

A Theater of Ideas Performance and Performativity in Kierkegaard's *Repetition*

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It has always been one of the tasks of philosophy to develop categories that give an intelligible form to knowledge. This is no different for Kierkegaard. He has developed important categories such as repetition, the instant, anxiety, despair, and so forth. However, there is something odd about these categories: it is very hard to find a clear and unequivocal definition of them. In different ways, each of them is shrouded in uncertainty. This uncertainty is not the result of a lack of talent but a deliberate effect. In Kierkegaard's view, there are two types of categories: logical and existential. Logical categories can ideally exhaust their object in such a way that there is no uncertainty left. This is different in the case of existential categories. These categories will never be able ideally to exhaust their object because they are dependent on the person who is using them. Kierkegaard tries to solve this difficulty by preserving the uncertainty inherent in these categories. An example can clarify this. One of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms tells about a witty fellow who divided humankind into three classes: officers, servant girls, and chimney sweeps. "In my opinion," the pseudonym writes, "this remark is not only witty but also profound, and it would take great speculative talent to make a better classification. If a classification does not ideally exhaust its object, the accidental is preferable in every way, because it sets the imagination in motion" (*SKS* 4:37 / *R* 162). The sheer impossibility of establishing an exhaustive classification of humankind shows that it makes more sense to rely on an accidental and unessential classification than on a serious and essential one. Any classification will at best approximate the truth, without ever reaching it. But an accidental classification has the added advantage of activating the imagination and forcing the recipient to produce a creative response. This is exactly the kind of performative effect that Kierkegaard tries to achieve.

In this essay, I will argue that Kierkegaard's oeuvre can be seen as a theater of ideas.¹ This argument is developed in three steps. First, I will briefly introduce a theoretical framework for addressing the theatrical dimension of Kierkegaard's works. This framework is based on a distinction between

“performative writing strategies” and “categories of performativity.”² As a second step, I will focus on *Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology*, “by Constantin Constantius,” one of the best examples of Kierkegaard’s innovative way of doing philosophy. This strange and elusive book introduces the difficult and counterintuitive notion of repetition. Repetition is a category of performativity that aims to activate the subjectivity of the reader. This performative effect is achieved by confronting the reader with an “unresolved” existential problem that is not yet drawn into clarity but is staged in all its confusions and contradictions. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Constantius relies here on a performative writing strategy that is animated by a dialectic of advance and withdrawal. In the last and third step, I will analyze Constantius’s own reflection on the performative dimension of his text. Constantius has left several clues behind, each of which suggests that he deliberately developed a performative writing strategy.

Theoretical Framework: Performance and Performativity

Many interpreters of Kierkegaard have studied his poetics of indirect communication as a maieutic practice that takes place on the borderline between philosophy and literature. Without denying the influence of literature on Kierkegaard’s works, I will focus on a different discipline of art: the theater.³ It is well known that Kierkegaard was an ardent lover of theater and could often be found in the Royal Theater in Copenhagen. He composed several minor writings about theater and remained fascinated with the subject to the end of his life. Although these minor writings have never received much attention, they can shed some light on the performative dimension of Kierkegaard’s works.⁴ “Phister as Captain Scipio” is exemplary in this respect. In this short essay, the pseudonym Procul analyzes how the Danish actor Joachim Ludvig Phister plays the role of Scipio, an alcoholic who is a captain in the Papal Police Corps.

To exploit the comic potential of this character, Phister has to make a double movement. On the one hand, he has to play Captain Scipio as someone who is constantly concealing that he is an alcoholic. On the other hand, he has to make sure that the viewer begins to develop a suspicion of this hidden condition. Nevertheless, Phister’s aim is not to expose Scipio as a cheat and an alcoholic, but to hint at the contradiction between his outer appearance as an authoritative figure and the hidden condition that he tries to conceal. This contradiction is heightened when it is “his duty to clear out a pub where the people are dead drunk” (SKS 16:133 / “PCS” 334). Procul is so impressed with Phister’s performance because he is able to keep the concealment and the disclosure in tension with each other. The way Phister conceals Captain Scipio’s hidden condition betrays that something is not right. By drawing the viewer’s attention to the concealment, he discloses that Captain Scipio hides

something, but what he hides still has to be uncovered. In other words, the disclosure takes place *telegraphically*, in an indirect and a nonverbal way (compare SKS 16:139 / “PCS” 340). Throughout his oeuvre, Kierkegaard is fascinated by this tension between concealment and disclosure. Like Phister, he tries to communicate something that cannot be shown directly but can emerge only as an enigma that still has to be unraveled.

