

A Promise Kept, a Self Repeated? Reading *Gjentagelsen* with Ricœur*

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Abstract

Based on Paul Ricœur's concept of ipseity and the role of promising for constituting selfhood as non-identical permanence in time, the article revisits the controversy whether or not the young man in *Repetition* experiences a repetition of the self. Considering Hans Lipps's notion of the radical openness of a promise based on solicitude as much as Ricœur's "fundamental promise" to be faithful to oneself, two different perspectives are provided in order to interpret the young man's break with his fiancée. According to both perspectives it can coherently be claimed that in the realm of ethical selfhood as depicted by Ricœur in *Oneself as Another* and *The Course of Recognition*, the young man non-identically repeats his self.

I. The Problem of Repetition

Hardly any other text by Kierkegaard has caused so much scholarly disagreement than *Repetition*. On the just about 100 pages of the *Venture in Experimental Psychology*, Kierkegaard's heteronym Constantin Constantius presents the reader with a wide array of topics: he discusses the category of repetition in comparison with the Ancient Greeks' understanding of *anamnesis*, change and motion, he describes a trip to Germany, and he also extensively comments on the life of a younger confidant, whom he simply calls *the young man*.

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In the beginning, Constantin expresses his premonition that just as the Ancient Greeks taught “that all knowing is recollecting, modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition”¹—but this conviction soon withers and gives way to the skeptical question whether repetition as such is possible at all. Constantin’s experimental journey to Berlin is clearly marked as a failure to repeat a former travel experience, and so the story of the young man becomes the center of the question: is repetition possible?

But first of all: *what* is to be repeated? As Constantin’s attempt to re-experience the same encounters, situations, feelings and moods he had when he visited Berlin for the first time shows (be it the weather, a show at the theatre, or the domestic situation of his landlord), he tries to evoke an identical repetition of something external. This, as it soon becomes obvious, is not feasible. Constantin therefore concludes that repetitions are not possible. But in the letters attached to Constantin’s study, we hear the young man say: “I am myself again. This ‘self’ that someone else would not pick up of the street I have once again.”² It thus seems that repetition may occur in the relation of a self to itself. Moreover, in a polemical letter to Heiberg, Kierkegaard has Constantin proclaim that there is only one true repetition, and this is “the individuality’s own repetition raised to a new power.”³ Thus, the *what* of the repetition in question is the self—this is what scholars agree upon. There are, however, different opinions on whether or not the young man actually *did* experience a repetition in this sense.

What would a repetition of the self imply? The Kierkegaardian reader, familiar with the Dane’s writings, usually assumes that the self is repeated in the movement

¹ SKS 4, 9 / R, 131. For the theological and philosophical implications of the statement including the addition that “The only modern philosopher who had an intimation of this is Leibniz” (*ibid*), see Paul J. DeHart, “‘The passage from mind to heart is so long...’: The riddle of ‘repetition’ and Kierkegaard’s ontology of agency”, *Modern Theology*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2015, pp. 91-122.

² SKS 4, 87 / R, 220.

³ *Pap.* IV B111:270 / R, Supplement, p. 294.

from one existential stage to another, thereby being “raised to a new power”⁴: the ethical self in a way is the same self which it has been when it was an aesthetic self, yet it is different in how it relates to itself and others; and the religious self can be understood as a specific repetition of the ethical self under the paradigm of the absurd. However, are there, in addition to the three existential stages, other ways to describe a repetition of the self in Kierkegaard’s thought?

In the following, I would like to approach *Gjentagelsen* from a Ricœurian perspective, concentrating on the young man. After a short description of what happens to the young man and how it has been interpreted in the literature (II.), I will turn to Ricœur’s understanding of the self as explained in *Oneself as Another* and *The Course of Recognition* (III.). A short analysis of the phenomenon of promising then distinguishes between keeping one’s word in a narrow sense, fulfilling a promise in a broader sense, and staying faithful to oneself (IV.). Based on these considerations, the question of a potential repetition of the young man’s self is finally approached again (V. and VI.).

II. “The Remarkable Change” of the Young Man

The young man’s story, similar to other young men’s stories in Kierkegaard’s work, is easily told in a few sentences: He is “fervently and beautifully and humbly in love”⁵ with a girl, but then he experiences a severe personal crises, breaks the engagement, and leaves town. As his letters show, it takes him almost a year to come to grips with what he has done, and with what this episode of his life has done to him.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ SKS 4, 12 / R, 134.

