” (*R*, p. 146). Kierkegaard describes Constantin’s malevolent effect on the individual throughout *Works of Love*, wherein one is admonished instead to turn this discriminating eye inward to detect one’s own questionable aims. The one who becomes privy to Constantin’s art is like “one who is jaundiced”, in that everything begins to look discolored; our eyes become “sharpened” in such a way as to see “the depravity of others”, rather than our own (*WL*, p. 286). At the outset, Kierkegaard speaks of the “conceited sagacity” that seeks to see accurately but instead becomes more and more mired in deceit (*WL*, p. 5). When one turns this vision toward the beloved herself, the result is often an appraising leeriness. Here the lover seeks to assess the value of the actual beloved and judge her compliance with the lover’s ideal. This “loathsome rash” of jealousy seeks to examine the other before we commit ourselves to the love (*WL*, p. 189). The tragedy is, Kierkegaard insists, that such a vision will find precisely what it has set out to find (*WL*, p. 157). By

“looking askance at [the young man’s] beloved”, Constantin does in fact deem *her* to be the one who is selfishly manipulating the young man, and thereby seeks to justify to himself and to his apprentice the deceptive scheme by which they can break the engagement (*R*, p. 143).

The poet’s manner of seeing is sickly intertwined with the cynic’s suspicion and the thief’s cant. Before we learn of the young man’s decision between trickery and higher poetry, we learn about the thievery that inspires cynicism. The narrative hits a break in sequence as Constantin flashes the reader back to his own predatory search for renewal in the actual. In the traveler’s diary ending the first half of *Repetition*, we have an account of Constantin’s attempt to survey the terrain of possibility. Constantin explains at the close of the description of his trip to Berlin: “That was how far I had come before I learned to know that young man” (*R*, p. 174). It is this trip to Berlin that comes to bear on the young man as he attempts to love the girl. Constantin is able to render any aspect of reality appropriate for amused derision: “no sigh is so deep that [one] does not have the laughter that corresponds to it in his jargon” (*R*, p. 145). Constantin’s detached cynicism appears as the “triumph” over his frustrated thievery in Berlin, after which he deems all to be folly:

Farewell! Farewell! You exuberant hope of youth, what is your hurry?
After all, what you are hunting for does not exist, and the same goes for
you yourself! (*R*, p. 175)

Kierkegaard describes precisely this argot in *Works of Love*. As “experience speaks deprecatingly about hope” when in the presence of youthful enthusiasm, so has Constantin influenced the perspective of the young man (*WL*, p. 250).¹⁴ In the absence of the eternal, one is subject to a “variously tough slime that is called practical sagacity” (*WL*, p. 251). One finds here an indication as to why the young man thinks that he must skip over the complexity of reality to idealistic poetry.

The Thief in Berlin

Kierkegaard makes clear in *Works of Love* that one who seeks renewal must first recognize, through self-renunciation, his own responsibility for being unable to love another; the command to love is spoken as an indictment and task for the beholder, not the beheld (*WL*, pp. 4, 90). A journey wherein one searches for something worthy of love is not only wrongheaded, but it also leads to the suspicious inspection and disdain described above. Yet Kierkegaard explains that merely human love is most often precisely about this predatory pursuit of valuable particulars:

Purely human love is continually in the process of flying away after, so to speak, or flying away with, the beloved’s perfections. We say of a

seducer that he steals a girl's heart, but of all purely human love, even when it is the most beautiful, we must say that it has something thievish about it, that it really steals the beloved's perfections ... (WL, p. 173).

While most readers note that Constantin's attempt to find renewable pleasure in Berlin fails, we too quickly distance ourselves from the "comedic" theft therein.¹⁵ Kierkegaard's insistence, in *Works of Love*, that our default mode of loving is akin to thievery is to prompt the reader to pay attention even to Constantin. His narrative in Berlin not only reveals the origins of the young man's poetry but writes thievery large enough to make our own, more subtle, occasions of theft more apparent. As Constantin luridly focuses in on his various, unsuspecting victims, so do we, in less obvious ways, often attend to the other with appropriation in mind. The vice involved in this section of *Repetition* is severe and warrants our close reading of the text as it stands, without *Works of Love's* intervening correctives. In Constantin's intensely selfish and cowardly attempt at satisfaction, we are to recognize our own forms of theft.

A bandit like Constantin requires distance adequate for cover but proximity sufficient to appraise the potential goods. Recollecting what he once had, Constantin travels from Stralsund to Berlin by stagecoach. To be fair, even Kierkegaard's most faithful seeker would find some difficulty traveling for thirty-six hours jostling limb to limb with his neighbor in a rumbling coach. Constantin is most definitely not up to that assignment and begins immediately to dread the entire enterprise, wondering if he will be "able to disengage [himself] in the singleness of isolation", rather than (horror of horrors) "carry a memory of being a limb on a larger body" (R, p. 151). He hurries to his lodgings, hoping that, protected there, he may salvage his mission. Constantin has imagined himself previously, sitting by the same window, as a sort of stage phantom, caped and creeping "along the wall with a searching gaze" (R, p. 152). In this lighting, he cannot be seen by others but can observe them as they pass unsuspecting by the opening to his lair. He "settle[s] himself cosily and comfortably in his quarters", where he may have a solitary space "from which he can rush out, a secure hiding place to which he can retreat". This is essential because, "like certain beasts of prey", Constantin cannot enjoy his spoils unless safe from the returned, implicating, gaze of another (R, p. 153).