Kierkegaard develops a “theater of ideas” in which philosophical and existential problems are performed rather than represented. The performative dimension of his work ensues from his interpretation of human existence. Although Kierkegaard does not have a unified theory of the self, his pseudonyms all start from the same basic premise: the self has a temporal structure that is paradoxical in nature. It is established as a relation between several elements that cannot be synthesized with each other. This creates a fragile equilibrium that is constantly on the verge of breaking apart. An added problem is that there is a qualitative difference between the inner world of the single individual and the external and collective means of communication by which he expresses himself. Kierkegaard tries to bridge this chasm between the inner and the outer by turning his oeuvre into a theater of ideas. His works not only *say* something; they also attempt *to do* something, to have a performative effect. To analyze this performative mode of communication, I will distinguish between the “categories of performativity” that can be derived from Kierkegaard’s works and the “performative writing strategies” that animate them. The first concerns the conceptual content, the second, the literary form. Their distinction indicates a difference in focus rather than in substance.

On the level of conceptual content, Kierkegaard introduces several categories of performativity. These categories address a type of communication that constitutes its own reality rather than representing it after the fact. The notion of performativity indicates that this type of communication does not refer to a preexisting state of affairs that is communicated. Rather, it confronts the readers with an unresolved contradiction, the content of which still has to be unraveled. The communication has a meaningful content, but this content is neither fixed nor predefined. It emerges only after it has been actualized by the reader. This usually involves a decision that discloses the view of the reader rather than that of the communicator. It was J. L. Austin who first introduced the notion of performativity. His main argument was that language is not just descriptive and reflective but can actually perform an action. (When I give an order, I am not describing that action, but I am performing it.) In a similar way, a category of performativity signifies a performative act that communicates something (analogous to Austin’s locution), but what it communicates is a contradiction that aims to activate the subjectivity of readers (analogous to the illocutionary force) by forcing them to respond in such a way that they disclose their own views on the matter (analogous to the perlocutionary effect).⁵

Kierkegaard develops a whole series of categories of performativity. These categories not only precede Austin's analyses of performativity; they also add to the tradition that emerged in his wake. Each of them is an original invention that is developed in reaction to a specific existential problem. In *Practice in Christianity*, for example, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus analyzes the performative context in which Christ, as the God-man, operates (*SKS* 12:81–151 / *PC* 69–144). To make this analysis possible he introduces several categories of performativity, such as “the incognito that demands faith” and “offense.” If God would appear in all his glory without an incognito to hide his divinity, he would become an idol that can be identified and known with certainty. This would cancel out the role of subjectivity. For that reason, Anti-Climacus argues, Christ hides himself behind the incognito of a lowly human being. By deliberately creating a contradiction between his ordinary appearance and his claim of being God, Christ makes himself offensive. In this way he turns himself into an object of faith and forces the recipient to make a choice that will disclose whether he or she believes in him. Notions like incognito and offense are introduced to address the unusual performative structure of the God-man.⁶

Kierkegaard's categories of performativity are interesting in their own right. However, they will also be helpful for understanding the performative writing strategies underlying his works. We find these performative writing strategies on the level of literary form. The aim of these writing strategies is to confront the reader with an unresolved existential problem that is not drawn into clarity yet but is staged in all its confusions and contradictions. In other words, Kierkegaard does not represent a solution in which the problem has already been overcome; instead, he tries to make the reader aware of the problem and let him or her struggle with it. By performing ideas as unresolved problems rather than representing them as clear and well-defined solutions, Kierkegaard breaks with the Aristotelian tradition of mimetic representation. His pseudonym Frater Taciturnus, for instance, introduces the notion of a psychological experiment to find a performative writing strategy that no longer relies on representation (compare *SKS* 6:173–454 / *SLW* 185–494). Hence Taciturnus no longer relies on Aristotelian catharsis as a purification of emotion through a process of identification. Instead, he introduces an alternative catharsis that purifies by activating the subjectivity of the reader. This is done by dramatizing an unresolved problem without providing a way out. A fictional protagonist becomes entangled in a contradiction between actuality and ideality that is simultaneously essentially comic and essentially tragic. The reader has to decide which of these moods prevails.⁷ It would be a mistake, however, to view this performative writing strategy as a kind of postmodern “empty play” that destroys meaning rather than creating it. The unresolved problems are not meaningless. Rather, they imply an excess of meaning that has to be narrowed down by the reader. Other pseudonyms, such as Johannes de Silentio, Climacus, Anti-Climacus, and Vigilius

Haufniensis, develop similar performative writing strategies. In fact, one might even argue that—at least to some extent—Kierkegaard also relies on these strategies when he writes under his own name as veronymous author.