Constantius, who is deeply fascinated by the unfolding of these events, provides a ready explanation for the young man's transformation from someone who was vigorous, open-minded and who "glowed with love,"⁶ to someone increasingly entrapped in depression: "During all this, a remarkable change took place in him. A poetic creativity awakened in him on a scale I had never believed possible. Now I easily grasped the situation. The young girl was not his beloved: she was the occasion that awakened the poetic in him and made him a poet."⁷ According to his letters, the young man becomes nauseated by life because he sees himself unable to fulfill the expectations that he has raised in the nameless girl—his poetic longings and ambitions would clash with a concrete marriage and moreover, harm the girl.

Constantius describes the situation more relentlessly: "If she died tomorrow, that would not distress him further, he would not actually feel a loss,"⁸ because "the girl was not an actuality but a reflection of motions within him and an incitement of them."⁹ In Constantin's view, the girl simply fulfilled the role of generating the idea of eternal love in the young man, thus providing him with a source of poetic inspiration. This source never runs dry because it is safely kept in recollection and has cut off all links with the actual relation: "She was drawn into his whole being; the memory of her was forever alive. She had meant much to him; she had made him a poet—and precisely thereby had signed her own death sentence."¹⁰

In contrast to Constantin's harsh words, however, stands the young man's suffering after the break-up. He is restless. He got what he wanted, his freedom, but he cannot move on. Quite to the contrary, he is doing his best to turn himself into a future husband. He tries to "clip himself" and to "take away everything that is incom-

⁶ *SKS* 4, 13 / *R*, 135.

⁷ *SKS* 4, 15 / *R*, 137f.

⁸ *SKS* 4, 55 / *R*, 185.

⁹ *SKS* 4, 55 / *R*, 185.

¹⁰ *SKS* 4, 15 / *R*, 138.

measurable in order to become commensurable”¹¹—without success. Like the beard he shaves off every morning, all the “impatience and infinite striving”¹² of his soul grow back again. He also quarrels with fate and vehemently refuses to regard himself as guilty.

But then, when the young man sees a wedding announcement in the newspaper that tells him that his former fiancée has married someone else, he suddenly feels *healed*: “I am myself again...The inveiglements in which I was entrapped have been rent asunder; the magic formula that hexed me so that I could not come back to myself has been broken.”¹³ The young man seems to regard this as a repetition, at least he suggests it by asking rhetorically, “Is there not, then, a repetition? Did I not get everything double? Did I not get my self again and precisely in such a way that I might have a double sense of its meaning?”¹⁴

Did he really? The question whether or not one can talk about a true repetition in the young man’s case has stirred a profound scholarly discussion. Some say the young man truly *did* experience a repetition, because the latter is all about becoming inward, and his reflections on guilt and fate testify that he moves from an aesthetic attitude, through an encounter with ethics, to the claim of being an *exemption* to ethical judgments.¹⁵ Others go even further and claim that the young man actually repeats himself under the paradigm of the religious. For instance, Catherine Pickstock argues that “he receives back his own non-identically repeated integrity beyond the travails of melancholia and anxiety”, acquiring faith “in the ‘absurd’ eternal return of the re-

¹¹ SKS 4, 81 / R, 214.

¹² SKS 4, 81 / R, 214.

¹³ SKS 4, 88 / R, 221.

¹⁴ SKS 4, 87f. / R, 220f.

¹⁵ See for instance Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Becoming. Movements and Positions*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2005, p. 83 and Wilfried Greve, *Kierkegaards maieutische Ethik. Vom Entweder/Oder II zu den Stadien*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1990, pp. 150-59.

nounced beloved.”¹⁶ According to Pickstock, “this experience, he thinks, now fits him to marriage after all, since his new sense of his deep self as the pure divine gift transcends all possible anxious and tragic contamination and suggests that he can be a welcome bridegroom.”¹⁷ Following this interpretation, the fact that the young man’s beloved is marrying someone else does not change anything: the young man has received his self again, it has been repeated as a *religious self*. But scholars strongly dissent on this point: The young man, some allege, is so relieved to read about his former fiancée’s marriage, that he *misinterprets* this feeling as repetition. He has not changed at all. Readily he casts himself into the self-indulgence of his imagination, now cutting off even the last connection with actuality; his ecstatic “three cheers for the flight of the thought”¹⁸ and for “the dance in the vortex of the infinite”¹⁹ illustrate nothing more than that. Thus, Jochen Schmidt concludes, “there is no repetition within *Repetition*. It is only by the intertextual interplay with *Fear and Trembling* that *Repetition* is, albeit indirectly, related to genuine hope, as it is by the virtue of the absurd that the knight of faith, unlike the knights of infinity, knows to return to earth.”²⁰

