

THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE AUTHOR:  
INTERSECTIONS IN PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

by

Benjamin Jordan Leubner

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Philip Gaines

Approved for the Department of English

Michael Beehler

Approved for the College of Graduate Studies

Bruce R. McLeod

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Benjamin Jordan Leubner

March 2004

In memory of Edward B. Versluis

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## ABSTRACT

The question of this thesis is what does it mean to write under the temporal categories, or categories of understanding of, repetition, recurrence and return. Naturally, before the question can be dealt with, these categories must be investigated, as well as set off against the traditional categories which they aim to expand.

The method of exposition utilized within the thesis is meant to walk, as it were, hand in hand with its content. The content being largely the “three R’s” mentioned above, the thesis accordingly repeats, recurs and returns to the same ideas and the same metaphors, throughout.

The materials incorporated within the thesis include, but are not limited to, the philosophical writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida, as well as the literary writings of William Faulkner, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Cees Nooteboom. There are no acknowledged borders between literature and philosophy within the thesis; instead I work from the tautological premise that a text is a text.

The conclusion of the thesis is, *at best*, inconclusive.

My methods of elucidation may be quite foreign to some readers. Through working as a tutor with Japanese exchange students for several years, I have found that rather than stating and continually restating the thesis throughout the course of the essay, starting *away* from the goal and from there slowly circling in upon it, in an elucidatory spiral, with the thesis, or center, being reached substantially for the first time only at the end, is more to my liking *as* a method.

What has been propounded here is for my own  
personal recollection of thoughts and intellectual preoccupations  
that have engrossed my soul many times in many ways.

-Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*

Time isn't holding us, time isn't after us.

-Talking Heads, *Stop Making Sense*

## CHAPTER 1

## EITHER/OR, OR

The narrator of Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby* laments that "the problem with every story is you tell it after the fact" (7). The following essay, in a sense, is an investigation into this one sentence. Implied in this assertion are assumptions concerning the nature of temporality and of authorship. Also to be noted immediately is that the narrator of this line regards the fact he is stating as a problem, perhaps not one with a solution, but at least one which we must simply deal with. There is a problem, then, in the logic of temporality and authorship, namely, that all stories are told *after the fact*. The nature of this problem, its implications and consequences, are the subject of this essay, as well as the question as to whether or not this situation needs be regarded *as* a problem at all.

"Philosophy is perfectly right," states Kierkegaard, "in saying that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other clause -- that it must be lived forward" (*The Essential Kierkegaard*, 12). By "philosophy" Kierkegaard may have Hegel in mind particularly, whose system presumably understood all of history backward, and perfectly at that. As is often the case Kierkegaard is not outrightly insulting Hegel, but merely mentioning that he forgot one minor detail, which is, of course, himself. We might advance the proposition that existentialism begins properly with this remembrance of the "other clause," that life must be lived forwards, which is to say, with a remembrance of oneself in relation to that which one understands. Kierkegaard's remark

concludes, “The more one thinks through this clause, the more one concludes that life in temporality never becomes properly understandable, simply because never at any time does one get perfect repose to take a stance -- backward.” And if Hegel thought he had this “perfect repose,” he was mistaken, or else from another planet, where “life in temporality” was but one way of living that might be forsaken for others *outside of* temporality, *sub specie aeterni*, as it were. Life on earth, though, according to Kierkegaard (and to many who followed him, as well), is always already in temporality, and therefore not an option but a necessity. The fact that one “concludes” thus is not a finality, neither an answer nor an inalienable truth, but something which one concludes “the more,” that is, over and over again, time and time again, within temporality.

Sartre also had something to say on the nature of this backwards understanding as opposed to a forwards living. Writing on *The Sound and the Fury*, he states, “Faulkner’s vision of the world can be compared to that of a man sitting in an open car and looking backwards. At every moment, formless shadows, flickerings, faint tremblings and patches of light rise up on either side of him, and only afterwards, when he has a little perspective, do they become trees and men and cars” (“Time in the Work of Faulkner,” 267). Obviously Sartre’s metaphor is similar to Kierkegaard’s insofar as it poses the problem concerning human understanding: that it only comes “afterwards,” or backwards, while the open car continuously moves forwards. In addition to this general conception of the quirk in existence, Sartre also, however, adds the notion of a delay. It seems that there is a period of time between the happening of the event (its appearance or occasioning) and its becoming understandable, a period in which everything is “formless

shadows, flickerings,” etc. This instant between happening and intelligibility certainly adds to the problematic nature of the initial dilemma over understanding, though perhaps not quite enough, for Sartre’s metaphor remains too hermetic. What it adds is merely an extra component, and not a surplus, the latter implying an element of *unaccountability*, which is precisely that which lies at the heart of Faulkner’s great novel.

Both Kierkegaard and Sartre, in formulating the problem *qua* problem, simplify its problematic nature to the point at which it becomes merely a problem for logic, and not existence. That is, in dividing the dilemma between an understanding which looks backwards and a life which lives forwards, both thinkers are positing the problem more in terms of a contradiction (which pertains to logic) rather than in terms of, say, an inescapable confusion (which pertains more to existence). Faulkner’s writing, however, does not present the problem in logical terms (forwards versus backwards), in fact does not *present* the problem at all, but instead seeks to represent temporality in its full ecstaticness (that is, the simultaneity of unfolding, indistinguishability and understanding), which representation of course presents its own problems and will be discussed later. For the time being, however, we have too many conceptions of time and understanding on our hands to effectively investigate -- *time and understanding*. In this instance we resemble the man who has too much food in his mouth and so is unable to swallow unless some of that food is removed. This metaphor, taken from Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, is preceded by the remark that when “this [being stuffed, so to speak] is the case, the art of being able to communicate eventually becomes the art of being able to take away or to trick something away from someone” (275). For

the time being, then, we shall limit ourselves to the perhaps too simple conception of “life in temporality” as above described by Kierkegaard and Sartre, and not bother ourselves as to what this conception lacks (which is a surplus), but instead chew only this small morsel that we might adequately digest it before moving on to the next course. Our conception of temporality and understanding, then, is limited (severely) to the already outlined situation of a sharp contrast in direction. We have reduced the philosophical buffet of time-problems to this singular snack not out of fear of the monstrosity of the time problem (as Ned Lukacher would put it in his book *Time Fetishes*), but rather so that we might come in better health *to* that monstrosity.

“Philosophy is perfectly right,” says Kierkegaard, “in saying that life *must* be understood backward.” We are obligated under a natural imperative to comprehend a meaning in anything only after we have been allowed to look at it for a while, to dwell on it, with it, or in it for sometime. And though this applies to life *in general*, and to all things pertaining thereto, we might specifically call attention to its application to the *self*. We can only understand ourselves, then, backwards, *after* ourselves (our former selves, that is) have passed recognizably into the field of vision which we comprehend from our seat in the open car. By focusing our attention thus, it becomes easier to see that “other clause” which Kierkegaard reprimands philosophy for having forgotten. For if we speak of “we” as understanding “ourselves”, surely that *we* is just as real and demanding of attention as is that *ourselves*, though it is precisely this “we” that philosophy (or Hegel) has forgotten. And the more we ponder this disparity between the person who understands and that which is understood, the more we contemplate the unclosable gap

between them (such that that which is understood always comes “after the fact”), then *the more we conclude* that life cannot ever be “properly” understood -- *because* it is always being understood.

Sartre’s Faulknerian delay does not alleviate the situation, but rather adds to its weight, for while what happens comes up from behind us so to speak, and while what we understand has already receded considerably into the distance, that which is *nearest* to us is this chaotic swirl of images, Stephen Dedalus’s “ineluctable modality of the visible” (*Ulysses*, 31), of which it is well nigh impossible to make sense, and concerning which we are unlikely to reach any sound conclusions. These are the fast rushing objects (if we ought to call them objects) which best remind us of the other clause, that we are in fact moving forward, while what we understand, located comfortably as it is in the distance, seems not to move at all, or perhaps to fade imperceptibly. Philosophy, then, has been understandably comfortable to contemplate the latter while avoiding, discarding or ignoring the former, which threatens menacingly all stable categories. Throughout the course of *modern* philosophy, however, the dominant trend, it seems, has been to slowly avert the focus of our gaze towards that which is nearest us, the mad rush of recent experience. It is as though philosophers the likes of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger have sought to pull in the line as it were, to bring philosophy and the philosopher into immediate contact with one another, to philosophize *on* the immediate, so that the difference between, say, empiricism and existentialism (both terms being used in a very broad sense) is not so much one of methods or conclusions as it is one of *focus*. The “other clause” is finally getting the attention it deserves, which is to say that we are

overcoming our fear of the uncertainties it may entail and attempting, insofar as it may be possible, to understand what it means to be living forward.

Derrida, no doubt a veritable pioneer in this effort, has written in “Violence and Metaphysics” of the possibility that philosophy has “always lived knowing itself to be dying” (79). Philosophy, then, by nature, exists as something which simultaneously performs two seemingly contradictory acts, living and dying. By appealing to Sartre’s metaphor, we might clarify Derrida’s words by positing that philosophy lives as one in an open car, traveling, but *knowing itself* to be continually receding, diminishing, passing away; dying. The subject of philosophy is its own death, or dying, the backwards understanding of itself. Derrida continues to speculate, “that philosophy died *one day*, *within* history, or that it has always fed on its own agony, on the violent way it opens history by opposing itself to nonphilosophy, which is its past and its concern, its death and wellspring.” The possibilities enumerated here are not necessarily mutually exclusive, that philosophy died “one day” or has “always fed on its own agony.” To die *one day* is to die “within history,” which philosophy must perpetually do, as history is the goal of the backwards understanding which is the method *of* philosophy proper. Philosophy must do this perpetually *because it does*, as any attempt at philosophy immediately produces non-philosophy, which withers into historical distance. Philosophy violently *opens* history by calling attention to itself in opposition to that which has been “philosophized,” or rendered historical. History, so long as it is supposedly viewed *sub specie aeterni*, remains closed and secure (Hegelianism), but as soon as philosophy is placed *within* history, one day, history is violently opened thereby and becomes

inevitably non-immune to the existential. Philosophy feeds on its own historical agony, its own chronological wake-like refuse, which is its “past and its concern” insofar as *this* is what is left behind, receding in miniature, and thus proper to the backwards understanding; *philosophy feeds on its “death and wellspring” insofar as the ideas of philosophy are both its offspring and its corpse.*

Derrida continues, changing gears, “That beyond the death, or dying nature, of philosophy, perhaps even because of it, thought still has a future, or even, as is said today, is still entirely to come because of what philosophy has held in store.” Most notable in this extension of the question is the transition from “philosophy” to “thought.” One would think that the sensible thing to say is that philosophy might have a future despite its dying nature, but this is not at all what Derrida says, because he does not think that philosophy has a future (the only philosopher who could be his own mother, he says, is perhaps his daughter). It is not due to a certain inadequateness that philosophy does not have a future, as if it had simply become old and weary so that we take pity on it and exclaim, “poor thing, it doesn’t have a future,” but instead it is simply the fact that *philosophy does not have a future -- period*, much as the Compson siblings, in Sartre’s view, do not: because they are entirely obsessed with the past in one outrageous manner or another. Only thought, then, which disassociates itself not only from philosophy but particularly from the baggage which philosophy carries along (namely, phallogocentrism), has a future. Only thought, that is, is *maybe* able to turn its head in the open car and look in the *other* direction, at that which is coming (philosophy as it were having no neck). But perhaps it would be incorrect to label this figure thought,

which until now we have been calling philosophy; perhaps it would be more accurate, “as is said today” (see Heidegger’s *What is Called Thinking*), to posit that thought is “still entirely yet to come.” Until philosophy acquires a neck, we do not know what thinking is or even might be. And *for* philosophy to acquire a neck, it needs to recognize that “other clause” and conclude the more that historical understanding is as insufficient as itself, ever since it placed itself *within* history. This is the birthplace of existentialism, the creation of a confusion of tenses, and Quentin Compson is not so far removed from this as Sartre posits.

In the *Postscript* Kierkegaard writes that “what really occupies the thinking person is not to come to know something afterward, but just to become contemporary with the existing person in his existence” (289). The thinking person, in addition to recognizing the other clause, in fact *lives by it*, and is able to “just become contemporary” with existence, so that his focus is not on the dead and dying objects bobbing in the past’s wake, but instead continually on what Nietzsche calls the gateway Moment (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 158). And by “just” I believe that Kierkegaard has in mind the notions of “just barely,” “just in the nick of time,” and “just as much as is possible,” all of which are in accordance with the fleeting non-understandableness of the moment, as well as with its *momentousness*. With regards to the moment, we cannot conclude once and for all, but only “the more,” or yet again, so that instead of forever agonizingly dying, we are -- agonizingly or otherwise -- forever living. At an earlier juncture in the *Postscript* Kierkegaard says similarly that “an existing person cannot be in two places at the same time, cannot be subject-object. When he is closest to being in two places at the same

time, he is in passion; but passion is only momentary, and passion is the highest pitch of subjectivity” (199). So, an existing, *thinking* person cannot be both in the open car and the object of his own view receding. The closest he/she can come to this is to reel in that which is gazed upon so that it becomes “just contemporary” with the gazer; this is the *nearest* one can come to being identically subject *and* object at the same time. The momentary nature of passion (though momentous as well), while thus transient, is yet also renewable, that we may conclude more than once, indeed conclude continually, that life is, in a word, *inconclusive*.

(Derrida’s extended speculation on the nature of philosophy in “Violence and Metaphysics” ends thus: “Or, more strangely still, that the future itself has a future -- *all these* are unanswerable questions.” Derrida is *unafraid* to ask questions where answers are unlikely to be found. Might this have something to do with the forward looking, un-understanding *thing* called *thinking* as mentioned above by both Kierkegaard *and* Derrida? But of this last speculation (on the future of the future) we shall enquire later.)

Concomitant and non-coincident with the question over philosophy, thinking, temporality, etc. is a question over the I, and whether it is stable, entire and eternal, or liquid, fragmented and temporal. Parallel to the notion of life as understandable versus the notion of life as never “properly” understandable, this debate over the nature of the I posits *two* “I’s”, much as Kierkegaard’s journal entry posited *two* “clauses,” both of which he felt had to be recognized in order to come into existing, into thinking. The calling into question of the I, equiprimordial with the calling into question of history, philosophy, language, etc. (for as Derrida maintains in “Violence and Metaphysics,” these

are all manifestations, or “hermetic determinations” (80) of the question *as* a question) is played out in various works of modern literature of which I should briefly like to examine three: Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, and Cees Nooteboom’s *The Following Story*. These examinations should serve to better guide us towards the territory for which we are aiming (which is, the concept of authorship as it pertains to these philosophical upheavals, or rather thoughtful upheavals *of* philosophy).