In the next section, Constantin attempts to pass off his need to be hidden as instead originality of mind and disregard for approval. If one wishes to attend the theater without a concomitantly required response, he should attend a farce. Here, Constantin informs us, "every general esthetic category runs aground", and there is no "uniformity of mood" (R, p. 159). The effect of the presentation "depends largely on self-activity and the viewer's improvisation", and thus the individual must be willing to "risk" (R, pp. 159, 160). This is the perfect setting for Constantin, who thinks of himself as

possessing “sufficient self-confidence to think for himself without consulting others” (R, p. 160). Constantin conflates self-confidence with his self-absorption and unwillingness to expose himself to scrutiny. The limits that a populated theater might place on a viewer do not apply to Constantin because he determinedly resists any memory of “being part of a larger body” as on the stagecoach. He finds “infinite possibilities” at the farce (R, p. 161) because he is able to sequester himself mentally (and physically) from the other’s returned and thus limiting scrutiny. His hiddenness is carefully constructed so that he is never himself the recipient of another’s gaze but instead always the observer. Self-risk is precisely what Constantin seeks to avoid.

The interplay between the farcical actors and the public for which they perform provides a telling contrast to Constantin’s secluded voyeurism. Those who come to watch do not laugh from a distance but rather *with* the actors, those “dancers of whimsey” who, “plunged into the abyss of laughter”, are able to impart their hilarity to others (R, p. 161). The shared unself-consciousness of the farce is to and with others who are quite aware of their being in the presence of others.¹⁶ Constantin himself sits where he may “be quite sure of getting a box all to [himself]” (R, p. 165). Here he may “sit as comfortably and well, almost as well, as in [his] own living room”, from which he has previously watched unsuspecting others. Here in the theater he is resolutely unaware of the presence of others and sees in the place of the audience “mainly emptiness” as if he were in “the belly of the whale in which Jonah sat” (R, p. 166). Unlike Jonah, who reconsidered his own singularity after being spat upon shore by a much larger beast, Constantin lies “stretched out by the stream of laughter and unrestraint and applause” (R, p. 166). Constantin seeks not so much to be a unique individual among others, as to be left alone to enjoy his masturbatory consumption.

But this is not enough. Viewing the actors, who know that they are being viewed, is not sufficient to bring Constantin’s theater visit to a climax. Integral to his whole project is Constantin’s desire to construe the other as merely an object for his own pleasure. Common to the thief and the poet is their refusal to grant the other a separate existence apart from their own aims and interests. In the thief’s case, one can best take from another when she is imagined as solely an amalgam of characteristics that the viewer may take as his own. The hallmark of the thief, Kierkegaard contends, is his unwillingness to recognize what is “yours” in the distinction between what is his and what belongs to another (WL, 267). While some thieves grapple with another in order to procure their quarry, Constantin does not even give the other that chance. Rather, he intends to keep himself from the risk that a true encounter would pose. Seeking what he lacks, Constantin catches sight of a “young girl,” who, he notes, “had hardly come to the theater to be seen” (R, 167). Unlike the actors or other “odious” females, the girl is the *unwitting* object of Constantin’s vampiric gaze. Only while watching her watch the performance is Constantin fully able to “yield” to the “greater pathos” of the

farce. It is her "unawareness" that delights him as he explains, "If she had even suspected my mute, half-infatuated delight, everything would have been spoiled beyond repair" (*R*, p. 167). Returning again and again to the theater to view her, Constantin finds in Berlin what he has previously found at home: a place from which he can hide (behind a tree, no less) to take in the unselfconscious activity of a young girl.¹⁷

Kierkegaard notes in *Works of Love* that the pirate who knows no "yours" neither truly has a "mine", in the sense that he forfeits himself in the stealing. He explains, "the richer the criminal becomes by the stolen *yours*, the less *mine* he has" (*WL*, p. 267). Constantin's satisfaction is unstable because parasitic. We are warned that when love is "thought of as admiration's wide-open eye", one will eventually "complain that the search is futile" (*WL*, p. 161). If the lover's focus on another is a means merely for taking from another what the lover needs, love cannot be sustained. Increasingly stuck in his pattern of furtive filching, Constantin is dependent upon others while also irritated by their shifting and thus untrustworthy forms.¹⁸ Unable to participate fully himself in the farce, dependent on the young girl for his satisfaction, Constantin is thwarted in his efforts when he returns to the theater. His secure lair is occupied, so he must sit with others. He cannot see the girl because she is mixed in with the larger body of people. Exposed, knee to knee with his neighbor, Constantin determines, "there is no repetition at all" (*R*, p. 169). At the coffee shop, again at the theater, in the restaurant, Constantin "pluck[s] a hair from every head, even the bald ones", but is unable to find among others what he wants (*R*, p. 170). Constantin concludes that "all is vanity" (*R*, p. 173). Given that even a "speck of something" lodged in one's eye can ruin one's vision of "the highest of all", there is no reason uniformly to seek satisfaction (*R*, p. 173). If one is to resist the captivating consistency of death, one must only hope for the sporadic occasion for theft—for fleeting, voyeuristic joy, and learn to be satisfied primarily in the knowledge that one is wiser than those who continue to hope for more.