Repetition as a Category of Performativity

Repetition is not a philosophical treatise in the traditional sense. It introduces repetition as one of the most important categories of modern philosophy, without clearly explaining how this category should be understood. On the contrary, Kierkegaard ensures that its precise meaning remains constantly in dispute. This is illustrative for the changing role of categories in his work. Instead of providing well-defined concepts that can be applied outside of the concrete contexts in which they are introduced, Kierkegaard develops categories of performativity that remain unfinished as long as the reader does not put them into action. If these categories are too hastily detached from the setting in which they emerge, they will become meaningless.

In its ordinary sense, repetition refers to an event that occurs for a second, a third, or any other time. This implies a repetition of the same. Examples of this ordinary repetition include a rehearsal (i.e., repeated practice to get something firmly in one's head), a relapse (i.e., return to a previous undesirable state), and a reprise (i.e., restaging an earlier production), as well as Constantius's own attempt to repeat his earlier trip to Berlin. Kierkegaard is not interested in these ordinary repetitions but tries to address a very different type of repetition that is existential rather than ordinary. In contrast to its ordinary counterpart, an existential repetition will always emerge as a unique event. In order to persist, this unique event has to be repeated. However, it does not remain the same as it was throughout this repetition but undergoes a transition that makes it unique again. There is no "first time" that repeats itself a "second time" (as with a touchdown that is repeated in the replay). On the contrary, the "first time" repeats itself in another "first time." According to Kierkegaard, this is how subjectivity is structured. Subjectivity is repetition, but the main characteristic of this repetition is that it is always new. It is no longer a repetition of the same but is a repetition of difference. Kierkegaard thus develops an existential philosophy in which subjectivity is no longer defined by an essential core that remains the same throughout change; instead, subjectivity is now seen as a continuous repetition of difference. As such, he is one of the first philosophers to redefine the concept of identity. Later philosophers, such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze, will follow him in this respect, although they will give a slightly different twist to it.

Repetition is structured in such a way that the two manifestations of repetition—ordinary and existential—are constantly confused with each other. Initially the reader will enter the text as a passive spectator who looks

from a distance at the events that happen to the protagonists; however, the confusions and misunderstandings will force the reader to become an active participant. Constantius achieves this effect by means of a dialectic of advance and withdrawal. At several points, a real understanding of existential repetition is reached. In these moments the category of repetition is advanced. However, each time the text will eventually switch back to ordinary repetition, as if the two manifestations of repetition are the same. At these moments the category of repetition is withdrawn again. In this way, the understanding of repetition is always taken one step forward and two steps back. The aim of this dialectic of advance and withdrawal is to activate the subjectivity of the reader. In the case of *Repetition*, this is done by embodying repetition in the lives of two protagonists.

The first protagonist is Constantin Constantius, the author-narrator of the book who sees himself as a “secret agent in a higher service” whose task it is to expose what is hidden (*SKS* 4:12 / *R* 135). The second protagonist is a young man who has entered into a love relationship with a girl but now slowly discovers that he cannot go through with it. Both these protagonists become entangled in a discrepancy between the ordinary and the existential manifestation of repetition. On a theoretical level, Constantius seems to understand what existential repetition entails (advance), but when he tries to bring it into practice it becomes clear that he has confused it with repetition in the ordinary sense (withdrawal). In the case of the young man, the opposite happens. He faces the problem of subjectivity and freedom in practice and seeks refuge in the category of existential repetition (advance). However, because he lacks a proper understanding of this category, he is satisfied with an ordinary repetition (withdrawal). It is the task of the reader to reconstitute the category of repetition by taking up the advances and by separating them from the withdrawals.