“History,” says Stephen Dedalus, “is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (*Ulysses*, 28). By this one might well imagine that Stephen is straining to acquire a vision of the uncreated future by which he may come into his own artistic (i.e., eternal) essence. Stephen wishes not only to awaken from the Hegelian strain of world history, but also from his own personal history by virtue of which he is always subject to himself as object. His “poor dogsbody” (39) he finds intolerably impoverished while his conception of himself as an artist, on the other hand, is equally disagreeable, insofar as it is ethereal. Stephen’s struggle is between these two clauses and is played out throughout the novel, though without any apparent resolution. In the “Scylla and Charybdis” episode of *Ulysses* Stephen, having been slightly mocked by his interviewers, satisfies himself by silently mocking them. The poet George Russell (A.E.) has just criticized Stephen for prying into the life of Shakespeare, and Stephen, not only his tongue but also his thoughts “unbound by the sacred pint” (15), thinks to himself of a time when Russell lent him a pound for food. Having been paid that morning by Deasy, Stephen has sufficient funds to repay Russell but decides to wait until a later day: “Wait. Five months. Molecules all change. I am other I now. Other I got pound” (156). Though no

doubt a subject for comedy, this difficult-to-grasp concept of the I is also a serious thought for Stephen, else it would not occupy him throughout the course of the entire day. We read, for instance, in the second episode, a similar thought, when Stephen is despondently carrying on a futile conversation with Mr. Deasy: "The same room and hour, the same wisdom: and I the same. Three times now. Three nooses round me here. Well? I can break them in this instance if I will" (25). Most apparently, there is a contradiction here. According to Stephen's inebriated logic of "Scylla and Charybdis," each time he says "I" he is "other I now," so that the three meetings conducted in Deasy's office ought to have consisted, on Stephen's part, of three "I's." Yet Stephen says of all three occasions: "and I the same." This is Stephen's dilemma; this *is* the nightmare of history from which he is trying to awake. Does history have a purpose, an essence, a "sameness," or does it simply consist of changing molecules? The former possibility leads Stephen to despair, the latter to sarcasm, *neither* of which are in accordance with his conception of the artist, *both* of which are chains that hold him fast to the open car of Ireland so to speak.

In the *Postscript* Kierkegaard writes

But now to become what one is as a matter of course -- who would waste his time on that? That would indeed be the most dispensable of all tasks in life. Quite so. But that is why it is already so very difficult, indeed, the most difficult of all, because every human being has a strong natural desire and drive to become something else and more (130).

In Stephen's case, his desire is definitely to become something *more*. The rub lies in the fact that no matter how strenuously one attempts to become something else and/or more,

one is forever bound to become what one is. For all of Stephen's impatience, he can only become an artist as a slow "matter of course." And yet by virtue of this process, he does in fact become something else and more, namely, Joyce (his teleological "other I" as it were). Joyce, then, resolves the conflict between what one is and what one would like to be by tangling it up into an inextricable mess. He lands neither on the side of "changing molecules" nor on the side of "entelechy, form of forms," the contrast between which he considers only an annoying "buzz buzz" (156), but instead, through an arduous and difficult process indeed, "wastes his time" on becoming "as a matter of course" who he is. *This* is how one wakes up from the nightmare of history. In the open car, Joyce is neither frozen looking one way nor the other. He draws on the receding figures of his historical past -- "I that sinned and prayed and fasted" (156) -- and projects them into the uncreated future. The decomposing dogsbody thus *becomes* immortal.

"Every human being," says Kierkegaard, "has the a strong natural desire and drive to become something else and more." Or, in the case of many of Samuel Beckett's characters, to become nothing. Which attempt, of course, always *ends up* with them becoming something else and more. The Unnamable, though it seems he has had some education, has not read Book Fifteen of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "Men who seem born to die, and chilled by death,/ Why tremble when the river Styx is mentioned,/ Or names that foolish poets have in mind,/ All nightmares of a world that never was?" (418). And if the Unnamable *had* read this text and was familiar with it, surely he would have merely shrugged, if he could shrug. For the world of metamorphosis, of change and permutation, though by the account of Ovid's philosopher a blessing, is for Beckett's Unnamable a

curse, a nightmare of a world that *ever* was. To encounter Styx would not be cause for trembling, but only cause for another story, for another I, for another character whose name begins with the letter “M.” The Unnamable desires to cease, to serve his penum and be done with it, but it seems his penum is but another one of his inventions, not far off from Malone’s hat.

Following Malone’s “death,” the Unnamable begins, “Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I” (291). What is this “saying I”? According to Beckett, it is unnamable, and yet cannot resist the temptation to name itself, to “keep going on” in narration, as we, in reading it, cannot help attempting to figure out just what it is that is saying “I.” At first glance, we might look upon the Unnamable as a sort of Cartesian *res cogitans*, isolated in a private vault where it exists by virtue of thinking it does. In attempting to relate to itself, however, it can only draw upon itself, and so quickly enters into layers of contradiction in a manner not dissimilar to Dostoyevsky’s Underground Man. With nothing to verify or negate what it says save itself, there is no way of knowing whether or not the verifications and/or negations are in any sense correct. The Unnamable can also be viewed as a personification of the Kantian thing-in-itself (a personification which goes to great lengths to minimize the personable element as much as possible without thereby negating the personification). After all, the thing-in-itself, according to Kant, is unnamable, unknowable, deducible *a priori* but not identifiable. Behind the host of vagrants, then (Molloy, Malone, MacMann, Mahood, Murphy, etc.), lies the Unnamable, which they are all yarns, or manifestations of. A third and perhaps more striking interpretation of Beckett’s mysterious I-sayer would be one which looks

upon it as Derridean *differance* given a voice (striking not only because Derrida did not coin this term until some time after Beckett's novels were written, but also for how logically it -- this interpretation -- follows on the heels of the Kantian reading).

*Differance*, itself not properly a word or name, cannot help naming itself, cannot help coming into identity through a ceaseless process of iteration, or narration. "Deplorable mania," says the Unnamable, "when something happens, to inquire what. If only I were not obliged to manifest" (296). The Unnamable "manifests" into a variety of identifiable characters (characters with names like Worm, for example), just as from *differance* identifiability becomes possible. *Differance*, then, is under an obligation, an obligation prescribed by temporality which dictates that *differance* manifest *as* (and at this point we find ourselves in the Heideggerian sphere of bewilderment over the fact that there is anything, something, rather than nothing -- nothing, which, of course, is what the Unnamable desires, but shall never have). Telling the tale of Worm and speaking of the possibility of the blissful state of perhaps resting on two planes rather than just one, the Unnamable says, "But Worm will never know this joy but darkly, being less than a beast, before he is restored, more or less, to that state in which he was before the beginning of his prehistory" (357). The time period referred to here is thrice removed from the historical: "*before the beginning of his prehistory.*" Beckett, like Joyce, is concerned with the notion of a non-historical "I" sayer, one who is not confined to the single clause which states that life can only be understood backward. Whereas the Joycean artist, however, surges forth toward the uncreated future, Beckett's nomads are continually reduced to states *prior to* history, out of which history arises, or is *said*. In either case,

though, the historical is never overcome, but integrated or fabricated, respectively, inevitably. In other words, in the works of both Joyce and Beckett, the I, once questioned, cannot return to its former state of contained, stable understandability (the illusion of which has been dispelled), but neither can it dissolve itself completely into oblivion (the egg-shaped one-eyed mass of the Unnamable is as close as it can get); instead, it remains in a temporal limbo between difference (“molecules all change”) and identity (“entelechy, form of forms”). If we are indeed condemned to be free, then this is our condemnation; however, as was stated at the outset, that this is a *problem* may yet be called into question.

Cees Nooteboom’s *The Following Story* offers its own unique take on the “stable I versus liquid I” quandary. I have in fact derived the term “liquid I” (not to be confused with the Unnamable’s liquid *eye*) precisely from this short novel. Herman Mussert, the narrator (who, incidentally, is in two places simultaneously while recalling memories of several others), muses, “The liquid I. The subject had arisen after that first and only time she came to my class. She wasn’t having any of it, and I can never explain exactly what I mean” (45). Herman’s inability to explain this concept is topped perhaps only by our inability to understand, initially at least, how he can be in his bedroom in Amsterdam and on the streets of Lisbon simultaneously. The she referred to here is the only woman Herman has ever been in love with (or so he says), Maria Zeinstra, who teaches science at a school where he teaches classics. He recalls their conversation following a lecture on the myth of Phaethon. Herman begins

“Is your ‘I’ the same as ten years ago? Or the same as fifty years from now?”  
 “I hope I will be gone by then. But tell me exactly what *you* think we are,  
 then.”

“A cluster of composite, endlessly altering circumstances and functions which we address as ‘I.’ What else can I say? We act as if it is fixed and unchangeable, but it changes all the time, until it is discarded. But we keep on referring to it as ‘I’. It’s a sort of profession of the body.”

Here we see the same ground being covered: is the self identifiable and understandable historically, continuously, as *one* thing (which therefore could not be in two places at the same time), or is it a “composite” of shifting molecules which merely continues to say “I”? Ironically, Herman the classicist adopts the latter view while Maria the biologist (the one who deals with molecules) adopts the former. In their brief dispute, though, Nooteboom is not accomplishing anything spectacular. It is only against the backdrop of Herman’s current predicament (or predicaments) that the conversation takes on a certain metaphysical allure. For Herman is dying in his apartment in Amsterdam. He is also, however, in a hotel room in Lisbon (the scene of his love affair with Zeinstra twenty years ago), and from there will retrace his past perambulations along the banks of the Tagus before embarking on a ship bound for the Amazon (which is also not only its geographical self, but also a mythological river of the underworld). Herman’s assertion of the liquid I is underscored and reinforced by his own spacial and temporal dissolution, which runs throughout the novel so that whereas in the beginning of the novel he identifies with the man in Amsterdam and looks upon the man in Lisbon as a stranger, by the novel’s end he has reversed this view and let go of the man in Amsterdam, which letting go of course frees him for the completion of his odyssey. Despite the fact, however, that Herman is dispersed in the manner related above, he yet manages to narrate

a complete tale *from the standpoint of a single narrator*. He is, that is to say, yet himself, identifiable as the teller, and not at all as liquid as he otherwise would be. Herman Mussert, “as a matter of course,” becomes what he is, namely, someone who has died, just as Stephen metamorphoses into Joyce the artist and just as the Unnamable assuredly continues becoming, or manifesting, or going on. Like Joyce and Beckett, Nootboom is siding neither on the side of the stable I nor on the side of the liquid I, but is instead affirming both; he is looking both forwards and backwards, from within the open car. In the following pages we shall attempt to explicate what this implies on both a metaphysical and an existential level.

The shift from the historical/existential opposition to the stable/liquid opposition was a conceptual metamorphosis. The concepts being dealt with remained the same, and yet had changed. To make another metamorphosis along the same lines, we now shift our attention from the stable/liquid opposition to the being/becoming opposition, which has in a manner been our goal in this first section concerning temporality and understanding. With regards to the two clauses of Kierkegaard’s statement (that life must be understood backwards while being lived forwards), Nietzsche may have found it odd that for so long, apparently, philosophy was able to live by the first one only. And now perhaps, with existentialism being *en vogue* to the point where we only seem to remember the second clause at the expense of the first, the tables have merely been turned, which Nietzsche would find no less odd, as it represents the same situation: living by a single clause which by nature of its formulation necessarily implies an other. In this respect, Kierkegaard was certainly in sympathy with Nietzsche, as it remains the point of his remark that *both*

clauses ought to be properly recognized and understood, so that we neither end up building Hegelian castles of systems in shifting sands of existence nor resigning ourselves to meaninglessness (which seems to be the word most popularly associated with existentialism these days). Yes, says Nietzsche, we ought to recognize both clauses -- *or neither*. In which case what remains?

In *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche describes in pinpoint brevity the creation, life and death of the “real” world, the afterworld, the world of being, the inalienable world. The idea of this world, says Nietzsche, has become “superfluous, *therefore* refuted” (20). In the sixth and final remark of this section, Nietzsche reaches what is perhaps one of his most crucial and unrecognized conclusions (despite the popularity *of* this section): “The real world -- we have done away with it: what world was left? the apparent one, perhaps? ... But no! *with the real world we have also done away with the apparent one!*” (20).

What seems to have gone unrecognized in this assertion is, coincidentally, its second clause, which, ironically, is the one that is heavily emphasized. That the real world has been done away with has been largely accepted by philosophy in general since Nietzsche. In substitution for it, however, many would-be philosophers and writers have clung to the apparent world and used its evident pointlessness as a grounds for elucidating their own concept of despair. Their enterprise, though, is mistaken: for how can there be *only* an apparent world, when “apparentness” implies a truth or reality which belies it? Nietzsche is insistent that in doing away with one clause we must *eo ipso* do away with the other, but this leaves us in such a situation as to ask, what, then, is left? To which Nietzsche responds: “Noon; moment of the shortest shadow” (20). Nietzsche’s method

of dealing with opposites here is a sort of anti-Hegelian *aufheban*, a synthesis which produces not a sublimated, elevated term but rather a moment of shadowlessness (where neither term or clause is longer than the other so to speak) which clears the ground of creation of darkness that it might thereby receive the warmth of the sun. The meeting of the world of being (the “real” world) and the world of becoming (the apparent world) is not at all unlike the meeting that the Unnamable witnesses between Mercier and Camier: “Two shapes, then, oblong like man [i.e., like shadows], entered into collision before me. They fell and I saw them no more” (296-7); it is a synthesis that results in a dissolution, a collision that produces a disappearance. In Nietzsche’s conception, then, this is the shadowless pinpoint, or pinnacle, of humanity where Zarathustra makes his entrance in order to affirm the doctrine of eternal return, his sun-bred creation, which, in actuality, is *not* far off from being a sublimated synthesis resulting from a Hegelian process of *aufheben*, insofar as Nietzsche states that eternal recurrence is the closest a world of becoming can come to being a world of being. The difference between Hegel and Nietzsche here, it seems, is that in Nietzsche’s case the third, elevated term does not issue forth from a conceptual coupling of the first two clauses, but instead rises from the ashes of their mutual annihilation, a distinction which is important because it borders more on the mythological than on the historical or biological.