The Higher Poet of Repetition II

Some have found in the second half of this narrative a hint as to how the individual is to receive the beloved back from God. In his later "Little Contribution" on *Repetition*, Constantin explains that one should particularly heed the second half of his text. There one will find "everything crucial that is said about repetition", whereas what comes before is "either a jest or only relatively true" (Supplement to *R*, p. 305; Pap. IV B 112, 1843–1844). As we read the culmination of the young man's distress and its resolution, we would do well here to suspect Constantin's advice.¹⁹ Constantin's predatory and cynical perspective as heretofore narrated has much to do with the form of the young man's renewal. In hearing the young man's own voice through his letters, we begin to sense the extent to which the young poet has internalized

the sage's cynical detachment toward the girl, a critical objectivity cultivated in conjunction with Constantin's clandestine thievery. Through his struggle with guilt or innocence, to his passionate meditation on the righteous sufferer, to his exultation above the stars, the young man's repetition is intertwined with Constantin's work as a "midwife" (*R*, p. 230) and can be carefully distinguished from the renewal called for by Kierkegaard's later, fruitful venture in *Works of Love*. Indeed, "underneath it all" there is a serious "misunderstanding" out of which the young man cannot will himself (*R*, p. 136). As we assess the young man's repetition, using *Works of Love* as contrast, we will resist Constantin's misleading appraisals of the young man's blissful escape. This narrative is "fruitless".

The second half of the story begins as the young man has fled from Constantin and the girl, from both the pernicious influence of his confidant and the other on whom that influence has come to bear. Constantin reports that the young man has deemed him "mad" and wishes that no one, not even himself, will know of the relationship between himself and Constantin (*R*, p. 183). Given that the young man has determined (under Constantin's advisement) that "humanly speaking, his love cannot be realized", and given that he lacks the "resiliency" to put into place Constantin's plan to trick the girl, the young man has, by Constantin's estimation, two options. Either he can expect the "absurd" or, if he has "hidden" something from his confidant and thus truly loves the girl, he can "murder" the confidant once and for all (*R*, p. 186). The poet cannot extricate himself mentally from the mess. Even from a distance, even cursing Constantin to silence, the young man continues to hear Constantin's voice, taking it up as his own in the first letter (*R*, p. 193). He is able to realize that Constantin is cruel, cold, in effect dead to the world, and protests that Constantin would balk if, in the middle of the plan to deceive the girl, he magically switched places with the injured and discarded one (*R*, p. 192).²⁰ But while defending the girl's innocence and implicating himself, the young man cannot ultimately escape Constantin's sneaking suspicion that she is at fault. Exclaiming "No! No! No!" to Constantin's persistent "yes", the young man moves from imagined vehemence to an incapable "no" followed again by his confidant's "yes" (*R*, p. 193). Ultimately, the young man not only fails to "murder" his confidant, but allows him the last word.

Suspecting his beloved and justifying himself, the young man strengthens his resolve, in the letters that follow, to see himself as innocent. Refusing to accept explicitly Constantin's explanation—that the girl is guilty—and unwilling to consider the deep error of his own ways, the young man comes up with an alternative explanation and solution. By commandeering the story of righteously suffering Job, the young man determines ("just as one becomes ill with the sickness one reads about") that he too has "lost" his beloved through no fault of his own (*R*, pp. 206, 198). He decides that "the secret" in Job—that Job, "despite everything, is in the right"—is also the explanation

for his own loss (R, p. 207). The young man turns to the wretched but inculpable as one who can give "voice to [his] suffering" (R, p. 197). After struggling to determine fault and weigh guilt, in an effort to judge himself, his beloved and their situation, the young man relies on Job, "appropriating everything" to deem his circumstance similarly "an ordeal" (R, p. 209).²¹ Glimpsing only momentarily that perhaps the mess in which he finds himself indicates the questionable state of his soul, the young man flees instead to Job as his spiritual mentor.²²

The young man evades the import of his predicament by taking himself out of the moral equation. This is a critical juncture in the text. The Young Man briefly but notably considers the possibility that his break with the girl is due to "something darkly hidden in [his] soul", but he decides instead that his "loss" is understandable only as part of "the whole weighty defense plea on man's behalf in the great case between God and man" (R, pp. 201, 210). The blundering poet who has broken his promise and left his betrothed without explanation unquestionably likens his suffering to a man whose children have died, distinguishing himself from Job only in that he himself has "lost" one beloved, whereas Job has lost several (R, p. 198). The "absurd" possibility for which the young man then places all his hopes is the return of the beloved who has, supposedly, slipped out of the text through no fault of his own. Rather than first recognizing his guilt and subsequently relinquishing *himself* in prayerful repentance before God, hoping in the possibility of his own forgiveness and transformation, the young man imagines himself as, in all innocence, religiously relinquishing *the world*, of which his beloved is a part.²³ The young man's chosen answer thus lies too in a "thunderstorm", wherein he will, like Job, receive back from the hand of God what has been "lost" (R, p. 212). By missing this opportunity to acknowledge his crooked ways, by likening himself to Job rather than to Cain, the young man remains within this vicious text.

