

Lacan as a reader of Kierkegaard: Repetition's encounter with the Real

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Lacan warns us: “Do not think that, for as long as I live, you can consider any of my formulas definitive. I still have a few tricks up my sleeve.”¹ One could say that the logic of this statement extends throughout Lacan’s teachings: the concepts he uses never have just the one meaning, but their significance or non-significance varies, depending on context. Where his ideas are concerned, it is not possible to ascribe to them what he termed a “point de capiton”, since Lacan incessantly moves the posts or even overturns his very conceptions. In this paper, we will be dealing with repetition, one of the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, a concept to which Lacan always came back, looking at both its good and its reverse side. Specifically, we will examine it from the point of view of a fundamental transition, the transition from the symbolic to the real. We will see how repetition in Lacan intersects with the thinking of Kierkegaard, who – and this is no accident – is present at all stages of Lacan’s teachings. Kierkegaard, who, according to Lacan, was “the most acute of the questioners of the soul”² before Freud, was beset by a problem: “whether repetition is possible, and what it means, whether a thing wins or

loses by being repeated”³. He says that he is “almost paralyzed” in the face of this question; in order to answer it, he resorts to an experiment: he decides to leave for Berlin, which he had visited earlier, to walk in his own steps in order to relive the identical moment of the past and thus find happiness again. Kierkegaard’s project appears here as a philosophy of action, precisely because he responds with an action (the transition to Berlin) that involves himself to the theoretical problem that concerns him so intensely. This is why repetition will not be a theoretical essay but rather the author’s recording of an experimental travelogue.

The self-reflection on his private condition had always been the leavening of Kierkegaard’s philosophical thought. This philosophy clashes with Hegel. In Hegel’s philosophy, the subject is never in the spotlight; priority is given to the System. Conversely, Kierkegaard stubbornly refuses to see himself as a transitory moment in the course of history, whose truth must always be found in a subsequent moment. Faced with the objectivity of the Hegelian Idea, he claims primacy for a subjective being who includes his or her own truth.

1 Jacques Lacan. Conférence sur la psychanalyse et la formation du psychiatre à Sainte-Anne le 10 novembre 1967. <http://www.histoiredelafolie.fr/psychiatrie-neurologie/jacques-lacan-conference-sur-le-psychanalyse-et-la-formation-du-psychiatre-a-sainte-anne-le-10-novembre-1967>

2 S XI, p. 60/59.

3 Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, translated by M. G. Piety, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, p.3.

In Hegel's mind, truth is external to the subject and is based on the Idea. In order to comprehend it, the subject has no option but to follow the historical expressions of the Idea. This is the work of the objective thinker. In Kierkegaard, truth is internal to the subject. Its comprehension is, therefore, the work of the subjective thinker. Kierkegaard's motto is: "Be subjective and then you will find yourselves inside the truth". In Kierkegaard's thinking, philosophy only becomes whole in the singularity of a personal experience. It follows that, for Kierkegaard, the Hegelian System is the sinking of the subject in the object's sleep. Kierkegaard attempts to Wake the subject up, tear it away from the lethargic objective being that may be compared to the existence of a somnambulist and bring it into contact with its interiority and truth, the genuine truth of its singular existence. In truth, Kierkegaard is the first post-modern philosopher: to each their own truth.

The confrontation between the externality of the objective system and the internality of the subjective existence becomes tangible in Kierkegaard's relationship with Regina. This peculiar relationship is at the root of Kierkegaard's entire philosophical project. No thought has ever been more motivated by such a personal affair as that of Kierkegaard and his questioning of who Regina truly is and of the true meaning of his relationship with her. Here is a reminder of some facts: Kierkegaard meets young Regina in May 1837 and they get engaged in September 1840. He, however, almost immediately realizes his mistake. He thus adopts a behavior that is so extreme that it forces Regine to call off their engagement. He loves her so much that he tries to save her from himself. The pretext for the breakup is his melancholy, the legacy of his father, which would have weighed down on his relationship with Regina, making it unlivable. However, as can be seen from Kierkegaard's correspondence, the true motive of the separation is his realization of a personal existential mission: he is made to be a writer and not a husband.