My insistence on the twin-like relationship between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche is an essential component of this essay, precisely *because* of the predominant view which posits the one as Christian and the other as Anti-Christ. This labeling, while perhaps accurate, recognizes only the “what” of each thinker (and that only partially), and not the

“how,” which is where each thinker insisted the truth was to be found. And if you look at *how* Kierkegaard and Nietzsche go about the business of thinking, you will find that they are not as dissimilar as their “whatnesses” initially proclaim them to be.

The passage in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* entitled “On the Vision and the Riddle” (155-60) is famous for being one of the few, select places in which Nietzsche advances his doctrine of eternal return and his conception of the gateway Moment. Both of these ideas, however, had already been developed in one form or another by Kierkegaard, half a century earlier and several hundred miles to the north. I maintain that Nietzsche’s formulation of these thoughts is the more widely recognized for its seeming compatibility with the aforementioned *en vogue* existentialism which wallows in the idleness whose motto is, “All is permitted.” Certainly this quasi-philosophical shrug is not compatible with Kierkegaard’s conception of the challenge and responsibility of existing, but neither is it compatible, as I hope to have shown, with Nietzsche’s conception of the “din from all free spirits” (*Twilight*, 20), which carries also with it a responsibility of value-creating and of existing *lightly*. To become what one is as a matter of course was to both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche a task of utmost importance and difficulty, and it is safe to say that the *existential* as put forth by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche has *not been allowed to do this* by many of its so-called inheritors who would instead make of it something else or something more.

In his biography of Heidegger, *Between Good and Evil*, Rudiger Safranski notes with all due respect that the concept of the moment “began its career with Kierkegaard” (173). Kierkegaard’s moment, though ostensibly distinct from Nietzsche’s insofar as it is

placed within a definite Christian context, is nevertheless insisted on with the same fervor and vivacity with which Nietzsche propounds his conception. And Kierkegaard's idea, also like Nietzsche's, is without doubt not only a means of advancing towards the uncreated future, hammer in hand, but also a critique of the past and the until-then prevalent spirit of philosophy. In the *Postscript* Kierkegaard states, "All logical thinking is in the language of abstraction and *sub specie aeterni*. To think existence in this way is to disregard the difficulty, that is, the difficulty of thinking the eternal in a process of becoming, which one is presumably compelled to do since the thinker himself is in a process of becoming" (307-8). The echoes of Nietzsche preceding Nietzsche ought to be apparent. To think the eternal from the standpoint of becoming was to affirm the eternal return of the same, to unite the two opposites in a single non-shadow. In Kierkegaard's writing, where the emphasis is put on recognizing both clauses rather than eliminating them, the task of thinking the eternal from the standpoint of becoming acquires a somewhat different meaning, but in one essential respect it remains the same, in that it, this thinking, is conceived of as "the difficulty" (or in Nietzsche's terms "the greatest weight" (*The Gay Science*, 273)), as the task of utmost necessity for any existing person. Passion, that "highest pitch of subjectivity," that "momentary" coalescence of subject-object, or becoming-being, is also the *convalescence* of the existing person that allows one to *become* what one *is*. Also in the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard writes

It holds true for potboiler writers, and then for those who are captivated by them, that change is the supreme law; but with regard to truth as inwardness in existence, with regard to a more incorruptible joy in life, which has nothing in common with ennui's hankering after diversion, the opposite holds true, and the

law is: the same, and yet changed, and yet the same (286).

If one were to remove the phrase “truth as inwardness in existence,” which is a dead giveaway, from this passage, one could almost convince oneself that these words came from the pen of Nietzsche. And at yet another point in the same work Kierkegaard states that “for an existing person, the goal of motion is decision and repetition” (312). These assertions prove that Kierkegaard was not merely infatuated with the idea of repetition while writing the short book by the same name because for a brief spell he harbored the idea of a repetition with Regine Olsen. Though this was undoubtedly a great influence in his thinking of the concept, Kierkegaard’s estimation for the idea of repetition remains philosophically sustained above and beyond this one decision, *for all decision* (to assert which, it must be noted, is by no means to belittle that one decision, namely, the breaking of his engagement, for to belittle one decision would be to belittle all decision). The one minor detail separating Nietzsche from Kierkegaard is that whereas Kierkegaard asserts that the goal of motion is repetition and decision, Nietzsche says fine, and *decides* that even this decision shall repeat itself, eternally, and be forever the same, and yet different, and yet the same, while Kierkegaard is meanwhile *leaping* towards his God, who presumably is one who can dance.

By no means have we exhausted Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and the idea of repetition and recurrence, within this essay. Indeed, we shall return to them in the second part, quite shortly. In the interim, though, I should yet like to examine two more thinkers on these same themes we have so far discussed throughout, particularly the ever-revolving opposites which stem from the being/becoming binary. For as regards Wittgenstein and

Derrida, I feel that here we have two thinkers who introduce their own original dissolutions of this problem. And I now say “problem” in a quite dissimilar sense from the narrator of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Lullaby*, who, it will be remembered, stated that “the problem with every story is you tell it after the fact.” The problem has now become *that this was ever or is regarded as a problem*, and we are examining potential ways of dissolving it, in preparation for the third and final part of this essay, which deals precisely with the question of telling stories and the concept of authorship.

Wittgenstein found Kierkegaard too deep for him in the sense that Kierkegaard was what he called “an honest religious thinker.” Ray Monk, in his biography of Wittgenstein, cites this notebook entry: “An honest religious thinker *is like a tightrope walker*. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it” (464, my emphasis). Kierkegaard, as Wittgenstein saw him, had achieved this feat brilliantly, and for a sustained period of time, while Wittgenstein himself was never able to maintain his balance for more than brief moments. In a remark from the collection entitled *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein begins

Kierkegaard writes: If Christianity were so easy and cozy, why should God in his Scriptures have set Heaven and Earth in motion and threatened *eternal* punishments? -- Question: But in that case why is this Scripture so unclear? If we want to warn someone of a terrible danger, do we go about it by telling him a riddle whose solution will be the warning? (31).

Obviously, Wittgenstein is here looking for something additional to the “slenderest support imaginable,” namely a rational answer which will at least make some sliver of

sense out of this apparent contradiction. If something is so important as to carry with it the threat of eternal punishment, why should the means of understanding it be so uniformly vague and obscure? Characteristically, rather than following his initial strain of thought, Wittgenstein changes gears at this point; that is, he does not seek to answer his own question (to find the rational justification as it were) but instead questions his own question and seeks its solution *there*. He continues, “But who is to say that the Scripture really is unclear? Isn’t it possible that it was essential in this case to ‘tell a riddle’? And that, on the other hand, giving a more direct warning would necessarily have had the *wrong* effect?” These speculations on Christianity, which began with the difficult task of thinking about Kierkegaard, echo the philosophical thoughts which Wittgenstein was preoccupied with at this time (1937). Perhaps one of the most important notions to come out of the *Philosophical Investigations* is that the meaning of a word is its use. What is expressed in this assertion is neither a utilitarianism nor a pragmatism; by “use” Wittgenstein does not mean “handiness” or even “usefulness,” but simply how a word is used in any given situation. In order to determine meaning, then, consulting dictionaries, engaging in dialectic, and researching etymologies are all somewhat superfluous activities; all one needs to do is ask how the word is used in various circumstances and one will get “a feel” for its meaning. This deceptively simple idea has disastrous consequences for the history of Western Philosophy. From Socrates to Heidegger, according to Wittgenstein, most of the “great” philosophers have been going about determining meaning in entirely the wrong way, and have created more confusion than clarity in their endeavors. The Socratic method of continually seeking out the essential definition of a variety of terms is

destined to fail, as there is no essential definition of any concept, but only “family resemblances” between multiple definitions (that most Socratic dialogues end where they begin seems to prove this somewhat indirectly). Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, on the other hand, which asks after the meaning of being, might have saved itself a lot time and trouble by simply asking, “How do we use this word in everyday instances?” rather than by entangling itself in metaphysical etymologies from which there is little hope of escape (and again, the incompleteness of Heidegger’s *magnum opus* seems to testify indirectly to the futility of its method). By saying that the meaning of a word is its use, Wittgenstein is denying meaning as an eternal, self-contained, inviolate entity, existing in a world of forms obtainable by rationality, much as Nietzsche denies the “real” world in *Twilight of the Idols*. What seems dangerous in this stance is that it seems to eliminate the concept of meaning altogether, to the point where what remains is a bunch of words that can be *used* in any way whatsoever. But the second clause of Nietzsche’s dissolution applies aptly here as well: in destroying the one world, you’ve destroyed the other as well. What’s left is an exposed ground on which to build, the future constructions of which will no doubt contain plenty of errors themselves, but the point is that those errors will be *yours*, as from this point on you’ll be thinking for yourself. The meaning of a word is its use: this does not mean that the meaning of meaning is utterly ambiguous, but rather that it is not wholly determinable, and that it never was and never will be. There will always be room for error, but this means necessarily that there will also always be room for guidance and training. The establishment of meaning is a fixed and simultaneously fluctuating social grammar. The failures of the Socratic Dialogues and of Heidegger’s asking after the

meaning of being are precisely their beautiful success. “Might we not say,” continues Wittgenstein, that

it is important that this narrative (the fourfold Gospels) should not be more than quite averagely historically plausible *just so that* this should not be taken as the essential, decisive thing? So that the *letter* should not be believed more strongly than is proper and the *spirit* may receive its due. I.e. what you are supposed to see cannot be communicated even by the best and most accurate historian; and therefore a mediocre account suffices, is even to be preferred.

Here we once again see the insistence on the clause which is *opposite* the historical. The “most accurate historian” might be able to depict with utmost clarity all that passes into the field of vision behind the open car, but what we are “supposed to see,” that is, what is ahead of us or “just contemporary” with us, cannot be thus depicted by the historian, and so riddles, such as the Gospels or Nietzsche’s doctrine of return (“On the Vision and the *Riddle*,” the chapter is called), are to be preferred, even though they inevitably carry with them the greater possibility of misinterpretation, or errancy with regards to the determination of their meaning.

Wittgenstein, as a philosopher, was attempting to dissolve the errors which philosophy had made. In this respect, a utopia-according-to-Wittgenstein would not consist of philosopher-kings or even of philosophers at all. Rather, it would be entirely devoid of philosophy, or of the need for philosophy, as there would be no need for undue speculation concerning the meaning of words. Ray Monk relates the following remark of Wittgenstein: “I am by no means sure that I should prefer a continuation of my work by others to a change in the way people live which would make all these questions

superfluous” (490). Superfluous, which is to say, refuted *existentially*. Wittgenstein never occupied himself with drawing up blueprints for this world, probably because he knew the thought of it was as nonsensical as most of the questions which it would have no need of. But it is at least certain that he thought of the real accomplishment of philosophy as not a continuation of its own work, its own death-agony, but its *cessation*, which would in turn require “a change in the way people live.” We would all have to grow necks, as it were.

Derrida has something to say of utopias, too. A Derridean utopia, it seems, would be one based on a politics of friendship. In the book by the same name, Derrida asks, “And if politics were at last grounded in this friendship, this one and no other, the politics of *this* hyperbole, would this not be to break with the entire history of the political, this old, tiring and tired, exhausted history?” (218). Would this, that is, not be to break our fixed and weary gaze upon the historical and acquire thereby a certain freedom of movement that was until then lacking? A freedom of movement which allows us to look forwards as well as backwards, even if when looking forwards we can see nothing distinctly, but only in riddles? And might it not be the case that our eyes simply have to adjust to this new vision which approaches rather than recedes, so that with time we might adapt to it and indeed make *something* out of it? Freedom of movement in the face of nothing: is this what is entailed in initially becoming contemporary with your own existence?

Like Wittgenstein, though, Derrida does not advance a design concerning this supposedly possible future. Instead, he considers it a temptation, indeed the temptation

of the very book he is writing, the duty of which is, paradoxically, to *resist* the temptation at all costs. “Not to resist so as to deny, exclude or oppose,” he says, “but precisely to keep the temptation in sight of its chance: not to be taken for an assurance or a programme” (218). To take the temptation for an “assurance or a programme” would be, presumably, to fall back directly into the “tired, exhausted history” which the temptation tempts one to overcome. These words of Derrida echo words of Rudiger Safranski in his biography of Heidegger, when he writes that “in such a place of ‘metaphysical need,’ the spirits, whether Holderlin or Heidegger, must hold out to keep awake the memory of what is still missing” (290). The actualization of the temptation, its fulfillment, would be the arrival of “what is missing,” but the distinguishing characteristic of Derrida’s conception in this instance is that the temptation never will be fulfilled, shall always remain missing, so that precisely thereby it may always remain a possibility, “within sight of its chance.” To fulfill the temptation would be to fulfill the “metaphysical need,” which again would land us exactly within the exhausted history which, like Stephen Dedalus, we are trying to awaken from. Instead we must remain in what Safranski calls “metaphysical homelessness” (54), the thought of which at once brings to mind the fact that we are now living solely in the “apparent world,” which, as we have been stressing thoroughly for some time now, is *not* the case. Freedom of movement in the face of nothing and freedom of movement in the face of apparentness are two very different things. By keeping the temptation within sight of its chance Derrida is in fact doing something remarkably similar to what Wittgenstein is attempting in saying that the meaning of a word is its use, namely, affirming indeterminacy. “Nature was wise

enough,” writes Derrida, “to implant in mankind a felicitous aptitude for being deceived” (*Politics of Friendship*, 273). Our aptitude for being deceived is also our aptitude for being tempted, both of which lead us into error more often than not. But were it not for this, were it not for the fact that meaning consists of “family resemblances” or cross-references which cannot be untangled, meaning would not even be possible. If the utopia came to be, it would cease to be, for it could no longer be *thought*. If meaning were for once and all outrightly determined, we could no longer question, but at best would be consigned to live as the Underground Man does, in a mill of contradiction. “Questioning is the piety of thought,” writes Heidegger (*The Question Concerning Technology*, 35), and were it not for the possibility of errancy or indeterminacy we would not be able to question, *to think religiously*, which is to say, we would not be able to think about Kierkegaard. Philosophy, for Derrida, need not cease entirely in order to give way to a better world, but must instead metamorphose into thinking, which is itself imperfect also, but in a different way. And even this may not make the world any better, but it might allow us to keep *in front* of our eyes the temptation *of* a better world, to adapt our eyesight to the face of nothing and continually make out of it something which we can share amongst ourselves. Whereas philosophy in many instances had been intent on setting the groundwork for a perfect society, the metamorphosis into thinking ceases to lay such faulty pipe, and instead in an act of supreme affirmation *keeps questioning*, keeps saying *perhaps*. “Again the question of the perhaps,” says Derrida, “the paradoxical conditions for an event or a decision” (*Politics of Friendship*, 218). The paradox here consists of the fact that a decision requires that we become “just

contemporary” with indeterminacy, and render out of it a meaning which could have been otherwise, but perhaps surprisingly was not. To accomplish such a maneuver indeed requires a great freedom of movement, which -- perhaps -- only a momentous, momentary passion can provide us with. Safranski, again in his biography of Heidegger, says that “philosophy in Heidegger’s sense is a coimplementation of concerned and providing existence, but it is also *free mobility* and contemplation of the fact that having possibilities is part of the reality of Man. Philosophy, therefore, is nothing other than alert existence and thus just as problematic and just as mortal as this existence” (125, my emphasis). As “alert existence” Heideggerian philosophy represents the person in the open car who is attempting to become just contemporary with what Sartre all-too-prematurely refers to as “formless shadows, flickerings, faint tremblings and patches of light”; as “mortal” Heideggerian philosophy, much like Derrida’s conception of the subject, is something capable of dying itself, and not merely that which assesses dying.