And the girl does not return. For all that Job received back, he did not receive again his children. As the young man explains, "here only repetition of the spirit is possible" (R, p. 221). And this is the repetition for which the young man has carefully "clipped" himself under Constantin's tutelage. This "repetition of the spirit" wherein the poet receives back the very same ideal that he has selfishly created is convenient for him indeed. Earlier we hear from him what Constantin has throughout contended: that his love for the girl "cannot find expression in a marriage", in part because "the moment it becomes a matter of actuality, all is lost". The young man describes himself as "split" and only capable of loving the girl as if "grabbing at a shadow", and it is merely a shadow that he ultimately receives (R, p. 201). His "spiritual actuality", in which he has formed the idea of the beloved, cannot be fitted into the realm of her own existence. When the girl marries another, the young man is freed from the responsibility of making concrete the love to which he poetically attests, of making it endure the test of time and daily

annoyance. He is released, as he puts it, to “belong to the idea” (R, p. 221). “Hidden” in the “abyss” and flung “above the stars”, “in the vortex of the infinite”, no one will “call him to dinner” or “expect him for supper”. The young poet becomes the elder poet, free to accept the “call of the idea” because he now has “nothing to abandon” (R, pp. 222, 221). The redone repetition in the second half is thus as fruitless as the first, unless the goal is in solitude to love the image of a beloved and an ideal of love. Perhaps at least in this case the real other is safe from the false lover’s greedy observation and/or his clumsy poetic panic.

In concluding the story, Constantin evaluates the young man’s repetition as “the raising of his consciousness to the second power” (R, p. 229). Is the reader to trust that the young man has indeed gone further? Or is the text, as Kierkegaard originally considered labeling it, fruitless? Much depends on how one evaluates the poet’s renewal. The young man remains a poet but now a poet resolutely separated from actuality altogether.²⁴ Prior to this point, Constantin explains, the young man has struggled to keep “the whole love affair in its ideality, to which he can give any expression whatsoever” (R, p. 229). But only after his thunderstorm and her marriage can he truly be the unencumbered higher poet. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard calls this the “most dangerous of all escapes”, by which one “flies over actually completely”; such a love “imagines itself to be the highest and most perfect kind of love”, unhindered by that which does not easily conform to the poet’s spinning (WL, p. 161). Incapable of reconciling our erotically inebriated vision of another with the basic realities of change over time and mortal frailty, much less the distorted construal our “sagacious” perspective gives to these, we are tempted to “escape” like the young man. As *Repetition* closes, the reader is challenged to imagine alternative possibilities to this conundrum of thievery, poetry, cynicism, and escape. In the last section, Constantin himself merely hints at a “religious” option, wherein, in his estimation, the young man could have gained “iron consistency and imperturbability” (R, p. 229). While the religious renewal described in *Works of Love* is much more perilous than Constantin, from outside, can foresee, the entirely different course elicited there offers a more promising way to proceed.

Divine Protection in Works of Love

With God’s grace, it is not necessary to choose either poetic ignorance or knowledgeable cynicism, because God commands and provides another way of viewing that protects and vindicates actuality. The adjustment necessary for this vision involves actively accepting God’s role as the true confidant for the relation between self and other. Being the “middle term” that intervenes where self-determined “preference” otherwise stands, God requires of the self a perspective that is the inverse of Constantin’s meticulous scrutiny of

the other (WL, p. 58). Whereas Constantin's presence adjusts the young man's idealized, idolized version of his beloved by illumining her mortal fragility and imperfection, God's intervention turns that blinding light of clarity inward on the self, the one to whom the command unequivocally speaks (WL, p. 90). Just as the poet is anguished by the effect Constantin has on his vision of the girl, so does this "earnest walk" with God cause agony (WL, p. 77). The command's effect described in *Works of Love* magnifies the shame we experience when we sense that we have indeed invited an invidious third party into the relationship between ourselves and another, and it renders that shame intense enough to "reduce [us] to nothing" (WL, p. 102). The young poet, much in love with his ideal, seeks to assure himself that his beloved is loveable and thus consults another. So in *Works of Love* is one continually to request assistance in seeing adequately, but the primary correction involves the lover himself, forcing him out of hiding and into the light of God's "requirement and criterion" (WL, p. 102). The command is thus like a hall of mirrors wherein one is denied "even the most unnoticed crevice to hide in if you were to be put to shame there" (WL, p. 248). The testing and doubt of *Repetition* are to ricochet off the beloved and onto the inept lover himself.

Constantin and the young man both attempt to hide from the other, Constantin in the shadows and the poet in Stockholm, even while using her as a meal or a muse. Crucial for this turn whereby the lover is himself implicated rather than evaluative or accusatory is the acknowledgment that one neither consumes another in private nor truly escapes his responsibility to another, for God is always and everywhere present. Taking on God as the third party to one's love places the relationship within an "earnest" context; the lover hears a "task for every moment" rather than "platitudes and fanaticism" (WL, p. 189). I am consistently to acknowledge God's presence as the one literally between myself and the one whom I love. As the "guardian" for the beloved, God stands between me and the other, commanding that I acknowledge that my beloved is first beloved and protected by God (WL, p. 189). Here Kierkegaard insists that although the "object and task" of love involves another person, the "judgment" lies with God (WL, p. 189). This leaves Constantin and the young man, you and me, without recourse to a place from which we may safely enjoy or contemplate another. Regardless of distance and shadows, the lover is always under God's scrutiny. Even if the other is oblivious to the collusion between ourselves and mistrust (as with the poet), or of our selfish gaze (as with Constantin), God is always cognizant of and judging the manner with which we see another.