The dialectic of advance and withdrawal can be illustrated by highlighting each of its two moments separately. A good example of a withdrawal can be found in the Berlin episode, halfway through the first part of the book. Instead of analyzing the category of repetition in a systematic way, Constantius decides to conduct an experiment in order “to test the possibility and meaning of repetition” (*SKS* 4:26–27 / *R* 150). He does this by undertaking an “investigative journey [*Opdagelses-Reise*]” to Berlin (*SKS* 4:26 / *R* 150). In his own words: “When I was occupied for some time, at least on occasion, with the question of repetition—whether or not it is possible, what importance it has, whether something gains or loses in being repeated—I suddenly had the thought: You can, after all, take a trip to Berlin; you have been there once before, and now you can prove to yourself whether a repetition is possible and what importance it has” (*SKS* 4:9 / *R* 131). After many unsuccessful attempts to relive his previous experience of the journey to Berlin, Constantius concludes that there is no repetition. This makes him feel ashamed for his big words; it seems to him that they “were only a dream from which I awoke

to have life unremittingly and treacherously *retake* everything [*tage Alt igjen*; literally 'take everything back'] it had given without providing a *repetition*" (SKS 4:45 / R 172). In Constantius's view, repetition should imply a "giving again," whereas the experiment shows that life "takes everything back." That is why Constantius is forced to conclude, "There is no repetition, and my earlier conception of life was victorious" (SKS 4:45 / R 171).

The experiment fails, and the category of repetition is abandoned. The reader will not be surprised to learn about this failure. The whole effort seemed ludicrous to begin with. How could Constantius even think that it would be possible to relive his earlier experiences? What is going on here? Has he lost his mind? Or is he trying to make a fool of the reader? The sheer absurdity of his experiment already indicates that it cannot be accepted at face value. The experiment is doomed to fail from the beginning because it is the result of a deliberate misunderstanding. This misunderstanding is never explicated in the text. It is only in a later, unpublished note of 1843–44 that Constantius identifies it as such.⁸ He writes there, "The most interior problem of the possibility of repetition is expressed externally, as if repetition, if it were possible, were to be found outside the individual when in fact it must be found within the individual" (SKS 15:69 / R, Suppl., 304). The external means by which the experiment is conducted are in direct conflict with the existential and inward nature of repetition. By animating this conflict rather than resolving it, Constantius forces his readers to decide the issue for themselves.

As a category of performativity, repetition can emerge only in the middle of confusions and misunderstandings. This does not mean, however, that the reader is left completely in the dark. On the contrary, the reader can fall back on the advances that have already been made by Constantius and the young man. In order to get a better grasp of existential repetition, I will highlight several of these advances. A first series of advances is made when Constantius opposes the worldview of the ancient Greeks to that of the moderns. According to him, the ancient Greeks relied on recollection, whereas modern philosophy turns toward repetition as "the new category that will be discovered" (SKS 4:25 / R 148). This category is not available yet but still has to be discovered. In fact, as a category of performativity, repetition will always remain a discovery in the making. When Constantius refers to the Greek worldview, he is thinking especially of Plato, who believed that the truth lies in the past but can be retrieved with the help of recollection. By situating truth in an originary and prior realm, Plato gives it a universal and eternal character. Constantius, on the other hand, introduces a new concept of truth. For him the truth is always something yet to come rather than a lost origin that has to be retrieved. This truth is not universal and eternal but is connected to a fleeting instant that constantly has to be repeated. As Constantius remarks, "Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated

backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward” (*SKS* 4:9 / *R* 131). From the metaphysical perspective of the ancient Greeks, the truth of the individual is understood as a movement that is directed toward the past. This truth does not emerge within the individual’s own existence but must be conceived as an essence that precedes the individual’s existence. According to Constantius, however, this essence is not the truth but is rather the untruth of the individual.

Despite the fact that modern philosophy turns toward repetition, it has not been able to grasp repetition fully. According to Constantius, this is largely due to Hegel and his followers. By reducing repetition to mediation, they transferred the problem of subjectivity and freedom from the realm of existence to the realm of logic. Constantius rejects this transfer. In his view, existence will never comply with the laws of logic. In contrast to the Hegelian conception of logical development, Constantius relies on an Aristotelian conception of existential movement. In the aforementioned unpublished note, he points out that “when Aristotle long ago said that the transition from possibility to actuality is a κίνησις [motion, change], he was not speaking about the possibility and actuality of logic, but about [the possibility and actuality] of freedom, and therefore he properly posits movement” (*SKS* 15:74 / *R*, Suppl., 310).⁹ In Constantius’s reading, κίνησις should not be understood as a mediated progression toward a predetermined goal but as a transition that implies a qualitative change. Repetition is the result of such a transition. As Constantius remarks, “The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new” (*SKS* 4:25 / *R* 149). Rather than a return to what was, repetition implies a transition to a new state. In this way it ensures that subjectivity comes into existence again.