In Nooteboom’s *The Following Story*, Herman Mussert, after lecturing on the trial and death of Socrates, is confronted by one of his students, Lisa D’India, who asks if he believes what Socrates says about the immortality of the soul. Mussert says that he does not believe it, but that this is not the point of the dialogue. “What is the point, then?” asks D’India. “The point,” says Herman, “is that we are capable of thinking about immortality” (91). Similarly, at the end of the *Republic*, Socrates says that the point of the dialogue has not been to take a step towards creating the perfect society, but rather *that they’re there*, having this conversation in the first place, about the perfect society, about immortality. This, I believe, is what Derrida means when he says we ought to keep

the temptation in sight of its chance. Any attempt to actualize it will degrade it, or, as Nietzsche writes in *Zarathustra*, “May your virtue be too exalted for the familiarity of names: and if you must speak of her, then do not be ashamed to stammer of her” (36).

The fact that we end up back at Socrates again and again does not speak highly of Socrates, as if he as the first philosopher was also the best, so that continually we must confront him with our own comparatively paltry efforts at thought, and continually be turned away by his questioning. No, the fact that we end up back at Socrates again and again attests to the fact that the attempt to actualize the temptation began with him, which attempt is merely keeping the temptation in sight of its chance *rudely*. We have not gone beyond where Socrates went because we *cannot* go beyond it; we cannot advance the other towards us to any point at which it becomes *less other* without thereby sacrificing its tempting quality of being other. Our *accomplishment* consists of the fact that we have ceased being the attempting stormers of the uncreated future and have instead taken on the roll of its protectors, its keepers. The former were the latter *anyway*, but the difference is not negligible.

## CHAPTER 2

## REPETITIONS

In the first part of this essay we were dealing largely with “opposites.” We were asking after how these apparently mutually exclusive terms had been dissolved in various works of modern philosophy and literature, and what that dissolution leads to. As it turns out, the dissolution leads us *nowhere*, but instead back to the instance where the temptation first comes in sight of its chance, which we never really left to begin with, save on a flight of fancy. Another way of stating this is to say that the dissolution leads us back to Socrates, who has his own way of tackling opposites.

In the *Phaedo* dialogue, Socrates begins talking to his friends with an opening remark concerning pleasure and pain, and how they often seem to accompany one another. He expresses his bewilderment at this, as he has just experienced a pain in his leg from the iron which binds it, followed by a feeling of pleasure at the sight of his friends. He says

How strange a thing it seems, my friends, that which people call pleasure! And how wonderful is its relation to pain, which they suppose to be its opposite; both together they will not come to a man, yet if he pursues one of the pair, and catches it, he is almost compelled to catch the other, too; so they seem to be both hung together from the same head (463).

This brief instance at first appears only to be a passing comment, something to get the vocal chords warmed up for the ensuing dialogue on the immortality of the soul. Upon a close reading of the dialogue, however, it becomes easy to see that these opening remarks

on the “supposed” opposites of pleasure and pain are not merely a philosophical primer, but more of a prologue which sets not only the tone but also the subject for the entirety of the dialogue. If pain and pleasure are opposites that always follow each other, and which hang from the “same head,” *what might we call this head?*

The *Phaedo* dialogue concerns itself initially with the soul/body distinction as it pertains to the question of death (i.e., whether or not the soul lives on after the body has died). Socrates says to Simmias, “Death is, that the body separates from the soul, and remains by itself apart from the soul, and the soul, separated from the body, exists by itself apart from the body. Is death anything but that?” (467). Simmias of course answers in the negative, and Socrates goes on to question as to whether the proper business of the philosopher is concern for the soul or concern for the body. But if body and soul are looked at loosely as supposed conceptual opposites in the same manner in which pleasure and pain are viewed, and if they therefore “hang on the same head,” how can they be separated at all the one from the other, whether in death or in the practice of the philosopher, who occupies himself only with the tendance of the soul (and whose activity Socrates refers to as “solely practicing dying” (466))? Socrates himself is certainly aware of this predicament, and throughout the dialogue when speaking of the philosopher’s task he always says something to the effect of “as far as possible,” as in, “Is it not clear that in such things the philosopher *as much as possible* sets free the soul from communion with the body?” (467, my emphasis). The continued use of this phrase or a variant of it suggests that Socrates, through both his own experience and through reason, is not convinced that such a separation can be entirely carried off without the

person who pulls it off becoming what Kierkegaard calls “not a human being” but an “idiot” (*Postscript*, 306). That is, however much one attempts to mediate oneself out of existence, one still “sleeps, eats, blows his nose, and whatever else a human being does” (*Postscript*, 306), and is therefore still very much in-body. The soul and the body hang from the same head -- what could this mean? Socrates says of pleasure and pain that they never present themselves together, but that the one follows always after the other. How can this be applied to the soul/body dichotomy? For it seems, traditionally at any rate, that the body and the soul are present simultaneously, continually at war with each other (as Socrates says also of pleasure and pain), and therefore that they do not follow each other sequentially. There are two ways around this dilemma: first, one could easily argue in a similar fashion that pleasure and pain are also always present together in this sense, with the one sometimes taking precedence over the other to the point at which it manifests itself solely, and vice versa. Just as we are sometimes caught up and preoccupied by matters of the body over those of the soul, so are we sometimes caught up by matters of pleasure over those of pain. In any case, though, the other term of the pair is always present by implication, even if submerged to the point of non-recognition. That the opposites never present themselves *together* means that they never manifest themselves entirely simultaneously, as it requires always the one to be submerged in order for the other to fully surface. The second way of getting around the dilemma of apparent simultaneity is to simply deny it and say that like pleasure and pain, body and soul never present themselves at the same time, for who can say that they have ever seen their soul or the soul of another? In this case, the body, presenting itself now, will be followed

ineluctably by the soul, in its own manner of presentation, just as pleasure always follows pain always follows pleasure, etc.

But to return to the dialogue: as Socrates continues his proofs of the soul's immortality, so he continues his discussion of opposites. At one point he even reintroduces pleasure and pain, stating that "to trade pleasure for pleasure, and pain for pain, and fear for fear, and even greater for less, as if they were current coin; no, the only honest currency, for which all these must be traded, is wisdom" (472). This passage, while significant in its apparent meaning considering the practice of philosophers, seems also significant in bringing up pleasure and pain again, as if to alert us to the fact that this subject, brought up at the dialogue's outset, has been with us ever since, and ought to be considered throughout along with the arguments in favor of immortality. To prove that the living preceded the dead preceded the living, etc., Socrates demonstrates how everything comes from out of its opposite, how bigger comes from smaller, stronger from weaker, better from worse, and vice versa, eternally. This, then, must also be the case with life, that it comes out of death, and with death, that it comes out of life, so that indeed, as Nietzsche says, "The living is merely a type of what is dead" (*The Gay Science*, 168), and conversely, the dead merely a type of what is living. What then of being? If it comes out of its own opposite, then it must come out of -- what? -- non-being? Or shall we say becoming? In which case, being becomes out of becoming and becoming becomes out of being? Suddenly we are in a good bit of conceptual confusion, and it seems that we, along with Socrates, were wise to refer to opposites as merely *supposed* opposites, and not otherwise, for this provides us with a backdoor to exit out

of the confusion we create. We can, like Wittgenstein, simply dismiss our speculations as nonsense masquerading as reason, and with a rude gesture have done with it and be outside again, breathing the fresh air. Socrates, though, is stubborn, and is not one to go out of backdoors, even when it is the sensible thing to do. He refers to pain and pleasure as “supposed” opposites, stating that they really are only two concepts which had been long at war with one another and so hung by their heads from the *same head*, whereby they were destined each to always precede and follow the other. Shortly thereafter, however, Socrates proceeds to expound that everything comes from its opposite, and we must presume that he is now talking of opposites no longer as “supposed” entities but as legitimate ones, at least insofar as the concept implies two concepts which necessarily always imply each other. In which case, what of being? Surely its opposite is non-being, or death, or nothingness. But then, what becomes of becoming? Is its opposite non-becoming? Again we find ourselves entering into a confusion which threatens to make the entire project look utterly ridiculous from the start. But Socrates has an answer: the opposite of being would be non-being, and as for becoming, it is the middle passage which constitutes each metamorphosis from one thing into its opposite and back again. Becoming is *that which allows* opposites to issue forth from one another. Were it not for becoming, we could not go from small to big, from young to old, or even from alive to dead. But then *does* becoming have an opposite, say in the eternal being of the world of the forms, which is the stasis to becoming’s flux? And if we answer affirmatively, aren’t we right back at the discrepancy between the *real* world and the *apparent* one, which must therefore be supposed opposites which give rise and fall to each other? And if they

thus hang from the same head, what might we call this head? Zarathustra responds: the eternal return of all things. To dissolve the opposition is to come to its head, its wellspring, its noon in which the shadow neither inclines one way nor the other.

What's being suggested here is not that Socrates' doctrine of Recollection and Nietzsche's doctrine of Return are the same thing. To make such a claim would indeed be preposterous. What *is* very striking, though, is that at the heart of the philosophies of both Socrates and Nietzsche lies the idea of recurrence, in one form or another. Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return of the same is no doubt the core of his philosophy, the total affirmation of which is the supreme expression of the will to power and the destiny of the overman. And not far into the *Phaedo*, Cebes refers to Socrates' doctrine of recollection as "that favourite argument of yours, Socrates, which we so often heard from you" (476). Thinking about recurrence will lead us in a roundabout way to a conception of what the author's task is.

Socrates is a believer in, or a thinker of, teleological metempsychosis. He maintains that those who live unvirtuous lives will be reborn as asses or beasts, or wolves or hawks, while those whose lives are happy "may pass into another similar political and gentle race, perhaps bees or wasps or ants; or even into the same human race again" (487). *Meanwhile*, the philosopher who succeeds in separating his soul from his body "as much as possible" during his existence is *not* reborn, but instead is given the eternal reward of dwelling in the halls of Hades, in good company, forever free from the torments of the body. Nietzsche as it were combines these two destinies, the possibilities of reincarnation and eternal life. While Socrates, despite acknowledging that opposites are

attached to the same head, remains partial *to* opposites, and particularly to the conception of a real world as opposed to an apparent one (or the soul as opposed to the body), Nietzsche instead realizes that in *recognizing the head the opposites disintegrate*. The world of being and the world of becoming *merge*, and, as Zarathustra says, “Soul is only a word for something about the body” (34). This “closest approximation” of becoming to being is the eternal return of the same, in which case whereas Socrates says that the happy may be born into the “same human race again,” Nietzsche says into the *same human life again*. And as concerns the philosopher who is bent on releasing him/herself from the cycle of rebirth, Nietzsche says that this person *ought to be* the “happy one” who wills not an escape *to* being, but being *as* the eternal repetition of the same becoming.

The dissolution of opposites in Nietzsche’s philosophy creates a space for a revaluation, and what immediately becomes clear is that in the act of revaluing, *by* revaluing, the self, or the conception of the self, is *changed*. Soul is now merely a word for something about the body. Traditionally it has been accepted in more philosophy than one, in more religion than one, that the soul was continually at war with the body, that the two served different masters, that they could not be reconciled in any manner but instead one must ultimately vanquish the other. This duality gave rise to the philosophical quandary concerning the “liquid I” and the “stable I,” and the quandary itself, to match its conception, *took the form of an either/or dilemma*. “The question is always enclosed,” says Derrida. “It never appears immediately as such, but only through the hermetism of a proposition in which the answer has already begun to determine the question” (“Violence and Metaphysics, 80). Or, as Wittgenstein says, “The first step is

the one that altogether escapes notice”; that is, we ask ourselves a philosophical question and immediately set about looking for an answer, with our eyes alert to any and all possible illusions or obstacles which may confront us in our quest; woefully we do not realize that in the instant we asked the question the one and decisive “conjuring trick” had already been played against us, and it was “the very one that we thought quite innocent” (*Philosophical Investigations*, 87). Recognizing the head, then, or the question in as undetermined a state *as is possible* -- thinking *before* our intelligence has been “bewitched by language” (*Philosophical Investigations*, 40) -- this is what Nietzsche is attempting to do in clearing the traditional ground so that he might create his own *nameless* values, or engage in the creative act *of* revaluation. And with regards to the question of the I, what immediately becomes clear in the space of eternal return is that *in this space*, the liquid and the stable become the same thing; or, there is no difference between the liquid and the stable. The closest approximation that ever-changing molecules can have to an unchangingly identifiable self lies in the thought that all things recur. Perhaps the most dire implication of this thought is that past and future become essentially synonymous terms. To fully think the eternal return of the same means to recognize that all remembering is foresight, and that all foresight is remembering. To remember is to look into the future (or perhaps we should call it the after-future, *the future of the future*) at what is surely to be again, *and* to adopt an attitude towards it, to assign it a meaning such that its approach is to be embraced more than shunned or feared. Similarly, then, to look into the future is to remember cloudily what has already happened, essentially, to look into the past (or perhaps we should say one’s “pre-history”). Thus the liquid I *becomes*