I do not want to take a stance on which interpretation is more adequate, if any. The aforementioned scholars approach *Repetition* from different theoretical backgrounds, and their interpretations all provide enlightening perspectives on the category of repetition in Kierkegaard’s thought, especially considering the intriguing fact that in *Repetition*, we are actually dealing with the self-interpretation of a *literary figure* depicted by a *heteronymous author*. What this short overview shows, however, is

¹⁶ Catherine Pickstock, *Repetition and Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, p. 138.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139. And furthermore, so Pickstock, „[i]f his older confidant, Constantin Constantius, suspects him of merely lapsing back into the aesthetic, then this is because, as he himself confesses, he has no feeling for the religious beyond the ethical” (*ibid.*, p. 138f.).

¹⁸ SKS 4, 88 / R, 222.

¹⁹ SKS 4, *ibid.* / R, *ibid.*

²⁰ Jochen Schmidt, “The Young Man: Voice of Naïveté”, in *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonyms*, ed. by Katalin Nun, Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate 2015 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 17), pp. 303-309, p. 307.

that the question about the young man's self and its repetition is a highly complicated one, and for this reason, it might be instructive to look for additional criteria and concepts to come to grips with it. In the next section, I would therefore like to turn to Paul Ricœur's understanding of the self.

III. Character, Promising, and Self-Constancy Throughout Time

When Ricœur's concept of selfhood is applied to Kierkegaard's thought, it is usually done with regard to narrative identity. In the last ten years, a profound theoretical shift has taken place in the literature on Kierkegaard's understanding of the self, concentrating on the role of narrativity in the constitution of personal identity in general.²¹ One could, however, question that *identity* is the right term for the phenomenon of selfhood as described by Kierkegaard. After all, *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript* stresses that "the principle of identity is only the boundary; it is like the blue mountains, like the line which the artist calls the base line—the drawing is the main thing."²² In the following, I will thus focus not so much on the concept of narrative identity, even though the young man's reading of the Book of Job in *Repetition* provides ample opportunities to interpret his repetition as a *refiguration*.²³ Instead, it is

²¹ For a general investigation of narrativity and selfhood in Kierkegaard's thought see *Narrative, Identity and the Kierkegaardian Self*, ed. by John Lippitt and Patrick Stokes, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2015. For a discussion of Kierkegaard in the context of modern and contemporary theories of personal identity see John J. Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality: from Frankfurt and MacIntyre to Kierkegaard*, New York: Routledge 2012; Anthony Rudd, *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012, esp. pp. 175-228; Patrick Stokes, *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015, pp. 166-91; and the seminal edition by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd, *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre. Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court 2001.

²² SKS 7, 383 / CUP1, 421. I owe this insight to personal conversations with Jeff Hanson, who also drew my attention to the quoted passage.

²³ Cf. Joakim Garff, "A Matter of Mimesis: Kierkegaard and Ricœur on Narrative Identity", *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2015, pp. 321-334, p. 331f.

Ricœur's concept of ethical selfhood and its core, the promise, that I will apply to the story of the young man.²⁴

Ricœur dedicates the fifth study of *Oneself as Another* to a question similar to the problem of the self's repetition in *Gjentagelsen*: "Is there a form of permanence in time which can be connected to the question 'who?' inasmuch as it is irreducible to any question of 'what?'? Is there a form of permanence in time that is a reply to the question 'who am I?'?"²⁵ In order to address this question, Ricœur distinguishes between identity or *mêmeté* as sameness (as denoted by Latin *idem*) and identity as selfhood or *ipseité* (derived from Latin *ipse*). Usually, both constitute our understanding of ourselves and others in time. Ricœur stresses that permanence in time is crucial for us—after all, we need to be able to recognize others and ourselves throughout the years.