The young man, the second protagonist of *Repetition*, also makes some advance in understanding repetition by focusing on the biblical figure of Job. In his reading, Job truly embodies repetition. Not because he “has received everything *double*” (*SKS* 4:79 / *R* 212), as the young man eventually concludes, but because he “qualifies as an exception” (*SKS* 4:75 / *R* 207). Job lost his whole family and everything he had, and still he is able to say “the Lord gave and the Lord took away.” More important, Job does not despair over what has happened to him. He is able to say this without losing his faith in God and without accepting that God has been punishing him for his sins. Despite everything, Job continues to believe that he is in the right. According to the young man, it is Job who gives evidence of “the noble, human, bold confidence that knows what a human being is, knows that despite his being frail, despite his swift withering away like the flower, that in freedom he still has something of greatness, has a consciousness that even God cannot wrest from him even though he gave it to him” (*SKS* 4:76 / *R* 208). Because of his freedom, Job is able to resist his friends’ suggestion that his misfortune is a punishment from God. At the same time, he is also able to withstand the

ordeal that God has imposed upon him as a test. Neither God nor the human being is able to take subjectivity and freedom away from him. For the young man this extraordinary manifestation of subjectivity becomes the paradigm case of repetition. Nevertheless, despite his advance in understanding, the young man proves unable to live up to the standard that is set by Job. Instead, when he tries to achieve repetition in his own life, he unintentionally turns it into a banality.

The dialectic of advance and withdrawal ensures that the reader has to struggle through a series of confusions and misunderstandings. In this way, Constantius has turned *Repetition* into an enigma. This enigma will become fruitful only when the reader first identifies the confusions and misunderstandings and then starts to develop the emerging category of repetition on his or her own. The outcome of the book becomes the reader's responsibility. This does not mean that Constantius is simply throwing his readers into an abyss of ambiguity and uncertainty. To make them aware of the performative structure of his text, he has left a few clues. With the help of these clues it becomes possible to reconstruct Constantius's own thoughts about the performative writing strategy that is employed in *Repetition*.

***Repetition* as Philosophical Theater: Constantius's Thoughts on His Performative Writing Strategy**

Although Constantius has not directly addressed the dialectic of advance and withdrawal, he has left certain clues in which this performative writing strategy is announced. I will focus on three of these clues. The first clue is already apparent in the subtitle of the book, *A Venture in Experimenting Psychology*. By calling his book a "venture," Constantius suggests that the outcome of the book cannot be known in advance but will emerge only gradually. The notion of "experimenting psychology" indicates that Constantius does not want to represent a real-life situation but that he tries to open up an experimental realm in which a psychological problem is put on the stage. Rather than studying repetition from the perspective of an uninvolved outsider, Constantius tries to transform it into something inward that has to be taken up by the reader. As he later remarks in a note of 1843–44, "I wanted to depict and make visible psychologically and esthetically; in the Greek sense, I wanted to let the concept come into being in the individuality and the situation, working itself forward through all sorts of misunderstandings" (SKS 15:68 / R, Suppl., 302). The venture in experimenting psychology thus becomes a philosophical theater in which ideas and categories are performed in a state of confusion.

Constantius finds an earlier example of this philosophical theater in a well-known anecdote about Diogenes the Cynic: "When the Eleatics denied motion, Diogenes, as everyone knows, came forward [*optraadte*] as an

opponent. He literally did come forward [*optraadte*], because he did not say a word but merely paced back and forth a few times, thereby assuming that he had sufficiently refuted them" (*SKS* 4:9 / *R* 131). The Danish verb that is used here, *optræde*, has a clear theatrical connotation. Literally it means "stepping up" or "coming forward," but it also refers to the moment an actor "makes an appearance" by entering the scene and giving a performance. In the anecdote, Diogenes sees no need to debate whether movement is possible. Instead, he simply paces back and forth. This little performance sufficiently shows that existence does not comply with logic. By pacing back and forth, Diogenes performed the physical movement for which he was arguing. Constantius tries to achieve a similar effect by performing existential repetition as a movement that ultimately has to be concluded by the reader.

A second clue can be found in Constantius's concluding letter "to Mr. X. Esq., the real reader of this book" (*SKS* 4:89 / *R* 223). The letter opens with a few remarks about the art of reading. Constantius indicates that he is looking for a type of reader who is willing to make an effort in understanding the book, despite being completely bewildered by it. He follows the dictum of Clement of Alexandria, who is said to have written in such a way "that the heretics [were] unable to understand it" (*SKS* 4:91 / *R* 225). The term "heretics" here refers to superficial readers who fail to uncover the deliberate misunderstandings in which the protagonists become entangled. For such heretics the category of repetition will remain a strange and hazy notion.