the stable I, not only in the sense *in that it is identical with*, but also in the sense that as the “closest approximation” it is befitting that which it adorns. The apparent contradiction between “identity” and “approximation” here is easily resolved by stating that insofar as we speak of an “approximation” we are remaining within the bounds of the thought which recognizes opposites as such (as Nietzsche himself did) while at the same time recognizing the single head from which these opposites hang. And although Heidegger rebukes Nietzsche for thus sitting on the fence, so to speak, it is perhaps the case that this is *entirely necessary*. To use another metaphor, we might imagine Heidegger criticizing Nietzsche for remaining on the tightrope and for *not* falling either to one side or the other, a criticism which is surely odd. In this case, going beyond the fence-metaphor which states the duplicit either/or, we arrive at a notion whereby the either/or itself becomes arbitrary, or abandoned (as to fall to the right or the left off of a tightrope carries with it the same consequence), and the previously unrecognized middle term, that one walks the rope, becomes all-important (and the fact that we are equating the Wittgensteinian religious thinker *qua* tightrope walker with Nietzsche is by no means accidental). Certainly Nietzsche’s image of the tightrope walker at the outset of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is to be called to mind here, but perhaps more important to our argument is the recognition once again of Derrida’s assertion that the temptation must be kept in sight of its chance, and that this is precisely what it means to walk the tightrope. To fall off on either one side or the other would be to seal up the temptation, and along with it its meaning, leading only to yet another metaphysical regression. By walking the tightrope, however (which, by the way, never ends; there is no apotheosis *as* reward),

one remains committed to both the temptation and to its meaning, or to the temptation of meaning, which so long as there is an imperceptibly thin thread beneath us shall remain assured, and so long as we do not fall off on either side of the either/or shall remain open (in the previously alluded to ninth episode of *Ulysses* a slightly drunk Stephen Dedalus attempts to walk this wire between “Scylla” and “Charybdis”). Thinking recurrence (whether it be the return of Nietzsche or the recollection of Socrates is not the point, but only that we are *thinking* it) opens up space *for* thinking, a space in which the final third of this essay will be executed. For the time being, however, there are other ways of thinking recurrence which might be beneficially dwelt upon, or temporarily dwelt within, as to do so considerably opens our desired space even more, and gives us -- *greater freedom of movement*.

Whereas in dealing extensively with Kierkegaard we found ourselves back at Socrates, now, having dealt a bit with Socrates, we find ourselves back at Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard as a thinker of recurrence in the form of repetition is one of the more unexamined philosophical phenomena in the whole of modern philosophy. At best his thought of repetition is scrutinized historically, as indicative of a desire for a “repetition” with Regine Olsen, but as we have seen in the first third of this essay, to deal solely with the historical is entirely insufficient, even detrimental, if not coupled with existential introspection. Existentially, then, or *alertly* (for we are now dealing with those “formless flickerings” with which it is very difficult to become “just contemporary,” or with which we can only become contemporary “insofar as is possible,” which is to say approximately), how does Kierkegaard think repetition?

A popular maxim states that variety is the spice of life. Not so for the *existing* person, though, says Kierkegaard. There the “opposite holds true, and the law is: the same, and yet changed, and yet the same” (Postscript, 286). Connected to this idea of repetition with a difference are the concepts of recollecting and forgetting, which essentially constitute the difference *in* the repetition. One experiences something, forgets it, experiences it “again,” or remembers it, and thereby the experience is registered as the same, yet changed, yet the same. In *Repetition* Kierkegaard calls this sort of thinking “consciousness raised to the second power” (229). For, as has been noted, by thinking the thought of return in any of its various forms, one acquires a greater freedom of movement *in* thinking, insofar as chronology’s reign crumbles and conceptual dualities merge and dissolve, or easily switch places, so that foresight becomes remembrance, remembrance foresight, or so that recollecting and forgetting become the same invisible wire. In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard writes, “When an individual has perfected himself in the art of forgetting and the art of recollecting ... he is then able to play shuttlecock with all existence” (*The Essential Kierkegaard*, 57). And these two arts are really one, i.e., they hang from the same head: “Forgetting and recollecting are identical, and the artistically achieved identity is the Archimedean point with which one lifts the whole world” (58). What does this mean, to play shuttlecock with all existence, and to lift the whole world? The shuttlecock metaphor is perhaps the more brilliant and the easier to explain of the two. It has to do with the above mentioned downfall of chronology’s reign, which dictates life as a steady progress in one direction. Contrary to this notion, the game of shuttlecock involves oscillating back and forth in elliptical, asymmetrical lob; it implies

drift and whimsy more so than inevitability. Mastering the arts of recollection and forgetting, then, allows one not only a wonderful range of movement, but also a certain idleness in that movement, an idleness which is not at all idle, but very active, or perhaps poetic. That is, through this looping confounding of past and future, one sidles poetically, creating meaning which is always necessarily late, or posthumous to the event, though it would indeed be an error to mistake this unpromptness for a laziness on the part of the creator. To become “just contemporary” with existence, or with an event, means not only to continually come up before it, but also to continually come up *after* it, so that one is always creating meaning in the wake of the event, in the unavoidable, infinitesimal delay of its passing (which is another event’s happening), which pause (if we can call it that) we need not sadly lament the existence of as if it forever prevented us from reaching the perch at the end of the wire, but instead we might *affirm* its necessity as our own responsibility in the game of the creation of meaning. To reach a perch of any sort would be to *seal up* meaning; this we cannot do. Meaning must remain open to itself and above all transportable. Hope must be thrown overboard, says Kierkegaard in the same passage quoted above, for only then can one gain control over the two “currents” in which life moves, namely recollecting and forgetting. This is the responsibility, this is the difficulty: to lift the world and play shuttlecock with it requires renunciation of hope, that one put one’s faith not in the possibility that meaning might someday be attained or reached, but in the demand that meaning must forever be created, lest one become an idiot. The art of recollecting and forgetting is the art by which the fluid back and forth world of becoming is sealed with the indelible stamp of meaning (and insofar as **re**collecting and

forgetting are the same, we might designate them with the single term “to reget”, from which of course we are but a letter away from -- *regret*).

“But what is recollected,” writes Kierkegaard in *Stages on Life’s Way*, “cannot be forgotten either” (*The Essential Kierkegaard*, 173). No doubt what is being propounded in this assertion is the same, yet changed, yet the same as what is propounded in *Either/Or*. For Kierkegaard’s various pseudonyms might be looked upon as his own way of playing shuttlecock with all existence, as his way of providing various players so that he might not be forced to engage in the somewhat absurd activity of running back and forth *along with* the shuttlecock. The pseudonyms, then, are various manifestations of his own liquid I, which he has culled out of mercurial form and set down in solid print. Of course, by this reasoning he himself becomes yet such a player in the game, hardly distinguishable from the others, but with regards to this subject we are getting a bit ahead of ourselves, as the question of authorship is reserved for the final portion of this essay. “What is recollected cannot be forgotten.” Does it then follow that what is forgotten cannot be recollected? Not at all. For in order to be recollected something must first have been forgotten. It is only *once* recollected that something cannot be forgotten again, but only “thrown away.” However, “just like Thor’s hammer, it returns, and not only that, like a dove it has a longing for the recollection, yes, like a dove, however often it is sold, that can never belong to anyone else because it always flies home” (173). Once what is forgotten is recollected -- once it is put into play in the game of shuttlecock -- not only does it forever remain eligible, as it were, for play, but it also longs to be bandied back and forth, *to return* each time it is “thrown away.” In this sense, it would seem, our

responsibility in existentially creating meaning is somewhat assisted by the very material we work with. That is, the material of recollection is not an inert residue of the past which we must shape like so much clay, but instead has *a volition of its own* to be shaped, to be banded, to be infused with the meaning which returning, or repetition, allows for. The material, then, is always unprompt in its gravity-resistant descent, but nevertheless desirous of making contact with the racket. “To recollect and to forget are not opposites,” says Kierkegaard. “The art of recollecting is not easy, because in the moment of preparation it can become something different” (173). And to become something different, or to become something else, or merely to desire either of these possibilities, it will be remembered, is *not* to become what one is as a matter of course. The shuttlecock metaphor continues to be particularly apt in describing this complex situation: as the shuttlecock itself takes its time in both its ascent and its descent, the temptation to do something *not* as a matter of course becomes more and more prominent the more impatient one becomes with regards to the idle lope of the shuttlecock. While it is pursuing its course through the air, one is left idle, or “in the moment of preparation.” Through impatience at this unpromptness which is the essence of the creation of meaning, however, one becomes inclined to act rashly, to attempt to do something more or else than can be done as a matter of course. The difficulty, says Kierkegaard, lies in the resistance of this temptation, in the ability to *let and allow* things to develop as a matter of course, in the strenuous task of forever keeping the temptation in sight of its chance while yet refusing to grant it determinate standing. Strict observance of the aspect of unpunctuality in the creation of meaning constitutes our eternal responsibility; that every

story is told “after the fact” is not a problem, but an existential obligation.

“When ideality and reality touch each other,” writes Kierkegaard in *Johannes Climacus*, “then repetition occurs” (*The Essential Kierkegaard*, 137). Or, when being and becoming collide, when they approximate each other *insofar as is possible*, then there is repetition, then there is the same, and yet changed, and yet the same, then there is the possibility for existential meaning. *But in what medium* do these two opposites collide, asks Kierkegaard: “In time? That is indeed an impossibility. In eternity? That is indeed an impossibility. In what, then? In consciousness -- there is the contradiction” (137). For if the collision occurred in consciousness it would be a question of recollection, but “recollection involves the same contradiction” insofar as it is neither ideality nor reality, but both an ideality and a reality that has been, which is a “double contradiction, for ideality, according to its concept, has been, and the same holds true of reality according to *its* concept” (137). The introductions of such contradictions and double contradictions (which Kierkegaard is fond of introducing) reduce the progress of our thinking to frustration with itself, so that we are in the end unable to account for this odd collision and its locale just as the Unnamable is unable to account for the collision between Mercier and Camier and its locale.

The contradiction of repetition, however, according to Kierkegaard, is perhaps to be embraced, or at least plainly acknowledged, in a manner similar to that in which we simply have to put up with the specific aerodynamic nature of the shuttlecock. In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard asserts that “repetition is the interest of metaphysics, and also the interest upon which metaphysics comes to grief” (149). And on the first page of the

same book, he says that “modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition” (131). Certainly in writing this prophecy Kierkegaard most likely could not have imagined the exact sense in which Nietzsche would fulfill it, and nor could he have imagined how Heidegger would say of Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal return that it was the idea upon which metaphysics was ultimately speared. From these words in *Repetition*, however, it seems likely he must have foresaw all of this at least to *some* extent.

The thought of repetition, of recurrence, of return, of recollecting, is the thought upon which *metaphysics comes to grief*; which is to say, it is a riddle that cannot be answered *by* metaphysics, because it is the riddle *left over* after the riddles of metaphysics have been dissolved. “Nietzsche,” writes Heidegger, “knew that his ‘most abysmal thought’ remains a riddle. All the less reason for us to imagine that we can solve the riddle. The obscurity of this last thought of Western metaphysics *dare not tempt us* to circumvent it by some sort of subterfuge” (*Nietzsche II*, 232, my italics). It appears by this account, then, that in addition to being the thought upon which metaphysics runs aground, the thought of return is also the last thought *of* metaphysics insofar as Nietzsche “had to think it in this way” (233) presumably in order to relate it *to* metaphysics. Nevertheless, says Heidegger, “This most abysmal thought conceals something unthought, something which *at the same time* remains a sealed door to metaphysical thinking” (233). Confronted by such an “obscurity,” we must *dare not let ourselves be tempted* by “some sort of subterfuge,” some deft maneuver which would allow us to duck through the single and double contradictions. Assuredly, we must keep the temptation in sight of its chance precisely in order to think the obscurity itself, but we must never

succumb to the temptation lest we find ourselves cast back out onto the either/or sea of metaphysics. Still, it must be noted, to exist so precariously upon such a thread consistently might well be impossible, and we might in effect be condemned to continually succumb to the temptation. But this needn't be a damnation as such, not if we recognize the difference in ourselves between, on the one hand, attempting the "subterfuge" of pressing for an answer, and on the other, safeguarding the question, or riddle, as such, through open thinking. Heidegger himself is aware that the temptation may be too strong to resist persistently, and he seems himself to have succumbed to it more than once and in more than one way. He therefore elucidates what he considers to be "at bottom" the only *two* "routes of escape" from the obscurity (232). First, we might regard the thought of return as "a kind of 'mysticism' that our thinking should not bother to confront," and second, we might maintain "that this thought is as old as the hills, that it boils down to the long-familiar cyclical notion of cosmic occurrence" (232). Temptations indeed! Heidegger tackles the second one first, and says condemningly that it, "like all information of that sort, tells us absolutely nothing" (232). By information of *that sort*, I assume he means historical information, in which case to situate the thought of return amid the countless other historical objects in the wake of the open car is to do it a disservice, as it is such an *ahistorical* thought, the very thought, in fact, which was to get us *out* of this way of looking at things, always backwards, always chronologically. Undoubtedly, to look at the thought of return in this manner does enable us to understand it historically, but this is not our goal at all in thinking the thought of return; we do not wish to understand it thus, but to think it *openly and existentially*, for which task we

cannot have a decisive recourse to the historical viewpoint, as it generally tends to seal up more than it opens. “What good is it,” asks Heidegger, “if someone determines with respect to a particular thought that it can be found, for example, ‘already’ in Leibniz or even ‘already’ in Plato?” (232). For the goal is to become “just contemporary” with the thought, not historically cognizant of it. In this respect, Ned Lukacher’s book *Time Fetishes: The Secret History of Eternal Recurrence*, while no doubt of great value insofar as it is a historical study, and insofar as it seeks to uncover the *historical* suppression of this thought, fails to hit the mark of *thinking* the thought itself. Lukacher expounds exquisitely on how others have thought, or attempted to think, this thought, or on how they failed, all in the face of its obscurity, and he even manages to elucidate in a very edifying way just what this obscurity consists of (the *aporia* of time, he calls it). Yet for the accuracy of his research and the clarity of his prose, his study remains an historical one, and as such is an incomplete account of this thought insofar as he only touches on its “abysmalness” historically, and never existentially. It remains the work of the poet, the *riddler*, or perhaps the author, to deal with this latter subject, to present it without necessarily succumbing to the temptation to expound it, and this may well be wherein lies the particular genius of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, who were in the full sense of both words both artists and philosophers, both authors and historians, both poets and scholars. They toed the line perhaps better than all others. “What makes Nietzsche so difficult to grasp,” writes Lukacher, “is his remarkable tolerance for an irreducibly antinomical experience of the world, which makes him at once incredibly cautious and incredibly daring” (117). It should come as no surprise that this description of Nietzsche

makes him sound very much like the tightrope walker who is, of course, both “incredibly cautious and incredibly daring.” To view the thought of return *merely* historically is to fall off on one side of the wire; to view it *merely* mystically is to fall off on the other (appropriately, Heidegger has fashioned the manners of “escape” after the old either/or design). In dealing with this other alternative, “according to which Nietzsche’s thought of eternal recurrence of the same is a mystic phantasmagoria,” Heidegger says that “a look at the present age might well teach us a different lesson -- presupposing of course that thinking is called upon to bring to light the essence of technology” (233). That is, the fact that the “birth” of Nietzsche’s thought is roughly contemporary with the “birth” of modern technology might lead us instead to assert that his thought of the eternal recurrence of the same is, rather, a *mechanical* phantasmagoria. But this, says Heidegger, would be equally as foolish as labeling it mystical, for both the mystical *and* the mechanical are but “offshoots” *of* the eternal recurrence of the same (233); that is, the mystical viewpoint which attempts to explain things from the point of view of mysticism is only one manifestation of being-there, and that therefore an attempt by it to account on its own terms for the openness from whence it *presenced* would necessarily *fall* quite short of the mark. And so with the mechanical viewpoint which explains things from the point of view of mechanism: the liquid *differance* from out of which this viewpoint is but one particular solid identity cannot be accounted for *by* this singular manifestation, as it is incapable of accounting for anything in any but its own terms (i.e., its method of formulation determines the answer without ever having asked what could rightfully be called a *question*). In thinking the return of the same one must possess not only a

“remarkable tolerance for irreducible antinomies,” as well as for complexities which are greater than antinomies, but also a steadfast resoluteness in the face of all temptations which promise to re-solve rather than dis-solve said complexities.