As far as Kierkegaard is concerned, writer and husband are incompatible, as the status of husband entails his submission to the typical obligations of a social institution. These obligations would only cancel his need to turn away from the externality

of the objective institution to the internality of subjective existence. Repetition, as a whole, is one of Kierkegaard's existential answers to the "externality" that Regina embodies. Saying "no" to Regina is the result of his decision to completely break away from Hegelian externality and to once more be the subject he has always been: "I am back to my old self. This 'self', which another would not pick up off the street, is mine again. The schism in my being has been removed. I am whole again. The anxieties of sympathy, which my pride nourished and supported, no longer force splits and separations."⁴ The objective being of a husband is now confronted with the subjective doing of a writer.

Let us go back to Kierkegaard's Berlin travels. The experiment turns out to be a fiasco. For example, it was impossible for Kierkegaard to feel the same spiritual uplift by re-listening to his favorite drama at the opera. The enjoyment he had felt in every respect belongs to the past and there is no possibility of returning to it. He even mentions that, unfortunately, the trip did not reward him for his trouble, because, in reality, he did not need to move from his seat to become convinced that there is no repetition at all. He had verified that "the only thing that repeated itself was that no repetition was possible" and he "became aware of this by having it repeated in every possible way"⁵. Simply, he observes, "one can sit peacefully in one's living-room, when everything is vanity and passes away; then one travels more briskly than if one travelled by train, despite the fact that one is sitting still"⁶. In the end, the anticipation of repetition was overshadowed by a memory.

How exactly does Kierkegaard's work intersect with Lacan's thought? In *Seminar II*, Lacan construes Kierkegaard's repetition as an attempt to answer the question "how and why everything which pertains to an advance essential to the human being must take the path of a tenacious repetition"⁷. This question posed by Kierkegaard intersects with the query of psychoanalysis; Lacan expressly refers to it as "the track of our problem". It is a question that is reformulated as follows: why is man a being of repetition? In this early stage of Lacan's teachings, "it has all to do with the intrusion of the symbolic register". Man is a being of repetition because he reproduces the

4 S. Kierkegaard, *idem*, p. 74.

5 *Idem*, p. 38.

6 *Idem*, p. 42.

7 *S II*, p. 88/110.

discourse of the Other: the word of the Other that I reproduce is "the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of the links"⁸ in the Other's chain.

Lacan uses the father's discourse as an example of an Other; this example is not random, if we take into account Kierkegaard's life and, especially the relationship to his father. In Kierkegaard's mind, his father's legacy was his sin. Well might we ask: what was his father's sin? When Kierkegaard's father, Michael, was young, it so happened that, once when he was looking after some sheep, worn down from loneliness, cold, and hunger, he cursed God for failing to come to his aid. Kierkegaard's father was a deeply religious person, and, from that moment, he never stopped fearing godly retribution and believing that, as he himself was not punished during his lifetime, the sin would be passed on to his children. Specifically, he was convinced that none of his children would live longer than Jesus, i.e., 33 years. Although five of the family's children died before their father, his prediction did not come true for the two who lived beyond that fatidic limit.

Kierkegaard was one of those two children and was the seventh and last child from his father's second marriage. The very existence of this marriage constitutes another sin of the father. Michael's first wife died two years after they wed, leaving him childless. Shortly after, he married a young woman who worked as a servant in the house he shared with his first wife. Their first child was born eight months after the first wife's death, proof of Michael's adultery. Indeed, Kierkegaard suspected that his mother was raped by his father while she was still a virgin. Her pregnancy served to speed up the wedding. Much later, in *Seminar XXI*, Lacan will refer to the relationship of Kierkegaard's parents, making the following comment: "The relations lived by Kierkegaard in question are those of a knot never avowed, which is that of a faulty [even sinful] father (père à la faute). It is not a matter of his own experience, but of that of he who in relation to him is found to occupy the place of the father. At the same time, this place of the father is found to be problematic..."⁹.