In line with his remark about heretics, Constantius predicts that reviewers, who will try to measure the book on the basis of certain fixed standards, will not get anything out of it. The expectations of these reviewers will be frustrated because the composition of *Repetition* differs from that of most books. Constantius develops the story in such a way that the course of events "is inverse" (*SKS* 4:92 / *R* 226). Inverse? This is an odd expression. Inverse in what sense? Does Constantius mean that the book is turned upside down? Or is he referring to unexpected turning points or strange revisions? It is not entirely clear what he intends, but the context suggests that he is juxtaposing two types of compositions: teleological and paradoxical.¹⁰ Teleological compositions are initially set in motion by a contradiction, but then progress toward a higher unity (the Hegelian 1, 2, 3). Constantius is not interested in these teleological compositions. In his view, they privilege the universal (logic) over the individual and the exception (existence). That is why Constantius has developed a new type of composition that is no longer teleological but is paradoxical in nature. This principle behind this paradoxical composition is aptly captured in the phrase "to kill a man and let him live" (*SKS* 4:92 / *R* 226). When the same man is killed and left alive, any attempt at reconciliation will run aground. In other words, the paradoxical composition ensures that the contradictions in the text cannot be overcome. The idea of a paradoxical composition already indicates how the dialectic of advance and withdrawal is generated. Taking one step forward and two steps back, the paradoxical

composition generates a circulating movement that echoes Diogenes's pacing back and forth.

The third and most important clue can be found in the digression that forms the heart of the Berlin episode. This digression is best understood as an extensive *mise en abyme*, a story within a story that tells us how to perform the book we are reading. It deals with two examples of kitsch. The first example concerns a cheap and sentimental type of painting that Constantius calls a Nürnberg print.¹¹ He describes this as follows: "There one sees a landscape depicting a rural area in general. This abstraction cannot be artistically executed. Therefore the whole thing is achieved by contrast, namely, by an accidental concretion. And yet I ask everyone if from such a landscape he does not get the impression of a rural area in general" (*SKS* 4:33 / *R* 158). Two elements are of importance here. The effect is achieved "by contrast" and with the help of "an accidental concretion." To understand what Constantius means by this, it will be helpful to explicate the distinction he makes between art and kitsch. According to Constantius, art derives its perfection from the way it balances the actual and the ideal. This balance can be achieved by giving a faithful representation of an exceptional panorama or by elevating a nondescript tableau in an ideal reproduction. In both cases, the painter has made sure that the depicted landscape (actuality) is worthy of being transformed into art (ideality). Kitsch, on the other hand, is always based on a contradiction between actuality and ideality. Although the rural area that is depicted in a Nürnberg print is nothing special (actuality), it is still immortalized by being painted (ideality). This creates a contrast that defies the aesthetic categories of the educated art critic.

Constantius sees in kitsch a model of artistic production that no longer relies on representation but is based on a principle of "accidental concretion." To my mind, "concretion" should be understood here in the geological sense. Like a fossil, the Nürnberg print can be viewed as petrification of the accidental. It generates enormous and universal categories like "the rural area in general," even though these categories emerge only in a singular and accidental form. Constantius compares this to a child who cuts "out of a piece of paper a man and a woman who were man and woman in general in a more rigorous sense than Adam and Eve were" (*SKS* 4:33 / *R* 158).

A second and more extensive example of kitsch can be found in a specific type of popular play, the sole purpose of which is to incite laughter. In Danish and German this type of popular play is called *Posse*. Its closest English equivalents are farce, burlesque, and vaudeville. As Constantius suggests, a farce is not based on a plot that unifies the actions into a meaningful whole but relies on accidental instances, the effects of which are wholly dependent on the mood of the spectator. Constantius seems to view farce as a paradigm of subjectivity. He writes, "Its impact depends largely on self-activity and the viewer's improvisation, the particular individuality comes to assert himself in a very individual way and in his enjoyment is emancipated from all esthetic

obligations to admire, to laugh, to be moved, etc. in the traditional way” (SKS 4:34 / R 159). In the same way as a Nürnberg print, a farce no longer complies with the aesthetic categories of the educated public and does not rely on the “commensurables of the artistic” (SKS 4:38 / R 163). On the contrary, a farce demands an incommensurable response that cannot be shared with others but solely depends on the individual viewer.