“Can you keep track of my tenses?” asks Herman Mussert in *The Following Story*. Beneath Kierkegaard’s plain formulation of temporality and understanding which states that we either look backwards or forwards or maybe perhaps both, there lurks a veritably obscuring confusion of tenses, an “irreducible antinomy” of our experience of the world (irreducible because not really an antinomy to begin with), which we have been seeking to illuminate from the outset of this paper. Earlier we looked briefly at three works of literature in an attempt to gain an idea of how this complexity has been variously presented in the novel genre. Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, and Nooteboom’s *The Following Story* were all given brief attention. For purposes of space, we shall spare further examinations of Joyce and Beckett (whose major works, it is both well known and well documented, center largely around issues of memory and recurrence) in the hopes of creating enough room for a perhaps not entirely unedifying analysis of *The Following Story* and its existential presentation of the subject of return.

Just as Nooteboom does not present the either/or of the liquid versus the stable “I” in quite the same way as do, say, Joyce and Beckett, neither does he present the idea of return, or repetition, in quite the same way as do Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and others. That is to say, *The Following Story* is by no means to be looked at as a *novelization* of Nietzsche’s “most abysmal thought,” or of any other “formulation” of this particular thought. The book thinks that thought in its own way, which is precisely the thing to be

stressed.

“There’s nothing like a full-blown *deja-vu*,” says Herman Mussert (19), who wakes up one morning in Lisbon (after having gone to sleep in Amsterdam) in a hotel room where he had a love affair with a married woman twenty years ago. At the outset he identifies himself with the man who went to sleep in Amsterdam and looks upon himself in Lisbon as a stranger, as an extraordinary phenomenon in need of some sort of explanation. Throughout the novel, however, he shifts his focus of identity so that by the “completion” of the story he looks upon himself in Amsterdam as a stranger and acknowledges that he is *who and where* he is, in Lisbon first, and then on a ship destined for the Amazon. In the final passage of the first half of the book this transition is made apparent: “I could see that the man in Amsterdam wanted to wake up, he was thrashing about, his right hand groping for his glasses, but it was not he who switched on the light; it was me, here in Lisbon” (60). The man in Amsterdam is dying, but Herman is having difficulty at first accepting his own death. He clings, therefore, to *this man*, and looks upon *himself* (his spirit?) as something alien. As he retraces the scene of and memories associated with the most significant event of his life, however, he slowly detaches his grip of association with the man in Amsterdam, and as he does so he becomes lighter and lighter, much like Dante ascending the various spheres of the stars, until finally he is deep within the Acheron-like Amazon and prepared to tell -- *the following story*, at which point the book, much like *Finnegans Wake*, simply starts all over again. Not only should the question of the “I,” which we examined earlier, be apparent in this brief synopsis, but also the question of repetition, which forms the basis of the novel as Herman *retraces* the

events which as it were sit in the throne of his memory. “Something about infinity,” he says, “about how an immeasurable space of memories can be stored in the most minute time span” (115). From this musing we gather that the entire length of the book occupies perhaps only a few seconds in “real-time,” but that “real-time” is certainly not the only time (a subject which comes up in various points throughout the book). The *problem* here, is that we are told this on the last page of the book, “after the fact” so to speak, so that the act of understanding the book essentially becomes the act of *recollecting* it in a literal sense, which, of course, means reading it *again*. And upon doing so, we are greeted with this remark on the second page: “From my years spent as a teacher I know one has to repeat everything twice over to ensure at least the possibility of creating some order out of what appears to be chaos” (4). Interesting to note here is that the order is not latent, but *created*, just as the meaning of an event or experience is not latent, but created once that event or experience has been repeated “twice over” and then some, in memory.

Aboard Charon’s ferry with a small company of fellow travelers, a ship crossing the Atlantic and bound for the Amazon (the blurring of distinctions between the “real” and the “mythical” is another tact used succinctly by Nooteboom throughout the novel), Herman begins to put things together for himself, to create his own order out of what appeared to be the chaos of his life. His recollections are interrupted and informed by encounters with one or several of the other passengers on the boat. At one point Peter Harris, a man who has seen much of the world, says to Herman as they both recognize the mud from the Amazon, “I have always admired the Portuguese for this, you depart from Belem, you arrive in Belem. There’s something cyclical about it, something of

eternal recurrence” (98). Harris is, of course, referring to Belem, Portugal, and Belem, Brazil, but the reference is unmistakably significant, as the end of the novel will, in similar fashion, drop us off at its beginning, and its beginning likewise at its end. Earlier on in the voyage, when the ship is traversing the Atlantic, Herman ponders, “The water of the ocean looked black; it reeled, tossed, sailed away into itself, furling and unfurling, glistening sheets of liquid metal collapsing soundlessly, merging, each wave plowing a furrow for the next to fold into, the inexorable, perpetual change into perpetually the same” (66). This passage, like many others in the book, seems to be saying something *about the book itself*. And the description of the water as a “liquid metal” is no doubt intended to refer to the debate between Herman and Maria Zeinstra over the seeming liquidness of the “I” in contrast to its metal-like stability. The issue of repetition is very carefully prominent in this passage, “carefully” insofar as it, as a subject, is delicately trodden upon. Mussert, as a lifelong student and translator of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, knows that all repetitions are different, are in fact *metamorphoses into the same*, and that one must watch one’s language when attempting to speak of such things. The description of the waves of the ocean provides a metaphorical vehicle for talking about what would only involve one in single and double contradictions were one to attempt a literal description (or metaphysical resolution) of it; namely, “the perpetual change into perpetually the same.” Likewise, the irony of departing from Belem and arriving in Belem implies a similar conception of how things remain the same, yet changed, yet the same. And perhaps most importantly of all, the notion of repetition refers to Herman’s memories, and how in repeating them, in recollecting them, they remain ineluctably

unalterable, and yet unmistakably different, for he is older, dying. His final, vivid recollections of the events which transpired in Lisbon and the events in Amsterdam which were associated with them are his final memories -- period. But what does this mean, to speak of a *final memory*, for memory is generally regarded as that which kicks in *after* the finality of an event is sealed? *After* the event has transpired, *that* is when memory goes to work, shaping, sculpting, forming. So what would a *final memory* be, but a *first beginning*? "Memory," thinks Herman, "postponement of metamorphosis" (45). The art of memory then, the art of forgetting, is an art which, similar to all other arts, designates form, gives form, *allows form to arise*. The final memory is the "final" note in the score which *precedes* the *capo* which instructs the player to *proceed back* to the beginning and start over. The final memory is the initiation of the metamorphosis which carries *all that form* back into what Mircea Eliade in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* calls the primordial chaos, from which, of course, the possibility of form arises.

"Can you keep track of my tenses?" asks Herman Mussert, and goes on to say, "They are all past tenses" (57). *The story is told after the fact*. While recollecting his *final* lecture as a teacher, on the *Phaedo* dialogue (which is the final dialogue in which Socrates participates and in which he exhibits *his* final memories, which are of the future), Herman Mussert notes concerning both the students surrounding Socrates and the students surrounding *him*,

Of course they wanted to believe that the uncouth, rough-hewn form before them contained a royal, invisible, immortal substance which was no substance, something which, once that strange septuagenarian body finally lay supine, grotesquely inanimate, would be liberated at last from all that obstructs pure

reason, free from desire, which would travel, depart the world, and yet remain or return -- the impossible (86).

Seeing as this is exactly what happens to Herman throughout the novel, that he departs from himself and yet remains, yet returns, the book itself might very well be read as an affirmation of this very “impossibility,” that being and becoming, or soul and body, can be *at-oned*; that these things might approximate one another or become just contemporary with each other to the point at which they can no longer be distinguished *from* each other, and yet remain “apparently” so; that the other is not as alien as it is made out to be, but is instead of the same nature as ourselves. And this impossibility, while no doubt difficult to grasp, as grasping grasps only after the possible, is the same impossibility which forms not only the content of the novel *but also the very task of the author*. The author as one who tells stories after the fact is put in the problematic position of *telling*, which designates what has transpired while yet constantly moving forward. Writing, or authorship, it seems, is a brake which does not work. The application of writing is the application of a brake which fails to slow considerably, if at all, the writer’s own momentum in time. As an author, or even as a scribe (as Barthes will later call it), one is never able to become just contemporary with the story, and yet, as an author, as a scribe, this is precisely one’s task. The story is always *following*, coming after the fact, and, once written, once told, threatens to recede into both the historical and the existential past, to be consigned amongst things rendered final, which only memory can play upon. How to keep the story just contemporary with existence becomes the question, and repetition becomes the answer; that the book overflows and repeats itself is the best sort

of failure it can have, so that Beckett, in his never-ending attempt to “fail better,” not only strived to attain repetition *within* his novels and plays, but also wrote in such a way that each novel and play repeated its predecessors.

Ned Lukacher’s book on eternal recurrence is part of a series called “Post-Contemporary Interventions,” and it seems that this word, “post-contemporary,” might well be used to describe those works in philosophy, literature, etc. which effectively are a surplus unto themselves and so repeat endlessly, perpetually *coming after themselves*. In this way the “problem” with every story, that it is told “after the fact,” is overcome *insofar as it can be*, and the impossibility of the author is affirmed rather than passed over, is maintained despite the temptation to fall to one side or the other. The “difference between time and eternity,” writes Lukacher, is “the trace which leaves no trace,” is what is always forgotten even when one remembers it (141). The impossibility of the author is to *write this down*.

“The teller of a story without end,” says Herman Mussert, “is a poor storyteller” (106). And yet the teller of a story *with* an end is perhaps even worse, so Herman Mussert tells a story which both ends and never ends, and it is the story of his own life, the recollection of “all the sites of my brief holy life, all the stations where the past had a face” (55), where what was sought *again* would only be recognized when found. This insertion of the word “again” is the Socratic solution to the paradox of how one seeks for that which one does not know, and it is also the solution to the paradox of how one *writes* what has already happened.

## CHAPTER 3

## THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE AUTHOR

From the point of view of an author, Faulkner considered that he had failed in writing *The Sound and the Fury*. From the point of view of an author regarding his work as an author, Kierkegaard thought he had succeeded. And yet Faulkner's failure was perhaps his greatest success, and Kierkegaard's success perhaps his standout failure. It has been the purpose of this essay up until now to open up a space for thinking this thought. Sartre's conception of Faulkner's characters as passengers in an open car who can focus only on what's behind them proved all too simplistic, as it did not account for the "confusion of tenses" which make-up temporality and existence, which not only Faulkner's characters but also his writing account for amply, especially in his greatest novel. Kierkegaard's initial statement which asserted that we must live forwards while understanding backwards also proved to be somewhat simplistic-sounding on the surface, and it was not until we had dissolved certain oppositions and cleared a space for thinking repetition that we were able to grasp what lies beneath that statement, namely the approximation of becoming to being and their simultaneity of presence in the existing individual, a simultaneity which makes it impossible to succeed as an author without failing, and impossible to fail as an author without succeeding.