Let us go back to the discourse of the father mentioned by Lacan in *Seminar II* as an example

of the reproduction of the Other's discourse: "I am condemned to reproduce them [the mistakes of my father] because I am obliged to pick up again the discourse he bequeathed to me, not simply because I am his son, but because one can't stop the chain of discourse, and it is precisely my duty to transmit it in its aberrant form to someone else"¹⁰. That is to say, it is a kind of automaton. I do not reproduce the discourse just because I am a son, as this reproduction is not the result of a biological reality. The reproduction, instead, goes beyond biological order, precisely because it is due to my being a part of the unbreakable chain of discourse, of which I am but a single link.

Consequently, in *Seminar II*, Lacan thinks of repetition only in relation to the power the symbolic exerts over the subject and attempts to explain it as the result of the subject's membership of a language system. Repetition is to be construed as "a circular process of the exchange of speech"¹¹. Repetition does not fall under the purview of the biological balancing and harmonization mechanisms; therefore, repetition arises from beyond the pleasure principle as a characteristic of the peculiar form of the being called the "parlêtre".

In *Seminar II* Lacan, following Freud, describes two different structures of human experience. Following Kierkegaard's example, he terms the first one "archaic". This is the structure of reminiscence, in which man recognizes the world and its objects because he has already encountered them. He calls the second structure "the conquest" and finds it to be founded on repetition. This distinction is highlighted in Kierkegaard's repetition: "repetition is a decisive expression for what 'recollection' was for the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowledge is recollection, thus will modern philosophy teach that life itself is a repetition."¹²

What, therefore, is the role of repetition? This role becomes clear if we follow the Freudian argument of the lost object. The pleasure principle is what pushes the subject to unceasingly seek that first experience of satisfaction that they remember having received from the object. Each new object, however, only partially grants the pleasure received

8 S II, p. 89/112.

9 Lacan J., *Seminaire XXI*, R.S.I., lesson 18/2/1975. Translated by Jack W. Stone.

10 S II, p. 89/112.

11 S II, p. 98/123.

12 S. Kierkegaard, *Idem*, p. 3.

from the primordial object. It is this partial pleasure that pushes the subject to forever repeat their search for the lost object of this original pleasure, which they however will never experience again. Freud insists that what we find, driven by nostalgia for the lost object, is never what we were looking for. It is the rediscovery itself that highlights the impossibility of repetition because what we find will never be, nor could be, the same object. The lost object is lost forever.

Along the same lines, in *Seminar IV*, Lacan attempts an explicit philosophical transcription of the distinction between reminiscence and repetition: if Platonic reminiscence is the rediscovery of pre-formed knowledge, repetition is the impossible to assuage¹³. Therefore, the difference between reminiscence and repetition consists in the fact that the reminiscence refers to objects that are already and always present there in their objective wholeness, whereas repetition refers to objects that are constituted through the work of the subject itself, i.e., by means of the incessantly repeated search for the lost pleasure object. It follows that, while reminiscence recalls an already structured pre-existing world, repetition is the very procedure of the constitution of that world. Repetition is precisely what constitutes the "world of objects" for the subject.¹⁴ This idea is fully in line with Kierkegaard's thought: "This is the reason there is a world. The world consists of repetition. Repetition is actuality and the earnestness of existence."¹⁵

Lacan remarks that the object first appears in Freud in this form. Thus, Freudian rediscovery is defined as a loss synonymous with the impossibility of repetition. This is exactly where Lacan locates, in *Seminar XVII*, the "kinship" between Kierkegaard and Freud. For both there is no return of the same: any attempt at substitution ultimately leads to failure. Lacan's answer to the question that troubled Kierkegaard (whether repetition is possible, and what it means, whether a thing wins or loses by being repeated) is given explicitly: "what is repeated cannot be anything other, in relation to what it repeats, than a loss."¹⁶ But what does loss consist of? It is always, Lacan explains, a loss of *jouissance*.