According to Constantius, a farce “must include two, at most three, very talented actors or, more correctly, generative geniuses” (SKS 4:36 / R 161). These geniuses do not rely on reflection and deliberation but achieve their goal by lyrical improvisation. Their talent is exceptional only insofar as they “have the courage to venture what the individual makes bold to do only when alone, what the mentally deranged do in the presence of everybody” (SKS 4:36 / R 161). Constantius illustrates this talent with a remarkable description of how Friedrich Beckmann, the leading actor at the Königstädter Theater in Berlin, enters the stage: “What Baggesen says of Sara Nickels, that she comes rushing on stage with a rustic scene in tow, is true of B[eckmann] in the positive sense, except that he comes walking [*komme gaaende*]. . . . He is not only able to walk [*gaae*], but he is also able to *come walking* [*komme gaaende*]” (SKS 4:38 / R 163). A distinction is drawn here between two types of dramatic action. Ordinary actors just walk onto the stage. Beckmann, on the other hand, “is able to *come walking*.” What is the difference between these two types of movement? To understand this we have to look more closely at the Danish phrase *komme gaaende*. This phrase, which is repeated no fewer than five times, literally means something like “coming while going.”¹² This ambiguous movement goes in two directions at once. On the one hand, Beckmann is arriving; on the other, he is already leaving. Constantius seems to indicate here that Beckmann does not represent a particular intentional action but embodies movement as such. That is why Beckmann can play the role of an apprentice without representing him in any way. Instead of fully developing this role, he uses it as an incognito. Behind this incognito “dwells the lunatic demon of comedy, who quickly extricates himself and carries everything away in sheer abandonment” (SKS 4:38 / R 164). The phrase “coming while going” echoes the instant of transition on which existential repetition is based. However, Beckmann embodies this ambiguous movement of repetition merely in an external way. By letting the meaningful world vanish, he gives an impetus to subjectivity. As such, he covers only one half of the transition. The other half of the transition has to be carried through by the viewer.

The performance of a farce relies on two or three geniuses like Beckmann who have a lyrical talent for invoking laughter. The rest of the cast can consist of minor actors who do not need to have any special talent. Constantius describes these minor characters in terms similar to those in which he described the Nürnberg print. According to him, “the minor characters have their effect through that abstract category ‘in general’ and achieve it by an

accidental concretion” (SKS 4:37 / R 163). We already saw that an accidental concretion is comparable to a fossil, something unimportant and ordinary that is immortalized. In the case of a farce, the accidental concretion makes “a claim to be the ideal, which it does by stepping onto the artificial world of the stage” (SKS 4:37 / R 163). In this way, the farce defies the laws of serious theater. Instead of developing concrete characters that are thoroughly carried out in ideality, the farce remains stuck in accidental situations by highlighting something unessential. In serious theater a concrete actuality is translated into an abstract ideality by showing something essential that is not only valid for the character in question but applies to everybody. In this way, it generates universal templates of action that indicate how a courageous or chivalrous person is supposed to behave. Farce, on the other hand, moves from the abstract to the concrete. An abstract person in general is embodied by highlighting something unimportant that is completely accidental. This ensures that a farce never reaches ideality but gets stuck in actuality. By putting the accidental on the stage, the farce achieves a comic effect that destroys universal templates of action rather than creating them. Instead, it activates the viewers’ own productivity and forces them to develop their own template of action.

I have analyzed three clues in which the dialectic of advance and withdrawal is announced as a deliberate writing strategy that is based on performance rather than representation. The first clue indicated that *Repetition* opens up an experimental realm that functions as a theater of ideas. A second clue was found in Constantius’s suggestion that he relies on a paradoxical composition in which two irreconcilable tendencies are placed in tension with each other without providing a way out. These first two clues culminated in a digression on two forms of kitsch. This digression can be read as a *mise en abyme*. As such it is exemplary for the performative structure of *Repetition* as a whole. Constantius introduced two important notions there: “accidental concretion” and “coming while going.” As we saw, an accidental concretion concerns the tension between actuality and ideality. This reveals something about Kierkegaard’s categories of performativity. The intention of these categories is also to resist ideality by letting the reader get stuck in actuality. The notion of “coming while going,” on the other hand, tells us something about the role of performance in Kierkegaard’s theater of ideas. It embodies the ambiguous movement of a simultaneous advance and withdrawal.

To conclude, in this essay I have argued that Constantius invents a new way of doing philosophy in *Repetition*. This allows him to introduce existential repetition as a category of performativity. Rather than clarifying what existential repetition is, he lets it emerge in a series of confusions and misunderstandings. In this way, the category is advanced and withdrawn at the same time. It is the task of the reader to make this dialectic of advance and withdrawal fruitful. This performative demand turns *Repetition* into a theater of ideas.