In an essay entitled "Kierkegaard's Last Pseudonym" Michael Sexson maintains that Kierkegaard's authorship is never finally resolved or finalized by Kierkegaard himself, but rather that the "second most melancholy Dane's" (34) own efforts to clarify

his use of various pseudonyms are themselves pseudonymous efforts which join in the dance instead of bringing it to a close. Kierkegaard's last pseudonym, then, is Søren Kierkegaard. Sexson notes that in one journal entry Kierkegaard says explicitly, "I am a pseudonym'," and that such an admission ultimately renders Kierkegaard "as nothing" (39). That is, Kierkegaard's failure as an author lies in the fact that he cannot help being pseudonymous *as* an author, that everything he writes is written by a no-longer-him and therefore "false" him, despite even his efforts to explain his authorship otherwise, as the duplicit deception of an always-him who is merely making up the other-hims in order to trick people into believing what the all-him wants them to believe for themselves. The trouble with this "all-him" is that it becomes not that which "explains" the pseudonyms, but yet another pseudonym, while Kierkegaard himself goes on becoming, living forwards, never becoming *all* insofar as he is always doing something more than merely understanding everything backwards. What hinders him from succeeding as an author and thereby *being who he is* is that he is always doing something *more than all* and thereby *being less*, or *becoming who he is*. "Such an emptying, though," writes Sexson, "is really a filling, such a 'kenosis' is really a 'plerosis,' such a loss really a gain, and such a death really a birth" (40). Also, such a failure is really a success, really *the* success which the author strives for. "Becoming a fiction," Kierkegaard "became real" (40). And it is not out of line to point out that according to Kierkegaard, to *be* real is to become a fiction. Anyone who makes such a claim (that of being real, or of being an author *as such*) is to be regarded with great caution, and we are to wonder as Kierkegaard did at how "strange" it is "that such enigmatic beings are turning up" (Postscript, 306). In *The Point of View for*

*My Work as an Author*, the very piece in which Kierkegaard attempts to solidify himself into the sort of all-being he is so fond of despising, he writes that “in these days and for a long time now we have utterly lost the idea that to be an author is and ought to be a work and therefore a personal existing (*The Essential Kierkegaard*, 469). By contrast to the supposed purpose of this “strange document” (Sexson, 35), Kierkegaard here seems to be saying, *within* that document, that the author ought to always also be existing, which in some manner renders him less than an author, and in some manner more. He goes on in the same paragraph to state that we ought to go back to antiquity to learn “what it means to be an individual human being, no more and no less, which also an author certainly is, no more and no less” (469). What we ought to learn from antiquity is perhaps best summed up by this remark from the *Postscript*: “In Greece a thinker was not a stunted existing person who produced works of art, but he himself was an existing work of art” (303). In contrast to “the existing work of art,” then, Kierkegaard posits the modern notion of the “stunted existing person who produce[s] works of art,” i.e., the author, and we might easily replace the word “stunted” with the word “being.” The idea of the being-existing person, the “I-I,” is the very notion which Kierkegaard, as the initiator of the concept of the Moment, is seeking in all his works to expose as fictitious. We are admixtures of being *and* becoming, of the infinite *and* the temporal; this is precisely what it means to be existing in the first place. The question now becomes, then, why did Kierkegaard attempt to establish himself as a stunted author by bringing his entire authorship to a premature close in *The Point of View*? That he refers to himself at one time in his journals *as* a pseudonym shows us that this was not at all what he was attempting in that short work,

but rather that he was being more duplicitous than ever, in an effort to further *de*-solidify himself by attempting to do something which seems so contrary to his entire thinking enterprise, namely, to solidify himself. What better way to remain *un*-stunted than to continually *become*, and what better way to *become after death* than to be continually *discussed*? Why does Kierkegaard write this odd memoir? we ask, and thereby allow him to continue what Sexson calls his “infamous parade” (34), his “dance” (40).

Kierkegaard’s work as an author was a failure because he did not succeed in becoming an author *per se*, but remained always an existing individual *also*, no more and no less. This failure, though, is the triumph of his entire philosophy, his greatest success as an existentialist, insofar as each successive failure essentially *succeeds* over its predecessors, in which case *The Point of View* is Kierkegaard’s final failure in a way similar to Socrates’ final memory, i.e., in that it takes us all the way back to the beginning where we must start again. What the final failure accomplishes is a complete success over all previous failures, and in so doing it casts said predecessors in such a light that it becomes imperative for them to repeat themselves, to continue dancing. *The Point of View* is the capstone on Kierkegaard’s authorship, not its period. The name “Søren Kierkegaard” is not only his last pseudonym, but also his first.

Walter Lowrie, in his *Short Life of Kierkegaard*, relates the following remark of the second most melancholy Dane: “If it should occur to anyone to quote a particular saying from these works, he would do me the favor to cite the name of the pseudonymous author in question” (154). Up until now we have not done Kierkegaard this favor, merely in order to avoid confusion. From now on, however, we shall attempt

to make up for this lack of respect by granting this favor in the remaining pages. Why would Kierkegaard insist on this, though, that we always cite the pseudonyms and never himself? The fairly obvious answer, relying on the account of the author of *The Point of View*, would be because “he” does not wish himself to be associated with the aesthetic works, but only with the religious works. This “he,” though, the author of the final failure, as Michael Sexson points out, is not necessarily to be trusted just because he *seems* to be omniscient with regards to the entire authorship. He has the appearance of being entirely stable and still and yet for all that may be the best dancer on the floor, or at least the most subtle. If this is indeed the case, then asking us to do the favor of always quoting the pseudonyms might have a purpose other than the commonly accepted one. Kierkegaard might, in fact, be attempting to tell us that *all authors are pseudonyms*, that the author *as such* is an impossibility, that what really ought to be paid attention to is one’s own personal existing. To give credit to the pseudonyms is to mock the spirit of the system *as well as* the spirit of its author, who is presumably as complete *as* his system, which presumption is, of course, ridiculous. Kierkegaard does not want us to refer exclusively to *him* because to do so would be to acknowledge him as some sort of unproblematic entity, the author, which acknowledgment would grate unendingly upon the essential message of his philosophy, that existence *is* problematic. This sort of inconsistency cannot be allowed, therefore pseudonyms. That this was in fact Kierkegaard’s intention in making the above-mentioned request, and in writing *The Point of View*, can be gleaned from certain passages in that work. “This is how I *now* understand the whole,” he writes. “From the beginning I could not quite see what has

indeed also been my own development” (*The Essential Kierkegaard*, 454). By use of the word “now” here Kierkegaard is remaining true to his statement that while life can only be understood backwards, it must be lived forwards. In *The Point of View* Kierkegaard is understanding the entirety of his work backwards, but it is an entirety which *remains open*, incomplete, because this is how he is understanding it “now,” while he is still living forwards. The shuttlecock of his authorship has finally completed its journey over the net to the point where he can make a judgment on it, but that judgment is a *thwack!* which sends it hurtling directly back into space, back into the undecidability which allows the judgment to be made in the first place. Kierkegaard *is* the shuttlecock. The “upbuilding author” of *The Point of View* shares the field with the rest of the parade.

“My dear reader,” says Constantin Constantius in *Repetition*, you will now understand that the interest focuses on the young man, whereas I am a vanishing person, just like a midwife in relation to the child she has delivered” (230). The “vanishing person” in question here is the “author” of the account, the pseudonym relating the story. Kierkegaard the author was also such a vanishing person, such a fantastical being, one who like the Joycean artist recedes from his creation leaving only a trace of his signature behind, and one who like that infamous midwife Socrates says the product takes precedence over its deliverer. The impossibility of the author is *to stay*, to remain with the creation. Instead, the author is always already vanishing with each additional word penned. The irony of *The Point of View* is that its author is attempting to account for himself and his work *while writing*, while *adding to* both the body of himself and his body of literature. It is as if he were counting birds on a wire and relating to us how many were

on the wire definitively, when every so often a new bird arrives. The “vanishing person” of Constantin Constantius is not of the same ilk as those historical objects which vanish from our view as they recede into the distance whilst the open carriage moves on. Rather, he is somewhat the opposite, insofar as he is *that which vanishes from the historical*; insofar as he is the one in the carriage who, from the perspective of the historical, is always himself receding. His impossibility is that he can never get off of the carriage from behind and take definitive stock of what surrounds him, and nor can he run ahead of the carriage in an attempt to become something more and else. He must become what he is as a matter of course, and what he is, *qua* author, is a “vanishing person,” a specter, a failed attempt at materialization, a fabricator of fantastic stories and himself a fabrication.

At this point we may not envy the author’s position so much, and we may be thankful that we are simple existing persons who simply exist and therefore don’t have anything of this nature to worry about. But no one, says Kierkegaard, simply exists. What if, asks Johannes Climacus, “a Pegasus and an old nag were hitched to a carriage” and the man on the carriage told, “Now drive” (*Postscript*, 311)? Obviously, the carriage which Climacus here speaks of is somewhat analogous to the carriage Sartre describes, only instead of being mere passengers in the carriage who can only look out of its rear end, we are now told, “Drive.” “This,” says Climacus

“is what existing is like if one is to be conscious of it. Eternity is infinitely quick like that winged steed, temporality is an old nag, and the existing person is the driver, that is, if existing is not to be what people usually call existing, because then the existing person is no driver but a drunken peasant who lies in the wagon and sleeps and lets the horses shift for themselves. Of course, he drives also, he is also a driver and likewise there perhaps are many who -- also exist.

The barb of this metaphor is that in the modern age existence has become something secondary, something one does in addition to adding up the month's bills or in addition to getting drunk and passing out -- something one does *also*. That is, one takes the reins from time to time, or perhaps has a very loose finger wrapped around them continuously, but for the most part one's attention is centered elsewhere, on idle things and idle chat. Existence becomes something one does *merely*, and, in many cases, the less one has to do this, the better. If our response to the plight of the author is an expression of thankfulness insofar as we don't have to do anything like *this* but can simply get on rolling around in the back of the wagon, without heed or attentiveness, then we do ourselves a disservice as existing beings. We are all, says Kierkegaard, drivers; we are all capable of grabbing the reins and *controlling* these two steeds, as if it were a matter of having enough control to steer perfectly the rudder of a small craft. To occupy such a position, however, one must become a vanishing person, one must occupy that slim threshold, that invisible wire, on which one is neither attempting to become what one would be, nor resigning oneself to what one was, but instead attempting to become what one is. And this means that one neither merely hopes, nor merely recollects, but instead *wills repetition*. The one who steers in this manner is one who is *constantly* becoming, *constantly* vanishing, in a name, Constantin Constantius. And one does not have to become an author in order to achieve this feat, but might become any number of things, including, not surprisingly, a reader.

The letter which Constantin Constantius writes at the end of *Repetition* is delivered in an envelope addressed to “Mr. X, Esq., the real reader of this book” (223). The contrast is evident: how can one “Mr. X” be the “real” reader of this book (it being assumed, of course, that by “X” an unknown variable is implied)? And similarly, how can Constantin Constantius, an apparition, be its real writer? How can the “apparent” world copy, as it were, the “real” world? What is this strange manner of *mimesis* which confounds and confuses all distinctions among tenses, identities, etc.? “*My dear reader!*,” begins Constantin’s letter, “Forgive me for addressing you so familiarly, but we are, after all, *unter uns* [by ourselves]. Although you are indeed fictional, you are by no means a plurality to me but only one, and therefore we are just you and I” (225). Who, then, is this “fictional” reader, this “one”? The most plausible historical answer is, without doubt, Regine Olsen, but also without doubt, Kierkegaard is up to much more than mere historical allusion here. *It is absurd*, this situation of “just you and I” which consists of one out of a host of pseudonyms *who himself has his own pseudonyms* and one who is identifiable only as “Mr. X” and might be one or one thousand in actual number, if one can even speak of numbers here. How can this fabrication possibly be boiled down to a “just you and I”? We are spiraling back into single and double contradictions, and are about to run aground once again on the concept of repetition. Mr. X is, no doubt, a *vanished* person, the *good* reader of whom there are not many left. “Who in our day,” asks Constantius in his letter, “thinks of wasting any time on the curious idea that it is an art to be a good reader, not to mention spending time to become that?” (225). Who indeed, but the *reliable* reader, who like the reliable author is one who vanishes, or fails to

materialize, and as such is *unreliable* in the sense that one cannot *lean* on him, identifiable only through the apparition of a name?

The situation here with regards to Kierkegaard bears a striking resemblance to the situation of the Unnamable, as briefly touched upon earlier in this essay. The Unnamable, himself both “plural” and “one” like the fictitious “real” reader of *Repetition*, says to himself (so to speak), “To tell the truth I believe they are all here, at least from Murphy on, I believe we are all here, but so far I have only seen Malone” (293). The Unnamable says this in his “room,” speaking of his pseudonyms, the “infamous parade” from Murphy on, consisting of, among others, Watt, Mercier & Camier, Molloy, Malone, MacMann, Mahood, and of course, Worm. And it should not be difficult, at this point, to imagine Kierkegaard in *his* room, saying to *himself*, “They are all here: Constantin Constantius, Frater Taciturnus, Hilarius Bookbinder, Victor Eremita, Johannes Climacus,” etc., the ludicrous plurality which is also the one, the unnamable, named Kierkegaard.

Faulkner failed in writing *The Sound and the Fury*. Strangely enough, the only novel which he failed at is hailed to this day as perhaps his greatest success. How can we explain this? “I wrote the Benjy part first,” said Faulkner. “That wasn’t good enough so I wrote the Quentin part. That still wasn’t good enough. I let Jason try it. That still wasn’t enough. I let Faulkner try it and that still wasn’t enough, and so about twenty years afterward I wrote an appendix still trying to make that book what -- match the dream” (*TSATF*, 237). The striking feature of this explanation is its progression: first, Faulkner “writes” the Benjy and Quentin parts, then he “lets” Jason try it (as if he was a real person), and then he “lets” himself try it (as if he were of the same nature as the three

Compson brothers, i.e., fictional). These four men are attempting to play a game of shuttlecock, and they are not having a lot of success. None of them can ever quite make the right kind of contact, and this bothers Faulkner enough that he still has not given up twenty years later when he writes the appendix in one last futile effort to make the book “match the dream,” which, obviously, it can never do. Or rather, the only way the novel can ever match the dream is by continually failing to match the dream, which it does perhaps better than most modern novels. Faulkner succeeds so brilliantly because he fails not once but *four* times in the same book, which is to say that the book is comprised of four pseudonyms all attempting in their insubstantiality to *grasp* Caddy Compson in a fashion similar to that in which Dante attempts but fails three times to embrace the shade of Casella.

“I wrote Quentin’s and Jason’s sections, trying to clarify Benjy’s. But I saw that I was merely temporising; that I should have to get completely out of the book” (*TSATF*, 231). What is this *mere* temporising of which Faulkner speaks? Based on what has been advanced in this essay, “to temporise” as a writer is nothing *mere* at all, but the key to a representation of existence which exceeds an all-too-simplistic view of the matter in frontwards and backwards terms. That is, “temporising” is the process whereby one overflows the cup of clear and precise formulation and thereby creates a confusion of tenses such that, from the viewpoint of formal clarity and precision, one has apparently failed to set down in proper order the material one set out to expound from the start. But that is just the thing about *The Sound and the Fury*: Faulkner had very little idea concerning what he was setting out “to expound” when he began work on the novel. In an

introduction to the book written in 1933, Faulkner wrote, “When I began it I had no plan at all. I wasn’t even writing a book” (*TSATF*, 227). And yet for this remarkable fact the book *does* possess extraordinary clarity and precision, such that the reader is given the bare minimum of information necessary for piecing together the events of the novel, and such that if any one of these pieces were removed the entire book might fall into incomprehensibility. *How did Faulkner do this?* How did he navigate this passage between Scylla and Charybdis? How did he toe this wire? *By merely temporising*, which is to say, by confining his view in the open carriage to neither one direction nor the other. In fact, he does not even manage to look one way *and then another*, in rapid succession, as if becoming “just contemporary with existence” was only a question of turning your head every so often, now to the future, now to the past. No, Faulkner *merely temporises* with Benjy, Quentin and Jason, *merely occupies* that sliver of a threshold of unintelligibility and undecidability *between* all tenses, and in such a way that we as readers are *just barely* able to make sense of it, thanks to a few well-placed clues. And as to the question of getting “completely out of the book,” which Faulkner realized he would have to do in order to complete it, we might assert quite matter-of-factly that this is frankly impossible. By “letting Faulkner” try his hand at it, Faulkner does not get away from “temporising” at all, but instead only attempts to disguise it as it has so often previously been disguised, namely in the form of an atemporal omniscient narrator. That is, Faulkner tried to trick himself into thinking that *this* might work, which it didn’t, which he knew. It turns out that even the author is temporal, is temporised, that even the author’s name, be it Kierkegaard or Faulkner, is a pseudonym, no less a fiction than their

own creations. Faulkner's "dream" of completion, then, is no more attainable, no more capable of being "matched" by an act of literature, than is Quentin's dream of an eternity in which he and his sister will be forever locked attainable by an act of suicide.