Kierkegaard provides us with an eloquent example regarding the loss of *jouissance* during the

repetition to which Lacan refers. Indeed, he teaches us that the loss of *jouissance* may also refer to a work of art. Specifically, the example consists in the play that Kierkegaard attends in Berlin, where he is astonished to observe that the pleasure he expected has been lost forever: "I held out for half an hour and then finally left, thinking that repetition was impossible. This made a deep impression on me. [...] I had believed, however, that the pleasure this theatre had provided me was of an enduring sort. One had to have learned to be humbled and yet aided by existence before one could appreciate this kind of humour, and this seemed to me to suggest that such appreciation would be permanent. Could existence be even more disappointing than a bankrupt! [...] The comical is the least one can ask; is not even that capable of repetition?"¹⁷ This is where an aesthetic theory for the texture of the work of art arises: the work of art is not repeated, the feelings one experiences whenever one encounters it are different. This is because the work of art itself is different each time, even for the same observer.

After Kierkegaard, we also encounter the idea of the impossibility of repetition in literature: in 1925, Fitzgerald will use it as the foundation of one of his most important, if not the most important, novels, *The Great Gatsby*. The novel's hero is obsessed with the desire to consummate his lost love with Daisy and bring the past back to life, as if no time at all had gone by. By indulging in this absolute certainty, however, he stubbornly refuses to accept the impossibility of repetition, the impossibility of reliving a pleasure lost in the past. It is this very stubborn refusal that will engineer his end. At this point, let us quote a remarkable passage, in which the narrator and Gatsby's friend tells him the following with regard to his past love story with Daisy: "I wouldn't ask too much of her," I ventured. "You can't repeat the past." "Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!" He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here on the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand. "I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before," he said, nodding determinedly. "She'll see." He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea

13 S. IV, p. 7-8/15-16.

14 S. II, p. 125.

15 S. Kierkegaard, *idem*, p. 4.

16 S. XVII, p. 46/51.

17 S. Kierkegaard, *idem*, p. 36-37.

of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy."¹⁸ We could, therefore, claim that *The Great Gatsby* is the dramatization of the impossibility to repeat a pleasure that has been lost to time.

The topic of the impossibility of repetition is also present as one of the central patterns of another piece of literary work which could be characterized as a modern version of the feminine *Gatsby*. Specifically, it is the novel with the title *Simple passion* of Annie Ernaux who was recently awarded with the Nobel prize in literature. The story is about the intense passion the person narrator has for a man with whom she had a sexual affair. The woman is deeply marked by her encounter with him, an event which divides her life between a before and an after. Her most profound desire is to repeat the history of this encounter: "During my spells of insomnia, I would take myself back to Venice, where I had spent a week's holiday just before meeting A. I tried to recall my timetable and the places I had visited; [...] I would enumerate the things that were there, one after the other, attempting to chronicle the contents of a place where I had stayed before my story with A. had started, as if an exhaustive inventory would enable me to relive the events [...] Throughout this period, all my thoughts and all my actions involved the repetition of history. I wanted to turn the present back into the past, opening on to happiness". Here also it is quite obvious that repetition is related with the impossible: namely, the impossibility of turning the present back to the past which is lost forever. Let us remark that what is impossible here is not the revival of the past in the present but a kind of projection of the present in the past in a way that the former is fully assimilated to the latter. This is a remarkable reversal.

Let us return to Lacan and to a significant reversal that takes place in *Seminar XVII*. The extremely interesting thing here is that, in Lacan's text, *jouissance* is explicitly related to repetition: "What necessitates repetition is *jouissance*."¹⁹ While, until recently, in Lacan's teachings repetition had been something required by signifying articulation, the entire *Seminar XVII* aims to prove that we can only think of repetition against the horizon of *jouissance*. It is now *jouissance* that reigns supreme and not the signifier.