By understanding the ones to whom we relate as being first related to God, we come to acknowledge their actual selfhood apart from any image, dream, or plan we have for them. Kierkegaard interprets the command to love one's neighbor as a "redoubling" of the self, forcing one to see that the other is truly other than the self, when what we so often attempt in love is to

see the other as an extension of our own wishes and desires (WL, p. 21). Kierkegaard characterizes a properly Christian love as that which “dethrones inclination” with a command to love the other as she is first related to God (WL, p. 50). Into the consuming selfishness of merely human love, God places this little term, “neighbor” whereby we are reminded that the other is God’s own, not ours (WL, p. 53). This is a “test” by which we are to examine our motives toward another whom we profess to love (WL, p. 54). The individual’s desire to subsume the one he loves into his own self, as an “other I” rather than another self, is thwarted by this reminder-term, “neighbor”, whereby each individual is singly related to God (WL, p. 57). Constantin’s and our acquisitive negation of the other, whether from afar or in extreme proximity, is thwarted by this image of the returned and accusatory gaze. The command to love one’s neighbor thus transforms even “erotic love” into “matter of conscience” (WL, p. 139).

God’s presence places the command between the individual and the other, requiring self-scrutiny and even fear of impending transgression. Attention to a particular other brings with it an increase in the occasion for sin. Whether due to perfections we may, even inadvertently, purloin, or to perceived imperfections that may tempt us to doubt, the other provides ample opportunity for vice. Given our selfish inclination to distort and steal from the other, it might be understandable for one to wish, like the young man, to be flung far from the task at hand. Yet this “flight that soars above the world” is not the love to which Kierkegaard summons the reader. The “humble and difficult flight along the ground”, requires not only fear but also a repentance born of faith (WL, p. 84). Both Constantin’s protective perusal and the young man’s disengagement betray a fearful distance from the other who tempts them. Constantin judges himself to be a singular individual, separate from the all too easily conforming masses, when in truth he cannot bear the returned, accusatory, gaze of his neighbor. The young man attests to an irreligious renewal that saves him from the guilt-inducing trauma of his broken engagement. The distance to which one is called in *Works of Love* can be distinguished from either of these escapes in that a faithful lover remains visible and committed, even with fear and trembling. This sustained engagement requires of the self not only recognition of God’s law but a trust in God’s grace.

David Cain suggests, in his careful reading of *Repetition*, that “to have to do earnestly with oneself for very long is to come upon the problem of forgiveness”.²⁵ If guilt before the law were the only aspect of God’s guardianship of the beloved, few of us would have the courage to proceed. Because he knows well the abuse Christianity has made of Luther’s *sola gratia*, Kierkegaard is wary throughout *Works of Love* to speak of love’s task primarily as our reception of grace. But along with an indictment, in *Works of Love*, of *Repetition*’s blundering lovers comes a call for us to face with tenacious hope the realization that the Young Man evades. There is something

"darkly hidden in [our] souls"—that is, sin—and we must believe in the possibility of our redemption (*R*, p. 201). The infinite debt that we originally and in original ways incur even while "earnestly" trying to love well is "hidden" by Christ, forgiven by God through the work of Christ (*WL*, p. 287). As the "fulfilling of the law", Christ enacts the possibility of this other facet of God's presence for the individual: a grateful and persistent trust in God (*WL*, p. 102). M. L. Taylor, Gouwens, Caputo, and Crites all aptly propose that the true renewal outside the purview of *Repetition* is repetition through, as Caputo words it, "atonement".²⁶ Christ's continual work on the repentant individual is the persistently necessary key to the true love that eludes the poet, cynic, and thief.

Yet Kierkegaard often moves quickly, in *Works of Love*, through this description of sheer receptivity—that God's grace is the only possible source of hope in our blundering attempts to love.²⁷ Swiftly, this grace is also again task, for "we can learn humility from this relation to God", a crushing but not fatal humility before God (*WL*, p. 102). While grace enlivens expectancy, the individual's recognition of the infinite debt he has incurred should return him continually to God for forgiveness, limping "as Jacob limped after having struggled with God" (*WL*, p. 18). With this humility is to come a commitment again to attempt a truer love for the beloved, to see her as we know we are seen by God through Christ—that is, forgiven. Even grace thus becomes also law for Kierkegaard, pushing the individual invariably to acknowledge how far he falls below the humble gratitude and generosity toward neighbor called for in the presence of Christ. We must continually acknowledge our need for forgiveness and seek thereby to forgive the other.²⁸ When we fail to do so, we are thrown again on the necessity of grace. We are to resist the temptation to be like the young man whose "impatience", in George Pattison's words, "seeks to have done with the whole weight of existence in a flash", and instead resume receiving, trying, failing, and receiving again.²⁹