Rather than representing an already finished argument, Constantius performs a problem that still has to be unraveled. In this process he provides several clues, suggesting that the dialectic of advance and withdrawal is a deliberate writing strategy that can take on several forms.

Notes

1. This essay expands upon and adds to ideas introduced in an earlier essay of mine that was published in Dutch, “De herhaling van het onherhaalbare: Constantin Constantius over vrijheid en subjectiviteit,” *Wijserig Perspectief* 53, no. 2 (2013): 30–37.

2. My approach is inspired by and indebted to three important studies on Kierkegaard: Sylviane Agacinski, *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Kevin Newmark (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1988); Samuel Weber, “Kierkegaard’s ‘Posse,’” in *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 200–228; Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Continuum, 2001), 5–11.

3. Other scholars also have attempted to read Kierkegaard from the perspective of theater and performance. Joseph Westfall, for instance, argues “that Kierkegaardian authorship is performative, or that the Kierkegaardian author might best be understood as a kind of performer.” Westfall therefore focuses on “the person, persona or personae to whom authorship of the work is ascribed (*authoring*).” *The Kierkegaardian Author: Authorship and Performance in Kierkegaard’s Literary and Dramatic Criticism* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 145, 146. Although I do not disagree with this approach, I will not be focusing on the issue of authorship. Instead, I focus on the existential problems that Kierkegaard performs and on the categories of performativity that he invents in the process.

4. Minor writings on theater addressing “categories of performativity” include “The Crisis and the Crisis in the Life of an Actress” (*SKS* 14:93–107/ *CCLA* 301–26), “Phister as Captain Scipio” (*SKS* 16:125–43 / “PCS” 327–44), and selections from the first part of *Either/Or* (*SKS* 2 / *EO* 1). (On these writings by Kierkegaard about the theater, and also on his avidness as a theatergoer, see also George Pattison’s essay in this volume.—Ed.)

5. J. L. Austin, who first conceptualized “performativity,” introduced a by now famous distinction between three aspects of performative communication: the locutionary meaning, the illocutionary force, and the perlocutionary effect. The locutionary meaning is the sense and reference of an utterance. The illocutionary force is the function that the utterance performs when it is being said. For example, the phrase “I now pronounce you man and wife” constitutes reality as such; it does not refer to a preexisting state of affairs but creates these states of affairs; it is self-referential. The perlocutionary effect is the response of the listener or reader as a consequence of what is said to him or her, for example, anger or fear in response to a threat. This threefold distinction will shed some light on the complex movement that is implied in many of Kierkegaard’s performative categories. However, Austin’s distinction is too general and too linguistic to explain the structure and the intended effect of this complex movement. For

instance, this movement is not rule-governed in the limited sense of Austin, and it includes fictional statements. Compare J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

6. For more on the notion of incognito see my article “Incognito,” in *Kierkegaard’s Concepts*, Tome 3: *Envy to Incognito*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 15 (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2014), 231–38.

7. I have analyzed Taciturnus’s theory of the psychological experiment more extensively in my article “Psychological Experiment,” in *Kierkegaard’s Concepts*, Tome 5: *Objectivity to Sacrifice*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 15 (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2015), 159–66.

8. This note is part of several sketches (*SKS* 15:61–88 / *R*, Suppl., 283–324) in which Kierkegaard lets Constantius develop a response to J. L. Heiberg’s article “Det astronomiske Aar” (1843, “The Astronomical Year”), which discusses *Repetition* at some length. These sketches were written between December 1843 and March 1844 but never published by Kierkegaard.

9. I have slightly modified the English rendering of this sentence to eradicate an ungrammaticality that is present in the Danish original and that is preserved in the Hongs’ translation.

10. For an interesting but different account of the notion of “inverse,” see Arne Melberg, “Repetition (in the Kierkegaardian Sense of the Term),” *Diacritics* 20, no. 3 (1990): 71–87.

11. For a discussion of the many references to Nürnberg prints in Kierkegaard’s writings, see Ragni Linnet’s essay in the present volume. Linnet finds that the particular Nürnberg print described by Constantius approximates one of the *Entombment*, inspired by Raphael.—Ed.

12. Agacinski (*Aparté*, 165) and Weber (“Kierkegaard’s ‘Posse,’” 221–23) have also analyzed this particular phrase.