Repetition no longer arises as the insistence of the signifier that returns from the discourse of the Other, but as the obsessive return of the reminiscence of a lost *jouissance*. Lacan himself mentions that "Repetition is the precise denotation of a trait [...] with the little stick, with the element of writing, the element of a trait insofar as it is the commemoration of an irruption of *jouissance*."²⁰ It follows that repetition is the commemoration and, at the same time, the failure to retrieve the part of *jouissance* that was lost during its "transcription" into the chain of signifiers. Lacan's discovery in *Seminar XVII* may be summarized as follows: it is impossible to symbolically retrieve *jouissance* as a whole. Something always gets lost, and it is this very loss that creates the need for repetition.

In his text with the title *La psychanalyse mise à nu par son célibataire*,²¹ Jacques Alain Miller points out the significant difference between Lacan's first teaching and the late Lacan in *Seminar XVII*: in his early teaching Lacan thinks of the signifying chain as being oriented towards truth, while in his late teaching he thinks of the signifying chain as being oriented towards *jouissance*. Knowledge, therefore, is no longer a means to the truth but a means of *jouissance*. This shift presupposes a sort of slippage from the signifier to the mark: while the signifier is pure signification, the mark is both signification and a reminder of *jouissance*. The signifier itself is no longer a true meaning but bears the mark of a primordial *jouissance*. It internalizes *jouissance* and attempts to endlessly annihilate it. We must insist on this reversal from the signifier oriented towards truth and the signifier oriented towards *jouissance*: in this way the symbolic loses its primary character. What is of primary importance now is *jouissance* to the degree that it is concentrated in the mark. Consequently, according to Miller, while in his early teaching Lacan thinks of repetition as starting from the symbolic, in his late teaching Lacan thinks of the symbolic as starting from repetition that emerges from the fixation of the signifier to *jouissance* (with the mediation of the mark-trait *unaire*).

We may say that the reversal that takes place in *Seminar XVII* also brings about a sudden change in the way in which the question of the subject is raised:

18 Francis Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 88.

19 S. XVII, p. 45/51.

20 S. XVII, p. 77/89.

21 Jacques-Alain Miller. *La psychanalyse mise à nu par son célibataire*. Bulletin de NLS, Nouvelle École lacanienne, 2007, pp.77-94.

the question no longer refers to the subject's relationship with the symbolic in which it is immersed, but to the subject's relationship with what fails to enter the symbolic. This is what Lacan calls "plus-de-jouir" (surplus jouissance). This shift has consequences for the way in which one conceives repetition: while, initially, repetition is but the expression of my dependence on the symbolic, in a second phase repetition shows the way in which I relate to what insists on remaining outside of the symbolic field, i.e., the real. The way I relate to the real is marked by the impossibility of repetition: I cannot say it, but I can never stop repeating it, and failing to repeat it.

In *Écrits* and, specifically, in "On My Antecedents", Lacan reveals, with a reference to himself, the Lacanian project in *Seminar XVII*: it is a "reversed reprisal of the Freudian project"²². My earlier remarks help formulate a hypothesis with regard to the nature of this project: instead of starting from the pleasure principle, i.e., from the symbolic to reach to the "beyond" of this beginning, we choose as our starting point the masochistic jouissance which opens to the death drive. The Lacanian reversal consists precisely in the fact that we, henceforward, must think of the pleasure principle as starting from jouissance and not vice versa. This reversal can actually be found in Freud's text *Beyond the pleasure principle*, in which he corrects his earlier theory and mentions that "masochism could be primary."²³ Lacan highlights this Freudian remark when, in *Écrits*, he refers to masochism as a "primary process." The example of the masochist, to which Lacan refers repeatedly in this *Seminar XVII*, crystallizes "the mark's affinity with jouissance of the body itself."²⁴ The masochist is someone who knows very well how to draw pleasure from pain, deviating from the sphere of influence of the pleasure principle. One is not simply occupied by the big Other; this occupation is rather inscribed in an obvious way on his flesh. This mark on the masochist's skin is precisely the clinical imprint of "the commemoration of an irruption of jouissance".