In the introduction to the novel Faulkner writes, "One day I seemed to shut a door between me and all publishers' addresses and book lists. I said to myself, Now I can write. Now I can make myself a vase like that which the old Roman kept at his bedside and wore the rim slowly away with kissing it" (*TSATF*, 227). The vase, in Faulkner's case, was Caddy Compson, the "beautiful and tragic little girl" (*TSATF*, 228) who would be the only thing in all of literature which was capable of *moving* Faulkner. And yet Faulkner does not write her as he writes Benjy, Quentin and Jason, or as Joyce writes Molly Bloom. Instead, he shows her only through the lenses of the three brothers, and then through his own, and fails each time at telling her story thus. The secret to Caddy, says Faulkner, is the scene at the pear tree, when Caddy as a little girl climbs high up in the tree while her brothers remain below. She is trying to see into a window where her grandmother's corpse lies, and meanwhile her brothers stare up at her drawers, muddled from an incident at the branch. Speaking again of the Roman wearing away the rim of his vase with kisses, Faulkner writes, "It's fine to think that you will leave something behind you when you die, but it's better to have made something you can die with. Much better the muddy bottom of a little doomed girl climbing a blooming pear tree in April to look in the window at the funeral" (*TSATF*, 232). Caddy, then, is the *beautiful and tragic little girl*, the *doomed little girl*, the creation which Faulkner wears away with light kisses, kisses light enough that she ought to last an eternity, like the rocks against which waters

lap. To have written Caddy would have been to have treated her too roughly; it would have rendered her public property on top of the fact that it would have been anything but light treatment on the part of Faulkner himself (if we can judge from the other chapters). Therefore, as the Wittgensteinian maxim asserts, since Caddy Compson cannot be *said*, she must then be *shown*, and shown in such a way that she cannot be grasped, but only glimpsed, only kissed, as it were. Caddy Compson is the temptation which Faulkner keeps in sight of its chance, a process of erosion which, far from being a process of slow annihilation, continually cuts deeper into the *matter*, a river-wire which through questioning opens up ground.

Minrose C. Gwyn, in an essay entitled "Hearing Caddy's Voice," speaks of Caddy Compson as a *space* in the novel, an invisible mass which the three brothers and Faulkner himself revolve around inevitably, like the Roman's kisses coating the rim of the vase. We should be wary, though, cautions Gwyn, about formulating this space *as something*, even if we use such nebulous terminology as "an invisible mass." For this is a space, says Gwyn,

which expands and contracts *with the force of its own motion*. I do not see it as a 'blank counter' or an 'empty center,' a 'cold weight of negativity,' or a 'still point.' Indeed, by relinquishing our (imagined) mastery over it, our attempts to *fix* it, we may find ourselves being engulfed by it (much, I think, as Faulkner allowed himself to be) and losing ourselves in it and to it. We may believe ourselves in danger (406, my emphasis).

This, to believe ourselves in danger, of disappearing, of failing, of falling, is precisely the

point, and it is enabled by our adopting a specific relation to that which we dare not attempt to “fix,” namely, the unnamable, Caddy Compson. Gwyn, speaking from an enlightened feminist perspective, states that we must “relinquish” our “imagined mastery” over Caddy, over the unknown, over metaphysical questions of all shapes and sizes, and instead allow ourselves to be “engulfed” by them, like a river is engulfed by the canyon it cuts. We must give ourselves up, perhaps, to the piety of a questioning which does not desire answers, but merely space in which to continue questioning. In our orbits around Caddy, who “expands and contracts with the force of [her] own motion,” we might seek an equilibrium, a wire which connects us *to* her in the only way possible, intangibly. Benjy Compson can, perhaps, make this connection, but only in a highly distressed and somewhat arbitrary manner, so that whenever he hears a golfer say “caddie!” the connection is made perhaps as well as if it had been somebody actually calling her name, which, in a sense, it is. For Benjy, the phonetic sound of her name keeps her in sight of her chance. For Quentin, the connection is made only through the memory of its loss, via what has too often been called a “neurotic obsession,” but which might be better termed an assignation of meaning which cannot stop itself, an attempt not so much to fix the past formulaically as to stultify it temporally -- in the same way that the smell of honeysuckle chokes *him* -- to the point at which it dominates his present and ultimately dictates his future. Quentin cannot keep the temptation in sight of its chance because, the way he sees it, it is already behind him. And then there is Jason, the villain, the one who attempts to thwart the temptation and achieve thereby his own personal gain. His relation to Caddy is blind, a throbbing headache which nauseates him and drives

him into a rage, the instigation of which is symbolized by the smell of Quentin's perfume (much as the smell of trees and of honeysuckle symbolize the relation in the first two chapters). In the end, however, it is Jason himself who is thwarted in his attempt to outrun time, to get ahead of it by means of amassing wealth, as Quentin makes off with the money her mother has been sending her, which Jason had kept locked away. Jason cannot become something more or something else than he is, which is a scoundrel, and nor can Quentin or Benjy. Quentin, as one whom the temptation is behind, is a ghost of sorts, haunting Harvard and environs, and Benjy remains pathetically dumb, and yet for that, or *because* of that, *because* he is incapable of "fixing" Caddy in any but an unsophisticated, mute manner, he perhaps relates to her "place" best of all. It hardly behooves us, however, to speak in terms of "best" here, for all three brothers, in their orbits around Caddy, are erratic and unpredictable, caught up as they are, each in their own way, in a confusion of tenses which allows little in the way of respite or resolution, and a lot in the way of sound and fury.

And then there is Faulkner. Gwyn maintains that Faulkner allowed himself to be engulfed by Caddy, but not in the sense that the three brothers are, which is to say violently, but in a more healthy manner. Faulkner, by removing himself as best he could from the text, by creating a greater distance between himself and Caddy so that his orbit would be able to attain an equilibrium instead of, by virtue of proximity, being pulled into a collision -- by setting himself off like this, Faulkner achieved a balance, a harmony, which expresses itself in Dilsey's poise following the Easter Sunday church service. However, by this very same act of removal, by this act of keeping the temptation

remotely in sight of its chance, Faulkner fails spectacularly. The fourth chapter lacks the immediacy, the rush, the error, the confusion, and the violence of the first three; it is not as captivating. *It is not meant to be*. Faulkner could only have succeeded had his removal been complete, had the open car come to a complete stop, but this could not be the case, ever, and Faulkner knew this. Nor did he want it to be the case, as it would have prevented him from being able to wear away the rim of his vase eternally with kisses. In *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner fails, but his failure is what enables his success. None of his pseudonyms, none of his characters, caught up as they are in becoming, are able to establish a stable relationship to Being, because Being itself is a becoming character, Caddy Compson. The dust never settles in Faulkner's great novel, and our vision is always obscured by its ubiquity. Johannes Climacus states, however, that "only he really has style who is never finished with something but 'stirs the waters of language' whenever he begins, so that to him the most ordinary expression comes into existence with newborn originality" (*Postscript*, 86). Surely this is a fitting description of Faulkner, as well as an epitome of the viewpoint we have been trying to attain in this essay.

The narrator of Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby* states, before he gets very far into the story, "The problem with every story is you tell it after the fact." Sartre, similarly, says that "Faulkner always showed events when they were already over. In *The Sound and the Fury* everything has already happened. It is this that enables us to understand that strange remark by one of the heroes, 'Fui. Non sum'" (267). But Sartre has Quentin Compson, and perhaps Faulkner himself, all wrong. Bound for eternity, Quentin notices and muses, "A gull on an invisible wire attached through space dragged. You carry the

symbol of your frustration into eternity” (66). And what is this symbol? For Faulkner it may be Caddy’s muddy drawers, his Roman vase to lightly erode eternally the rim with kisses. For Herman Mussert it may be Lisa D’India, the girl to whom he tells his story, the temptation which throughout his life he kept in sight of its chance, but which he only actually encountered in a non-actual myth-world. And what is the symbol of frustration, of failure, for Stephen Dedalus, for the Unnamable, for Kierkegaard? The cracked lookingglass of a servant, the semblance of a self, a broken engagement? We could speculate on these questions. But for Quentin Compson, whose initiation into eternity is but half a day away, the symbol is: *a gull on an invisible wire attached through space dragged*. It is attached to something that is not there; it is moving, it is not moving; it is dragged, it is suspended. The paradoxical imagery of the gull is prevalent throughout Quentin’s chapter, attaching itself as it were nearly invisibly to everything he sees and thinks about on this, his *final day*. Opposite the gull in the air is the trout in the water which nobody can catch. Quentin sees it: “The trout hung, delicate and motionless among the wavering shadows” (74). Then there is Gerald Bland, “pulling in lonely state across the noon, rowing himself right out of noon, up the long bright air like an apotheosis, mounting into a drowsing infinity where only he and the gull, the one terrifically motionless, the other in a steady and measured pull and recover that partook of inertia itself” (77). Following Bland is perhaps one of the most famous passages from the novel, when Quentin regards *a carriage moving away from him*, “Beneath the sag of the buggy the hooves neatly rapid like the motions of a lady doing embroidery, diminishing without progress like a figure on a treadmill being drawn rapidly offstage” (79). Shortly after this,

Quentin, with his past choking him like honeysuckle, remembers being told by a girl, “*It’s like dancing sitting down did you ever dance sitting down?*” (85). And then, to return to the specific imagery of the gull once more, Quentin ponders the twilight, “that quality of light as if time really had stopped for a while, with the sun hanging just under the horizon” (107). All of these passages and a hundred more like them in his monologue represent Quentin’s symbol of frustration (the loping non-motion of the shuttlecock), which he will carry very shortly into eternity. How this relates to Sartre’s misconception of Quentin lies in the fact that Quentin’s symbol of frustration is also his symbol of temporality and identity; that is to say, his confusion of motion and non-motion are tantamount to a confusion of tenses which announces itself towards the end of the day, just when the ubiquity of the symbol overflows its cup and the paradox bursts through sense. Honeysuckle, itself a prominent symbol in Quentin’s monologue, is the catalyst to his confusion:

...the whole thing came to symbolise night and unrest I seemed to be lying neither asleep nor awake looking down a long corridor of gray half-light where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had felt suffered taking visible form antic and perverse mocking without relevance inherent themselves with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed thinking I was I was not who was not was not who.

Quentin is remembering this, but it is no longer in the italics of his earlier rememberings, but in the bold print of his present, which is being anticipated backwards from a fore-knowledge of the fact that it will soon no longer be. To say that this is merely “showing events when they are already over” is *far too* simplistic. How can we say of someone

who thinks “I was I was not who was not was not who” that he occupies a single tense, a tense which signifies that “everything has already happened”? Constantin Constantius says that “recollecting is indeed eternity’s flowing back into the present” (*Repetition*, 137). This “flowing back” creates an eddy of temporality in which all tenses commingle and become confused. When Sartre quotes Quentin’s “*Fui. Non sum.*” he has only got half the line. “A quarter hour yet,” thinks Quentin. “And then I’ll not be. The peacefulest words. Peacefulest words. *Non fui. Sum. Fui. Non sum.* Somewhere I heard bells once. Mississippi or Massachusetts. I was. I am not. Massachusetts or Mississippi. Shreve has a bottle in his trunk” (110). The translation of the Latin words is “I was not. I am. I was. I am not.” Corresponding to these phrases are Massachusetts, where Quentin is, and Mississippi, where he is not. Understandably, the confusion of tenses (“peacefulest words”) recommends him to a bottle, so that we soon get, “I am. Drink. I was not.” That every story is told after the fact is just as much a fable as the thought that it could possibly be otherwise.

## CHAPTER 4

## POSTSCRIPT

In “The Death of the Author” Barthes states that “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” (253). By virtue of its silent medium, writing destroys the voice, and yet, because words, the trace of a voice remains, disembodied, violently disseminated, so that like detectives we are tempted to ask after it, to seek clues. One of these clues is the “point of origin.” Also destroyed by the writing, says Barthes, by virtue of the errancy of the mark, which we trace not only forwards towards its innumerable destinations, but also backwards towards its innumerable origins. The shuttlecock can land anywhere, and therefore it can come from anywhere. “No doubt it has always been that way,” says Barthes (253). This is not, then, a postmodern fabrication of a nebulous construct such as the “author,” but rather the exposure of such a fabrication where it was perhaps not often looked for: in reason, in tradition. *Writing has always been destructive, the author always the first to be destroyed.* “The very identity of the body writing” (253) is dematerialized at the moment writing begins; or rather, it never succeeds at materializing to begin with. The author is an existing human being, not an author. The author is a ghost, a shade of a life *that never was to begin with.* “God is dead,” says Nietzsche, “but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown” (*The Gay Science*, 167). Many of these caves are books; many of these shadows “authors.”

What is the death of the author? What does it mean? Barthes says, “*The temporality is different*” (255, my italics). No longer is there an author who comes before the work, a subject “with the book as predicate” (255). Writer and written are simultaneous, largely indistinguishable, confounded. The change in temporality is a confusion not in and of itself, but because we have yet to establish our bearings in relation to it. But it is perhaps the essence of the change, of the difference, that we are *not* to establish proper bearings in relation to it (for that was the old way), but rather are to relate to this difference on its own pious pre-terms, its reverent even though “antitheological” (256) affirmation of repetition as sense.

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