Resilient hope is thus a task as well as a gift. The young man skips over the girl's actuality in part because of his own self-centered need to see her as fitting his ideal, but also in part because he fears the passage of time in which his beloved will necessarily further deviate from his present picture of her actuality. Both the cynic and the poet view possibility as an enemy, as that which brings the inevitable devaluation of the other. Thus the young man's love for the girl whips over to despair. The poem he recites repeatedly, as a mantra to sober his giddy desire and solidify his decision to break off the engagement, is of old age. Here the young man, Constantin, and Kierkegaard's "sage" link hope with youth, reckoning "that everything indeed ends in wretchedness" (*WL*, p. 257). The poet decides that the only way out of cynicism is to escape the earth altogether, but Kierkegaard describes a third way in *Works of Love* whereby one's youthful hopes are transformed rather than melted down into some "tough slime" (*WL*, p. 251). Kierkegaard

agrees that hope "has still much more in common with youthfulness than with the moroseness that is frequently honored with the name of seriousness" but insists that the passage of time need not necessarily lead to young love's diminishment and demise (*WL*, p. 250). There is a "lightness" about hoping with grace that shifts one's stance toward the future from apprehension to "expectancy" (*WL*, p. 249). The lover's "lightness", a "relaxation of the heart" perhaps, involves an irrepressible reliance on God as the third party to secure the future of one's love.³⁰ The young man seeks out Constantin in order to test and scheme regarding love. Kierkegaard commends instead that one relinquish all machinations and experiments in order to rely on God: "when eternity says, 'You shall love,' it is responsible for making sure that this can be done" (*WL*, p. 41). One is called to replace fear of the future with a trust in God's ability to strengthen his resolve to love through time.

The progress we are to make in our effort to trust in God is linked inextricably to our recognition of our own inability to progress. The proper setting for love, Kierkegaard insists, is one's debt before God. Constantin attempts to teach his apprentice his own cynical "alphabet" (*R*, p. 145), but the young man is unable fully to master the language. He instead hesitates "sticking out one foot and then the other" while Constantin acrobatically dives (*R*, p. 193). These images are similarly apt for the change to be wrought in the lover when he acknowledges God as his confidant. Kierkegaard admonishes the one who seeks to view the other with a kind of double vision; with one eye the lover tests and "only with the other eye do you see that [the lover] is the beloved" (*WL*, p. 165). At issue are not the beauty, truth and worth of the beloved, Kierkegaard explains, but instead the strength and resilience of the lover's ability to receive and incorporate an alternative language of debt and forgiveness. This "alphabet" entails the opposite of Constantin's miserly vocabulary of examination and doubt. While the "language of sagacity" deems it the "most obtuse and fatuous thing one can do", faithful love is to "believe all things" in favor of the beloved, offering a "mitigating explanation" for what mistrustful experience would deem unlovable (*WL*, pp. 226, 289). There is an "equilibrium of opposite possibilities", and true love requires that you decide "whether there is mistrust or love in you" (*WL*, p. 228). With-in this different context, the lover is himself "transformed" to perceive his beloved differently, like an artist who is never unable to "discern a more beautiful side" (*WL*, p. 158).³¹

When a mitigating explanation is not possible, the lover is called to "hide" the beloved's sins, as has God for the lover. Constantin's influence on young love exacerbates the young man's wary hesitation regarding his commitment to the girl. If the young man had indeed "murdered" Constantin and silenced the cynic's voice at that critical moment when contemplating his own guilt, he might have received back the real girl (*R*, p. 186). If the young poet had chosen God as his confidant and thereby faced his own sin and

asked for forgiveness, he might have been able to receive back the girl “despite and with [her] weaknesses and defects and imperfections” (WL, p. 158). This contrasting perspective of debt and forgiveness enables the lover to pledge his fidelity knowing that, on the occasion when the beloved is truly at fault, the task is still his own. If Christ was able lovingly to “discover nothing” before the Council who condemned him, we are to forgive even the ones to whom we are closest (WL, p. 288). Given that God sees the log in my own eye (even if I am capable of hiding it from others and myself) and nevertheless forgives me for it, it would be foolishness for me to “discover the splinter” in the eye of the one I behold (WL, p. 383). Pattison suggests that the “leveling” we experience before God’s law and God’s forgiveness enables us to love the neighbor with generosity.³² This “strange way of speaking” whereby I am constantly in “infinite debt” to God requires an adaptation of “attitude and mind” (WL, p. 178), away from the context of failed repetition, wherein the world is used, tested, weighed and rejected.

Repetition, but with Fear and Trembling

From Constantin’s perspective, “a deeper religious background” would have allowed the young man to act “with an entirely different iron consistency and imperturbability” regarding the “collision” (R, p. 229). This is, yet again, a misunderstanding. From the point of view of the elder poet who wrote *Works of Love*, even those who most earnestly seek to receive God’s grace merely glimpse true love as it glimmers between the fragmented slivers of our broken attempts. In his chapter on “Recollecting One Who Is Dead”, Kierkegaard explains that loving the living is perilous because “one cannot see with complete clarity what is love and what is self-love” (WL, p. 351). Only in loving the dead can one perform this pressing work of self-observation with ease, because the dead can neither tempt nor compel the lover. It is the living, with their beauty and blemish, that render us most incapable of standing resolutely before God with “clean hands” as the young man tries so hard to do. But we are not to find here an excuse to escape, either by sinning boldly or loving above the stars. While one may be best able to step gracefully when dancing alone in a church yard (WL, p. 347), the more difficult venture to which we are summoned is to love, carefully and patiently, while crammed inside the rumbling stage coach or, as Kierkegaard puts it, while “in the kettle the coppersmith is hammering on” (WL, p. 79).³³