We must understand that, henceforth, repetition is no longer an expression of the pleasure principle,

but relates to the search for jouissance. In fact, it is jouissance that places repetition in a field beyond the pleasure principle and therefore in the outer limits of the symbolic order. Lastly, jouissance, because it removes repetition from the "network of signifiers", brings to light its bond with luck (tuché) as opposed to the automaton.

We know that, in *Seminar XI*, Lacan borrows from Aristotle the term tuché, which, however, he translates as the "the encounter with the real."²⁵ The real, Lacan notes, is "beyond the automaton, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs, by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle. The real is what always lies behind the automaton." It should be noted that what is said here about the real is absolutely true of repetition. One only has to replace the word real with the word repetition in the previous quotation to see that the logic of the Lacanian text as a whole is based on this very possibility of mutually replacing these two terms.

What is it, however, that, according to Lacan, allows us and even leads us to think of repetition as the real and the real as repetition? It is the category of the impossible. Repetition does not indicate a present that is tailor-made to the measurements of the past, but a present that is tailor-made to its own measurements: this is what Lacan means when, in *Seminar XI*, he affirms that "repetition demands the new."²⁶ We can observe that this Lacanian claim masterfully sums up what Kierkegaard calls the "dialectic of repetition."²⁷ According to such a dialectic, repetition is never the reproduction of a pre-existing record: what is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated; but the fact that it has been, makes repetition something new. We are here very close to the Lacanian "economy of the real", which, as stated in *Seminar XI*, "admits something new, which is precisely the impossible."²⁸ In other words, repetition opens up to the real because it introduces us to the impossible.

In this paradoxical field that is defined by the concept of the impossible, Kierkegaard's repetition intersects, "comme par hasard", with the Lacanian real. What is repeated, therefore, meets the real,

22 Ec. p. 53/68.

23 Freud, p. 83.

24 S. XVII, p. 49/55.

25 S. XI, p. 53/53.

26 Idem, p. 61/59.

27 Kierkegaard, idem, p. 19.

28 S. XI, p. 167/152.

which is, however, never on time and incessantly calls for a record that is failing. We know that in *Seminar XX* the impossible is defined as that which “never ceases not being written.”²⁹ This is a record which, despite the fact that it impinges on the impossibility of its being made real, is repeated again and again, encore et encore. Although the real is not named, in light of this last observation it would be impossible to avoid the temptation to claim that the title of *Seminar XX*, *Encore*, is the “name” of the real.

Concluding remarks

We see, therefore, that the concept of repetition in Lacan is transubstantiated as his thought evolves. In his early teachings, repetition arises from the laws of the symbolic order. Later, in *Seminar XI*, Lacan introduces a fission of repetition between the automaton and tuché, that is, between the symbolic and the real.

In the symbolic order, we may speak of reproduction, but not of repetition: “reproduce” always means converting something into a signifier. This conversion is impossible in the case of repetition; hence repetition is not identical to reproduction.

Repetition expresses the fact that it is impossible for what is repeated to enter the order of the signifier. The signifier is reproduced, while the real is repeated. This distinction lays the ground for the reversal that takes place in *Seminar XVII*: repetition now breaks away from the signifier and refers to the “return of jouissance”. In the USA in 1975 Lacan states that the only definition of the real is that it is the impossible. As he says, “When something finds itself characterized as impossible, it is only there that is the real.”³⁰ Therefore repetition, insofar as it is impossible, is the very ground of the real.

29 S. XX, p. 87.

30 Conferences in North American Universities: December 2, 1975 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, published in *Scilicet*, 1975, n° 6-7, pp. 53-63. Translated by Jack W. Stone.