Within the convoluted, confused text of *Repetition*, the reader is given some warning as to the ways that we misstep while dancing with another.³⁴ The failed repetition there gives only hints as to what might be a more faithful way to proceed. Kierkegaard continues to give us the strands of his own effort to move beyond the pilfering love of the thief and the cowardly suspicion of the cynic, as well as the willed abandon of the poet. Many of the

texts in his pseudonymous authorship narrate this tension between our self-fish intent and our self-giving involvement, pointing to self-circumspection as a key element of true repetition. Because we are so ready to confuse selfish intent with self-giving involvement (or perhaps increasingly to ignore the difference all together) every faithful engagement must necessarily involve an element of fear:

Fear and trembling (see Philippians 2:12) is not the *primus motor* in the Christian life, for it is love; but it is what the oscillating *balance wheel* is to the clock—it is the oscillating *balance wheel* of the Christian life. (Supplement to *WL*, p. 395; from JP III 2383, Pap. II A 370, February 16, 1839)

The love to which Kierkegaard calls us requires us actively to acknowledge that true love itself is necessarily *precarious*—requiring prayers of confession as well as forgiveness.³⁵ We are to cherish our loved ones with fear and trembling as the balance wheel for our love, treading warily with the increasing awareness that works we believe to be loving may instead be occasions of our own self-indulgence or preservation. *Works of Love* is a gift precisely because Kierkegaard and we find loving the living to be formidable. Given that even Kierkegaard persevered in his belief that “to love people is the only thing worth living for,” (*WL*, p. 375) we are to continue our own feebly faithful attempts to heed his exacting call.³⁶

NOTES

- 1 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, edited and translated by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), cited throughout as *WL*.
- 2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, edited and translated by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), cited throughout as *R*.
- 3 M. Jamie Ferreira, “Equality, Impartiality and Moral Blindness in Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*”, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25:1 (Spring 1997), pp. 65–85.
- 4 Ferreira, p. 75.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 83. I understand Ferreira’s point that the command does not dictate the specific assistance or care the other requires. She does not, however, dwell sufficiently on the extent to which the command requires a particular, self-critical stance when attending another. Ferreira alludes to several passages wherein Kierkegaard warns against the potential delusions internal to our interest in another, but the overall import of her article is to make room in *Works of Love* for focused attention.
- 6 I will at times employ Kierkegaard’s own gender critique by more explicitly indicting the male reader.
- 7 Louis Mackey, *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University Press, 1986), p. 95. Joakim Garff notes that the summons emerges in the presence of failure and the “absence of result” (p. 130). Joakim Garff, “‘My Dear Reader!’ Kierkegaard Read with Restrained Affection”, *Studia Theologica* 45 (1991), pp. 127–147.
- 8 For what I believe may be an invitation to play see Sylviane Agacinski, “An Aparté on Repetition”, in Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh (eds), *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 131–145.
- 9 Frederick Sontag quoted in David Cain, “Notes on a Coach Horn: ‘Going Further,’ ‘Revocation,’ and *Repetition*”, in Robert Perkins (ed), *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Vol. 6* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), pp. 335–358.

- 10 Supplement to *R*, p. 276; Pap. IV B 97:2, 1843; Supplement to *R*, p. 276; Pap IVB 97:1, 1843.
- 11 While their reading of the young man's advance is guarded, both Crites and Gouwens see him as going beyond Constantin, toward "the absurdity of the coincidence of eternity in time present that is inexpressible" (Crites, p. 246) or by exploring "the question of his own guilt and innocence" (Gouwens, p. 296). David Gouwens, "Understanding, Imagination, and Irony in Kierkegaard's *Repetition*", in Robert Perkins (ed) *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Vol. 6* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), pp. 290–310. Both readers use *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, rather than *Works of Love*, as the text by which to judge the Young Man's situation.
- 12 By placing our return to the beloved within the context of our debt before God, I differ from those who find within Kierkegaard's texts a call for us to discover the beauty of our beloved. While theirs may be one construal of Christian love within the tradition itself, Kierkegaard's description of faithful intimacy requires more fear and trembling than erotic celebration, and our love for the beloved is to be for her as also fallen and faulted, rather than as newly appealing. A pivotal point is the reader's interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*. Some readers find in de Silentio's story of the bumbling knight of faith a pertinent model for our love. The knight's "reckless" "freedom from care", that allows him to find "pleasure in everything", some view as Kierkegaard's intimation of Christian love (*FT*, pp. 40,39). I believe that the Third Problem is the decisive section of *Fear and Trembling*, wherein Kierkegaard indirectly persuades us 1) that we are more akin to the debauched merman than to righteous Abraham and 2) that we must make an alternative movement by virtue of the absurd by taking "refuge in the paradox" of repentance (*FT*, p. 98) and thus 3) that we must, like Tobias' Sarah ("a damaged specimen of a human being"), accept an extravagant and humbling gift from another—that is, from Christ (*FT*, p. 104). Kierkegaard further suggests, through de Silentio's musings, that the text is to provoke a lover to "take the time to scrutinize in sleepless vigilance every single secret thought" in order to discover "the dark emotions hiding in every human life" (*FT*, p. 100). We who stand sinful before Mt. Moriah thus receive back Isaac as ones chastened and wary rather than as freed to enjoy him anew. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, edited and translated by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- 13 George Pattison explains, "the situation becomes downright disastrous when an engagement is announced, since the real possibility of marriage confronts him with the need to break the spell of his dream world and come to terms with the reality of another person and his responsibility towards her" (p. 369). George Pattison, "The Magic of Theater: Drama and Existence in Kierkegaard's *Repetition* and Hesse's *Steppenwolf*", in Robert Perkins (ed), *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Vol. 6* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), pp. 359–377. Pattison's perceptive skepticism of the young man's and Constantin's relation to the other comes very close to my own, but could be furthered, I believe, by using *Work of Love* as a contrasting text.
- 14 David Cain notes that "freedom as sagacity", of which Constantin is an example, "develops strategies seeking to outwit repetition as tiresome and make it interesting" (Cain, p. 351).
- 15 I respectfully disagree with Stephen Crites, who discusses the Berlin passage as "a comic counterpoint to Nameless's ordeal" without noting the problem of the others on whom Constantin feeds (p. 237). Stephen Crites, "The Blissful Security of the Moment': Recollection, Repetition, and Eternal Recurrence", in Robert Perkins (ed), *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Vol. 6* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), pp. 229–245. Mackey calls Constantin's trip a "parody" without noting the menacing aspect of his perusals (Mackey, p. 76). While I take their point that Constantin provides a contrast to the young man's seeking, neither Crites nor Mackey notes the mutual collusion of both quests.
- 16 George Pattison explains that, at the theater, Constantin is "completely secured against the disturbing contingency and other-relatedness of life" (Pattison, p. 368).
- 17 Louis Mackey misses the furtively predatory nature of Constantin's work, even while noting that he "requires novelty and variety" (Mackey, p. 77). He construes Constantin more as a seducer than as a cowardly pervert. I believe that there are relevant differences between Constantin and the seducer of *Either/Or*, although both characters exhibit vices to which most of us can, albeit more subtly, relate.
- 18 Crites notes that Constantin's "ecstasy of the moment is hostage to momentary disruption that explodes it as wholly as it has taken form" (Crites, p. 239).

- 19 Louis Mackey warns that we should not, like the young man, “misread nervous apoplexy as divine intervention” (Mackey, p. 90).
- 20 And here Gouwens is certainly correct that the young man is able to “conjure up how his actions have affected the girl” (Gouwens, p. 294). The young man merely glimpses this, however, and does not at any point choose his course of action out of concern for her.
- 21 Gouwens and Mark Lloyd Taylor note that the young man views his guilt as a “temporary position” (Gouwens, p. 304), a “category” (Taylor, p. 47) that can be resolved in an instant. Mark Lloyd Taylor, “Ordeal and Repetition in Kierkegaard’s Treatment of Abraham and Job”, in George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans (eds), *Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1992), pp. 33–53.
- 22 There is a similar crux to Johannes de Silentio’s *Fear and Trembling*, as the writer and reader choose either the righteous Abraham or the evil merman as the character whose crisis most resembles their own. In both texts the decisive route rarely chosen is that of repentance.
- 23 One’s judgment of the young man’s hope in the “absurd” may largely hinge on how one reads de Silentio’s musings on the matter in *Fear and Trembling*. See endnote 12.
- 24 I agree with Louis Mackey’s estimation that the young man is “released not to the sobriety of the actual, but to the inebriation of the ideal” (Mackey, p. 92).
- 25 Cain, p. 352.
- 26 John Caputo, “Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and the Foundering of Metaphysics”, in Robert Perkins (ed), *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Vol. 6* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), pp. 210–223.
- 27 For what I believe to be the best discussion of Christ’s work and our hope, see David Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), although I do see grace as effecting a more radically discordant change in the individual than does Gouwens.
- 28 Even the forgiveness that enables the kind of charitable, enduring vision Ferreira commends is dependent upon, in Kierkegaard’s estimation, our deep understanding of our perpetual transgression and of our consequent indebtedness to God’s grace.
- 29 Pattison, p. 372.
- 30 Thank you, Margaret Farley, for this phrase.
- 31 By adopting Kierkegaard’s metaphor of the adept artist, we must avoid making the Christian lover into a more proficient Constantine in Berlin, able to find in every venue a person from which to steal. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard avoids speaking as if the Christian receives back the beloved as a “gift”, lest we mistakenly think that she is in any way our own. This point is also at issue in *Fear and Trembling*, wherein the merman who receives back Agnes does so with gratitude, but also with a sense of his own prior and potential transgressions.
- 32 Pattison, p. 110. The forgiveness Kierkegaard describes does not require us to remain in proximity to another who physically or verbally abuses us, however. In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard implies and in *Works of Love* he insists that were I to remain with another who so fundamentally refuses to acknowledge my selfhood before God, I would myself be in error. This does not preclude God’s call that I love and forgive the abuser as my neighbor, but I must do so from a considerable distance.
- 33 David Cain notes another apt metaphor for loving truly from Kierkegaard’s journal, of building a “nest upon the sea” (JP 1: 1023).
- 34 Gouwens aptly suggests that “perhaps one could go even further, reading and understanding *Repetition* as the young man read and understood the book of Job” (Gouwens, 1993, p. 308).
- 35 I am indebted to John David Ramsey for suggesting “precarious” as an etymologically apt word to describe a Christian’s attempts at obedience.
- 36 Thank you, Vanessa Rumble, for inspiring in your students a passion for Kierkegaard. Thank you, Gene Outka and David Gouwens, for your many careful readings. Thank you, John Utz, for your love.