One mode of permanence in time is *character*, which Ricœur defines as "set of distinctive marks which permit the re-identification of a human individual as being the same."²⁶ This does not mean that a character is totally fixed. But we have some dispositions that appear to constitute the unchangeable basis for the habits we acquire or get rid of, and for our preferences, opinions and identification with ideas, values, and norms. In character, there is almost a complete overlap of sameness and ipseity. In contrast, *faithfulness to oneself in keeping one's word* points out a distinction between the sameness of character and the permanence of self—it is what stays perma-

²⁴ This approach has been inspired by the work of Dorothea Glöckner, who dedicated a monograph on *Repetition* and another on Kierkegaard's understanding of the promise, focusing on *Works of Love*. Dorothea Glöckner, *Das Versprechen. Studien zur Verbindlichkeit menschlichen Sagens in Søren Kierkegaards Werk Die Taten der Liebe*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2009; and *eadem*, *Kierkegaards Begriff der Wiederholung. Eine Studie zu seinem Freiheitsverständnis*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 1998 (*Kierkegaard Studies. Monograph Series*, vol. 3). Yet Glöckner did not combine these two investigations, and it is this connection between the repetition of the self and the promise in Kierkegaard's thought that I explore.

²⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 1994, p. 118.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

ment even when the character might undergo changes: “Keeping one’s promise...does indeed appear to stand as a challenge in time, a denial of change: even if my desire were to change, even if I were to change my opinion or my inclination ‘I will hold firm’.”²⁷

It is in our promises that we are bound not only by the rules of language (to say “I promise x” leads to the obligation to do x), but also by our former self (the self that made the promise at a certain point in time). Thus, there might come a moment when our inclinations, our habits, our values and our living situation will be totally different, in short: when we will not be anymore the same person (in terms of *idem*) we were when we gave the promise. Yet in living up to our word, we are re-actualizing our self *at another point in time and under different circumstances*. One could also say, in keeping a promise we are *repeating* our self.

This way of constituting self-constancy in time inspired Ricœur in his later work *The Course of Recognition* to describe the promise as the *paradigm case of ipseity*.²⁸ Accordingly, the promise should not only be understood as an external obligation which others demand us to keep, but also as a chance for us to establish an understanding of our self as a unity in and through time. We usually think that it is the other, the receiver of the promise, who gets a feeling of security and affirmation through the promise. But the promise also establishes this sense of security for the one who makes the promise, because it gives hold in an ever changing life with an overwhelming amplitude of opportunities. According to Ricœur,

the ‘Here I am!’ [as answer to the claim of the receiver of the promise] by which the person recognizes himself or herself as the subject of imputation marks a halt in the wandering that

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁸ Paul Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. by David Pellauer, Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press 2005, p. 110.

may well result from the self's confrontation with a multitude of models for action and life, some of which go so far as to paralyze the capacity for firm action. Between the imagination that says, 'I can try everything' and the voice that says, 'Everything is possible but not everything is beneficial (understanding here, to others and to yourself),' a muted discord is sounded. It is this discord that promising transforms into a fragile concordance: 'I can try anything', to be sure, but 'Here is where I stand!'²⁹

We can conclude, at least for now: first, through promising, we are able to "repeat" our selves in time and under different circumstances, and second, promising yields orientation and provides us with criteria for the choices in the course of our life.

Ricœur's account of selfhood has of course not been left unchallenged.³⁰ Nevertheless, reading *Gjentagelsen* in the light of Ricœur's concept of the promise helps to clarify the question whether the young man experiences a repetition, and it also highlights how intricate the relation of promising and selfhood is. Let us thus return to the young man.

IV. A Broken Promise?

The following argument rests on two assumptions: first, that the young man has in fact *promised* the girl to marry her, and second, that an engagement actually *is* a promise, even though the performative act of becoming engaged is not signaled by the

²⁹ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 167f.

³⁰ For a detailed critical reading of Ricœur's account of selfhood see Claude Romano, „Identity and Selfhood: Paul Ricœur's Contribution and its Continuations“, in *Hermeneutics and Phenomenology in Paul Ricoeur: Between Text and Phenomenon*, ed. by Scott Davidson and Marc-Antoine Vallée, Cham, Switzerland: Springer 2016, pp. 43-59; Henry Isaac Venema, *Identifying Selfhood. Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricœur*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2000; and the essays in *Ricœur as Another. The Ethics of Subjectivity*, ed. by Richard A. Cohen and James L. Marsh, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2002, especially Cohen's work on "Moral Selfhood: A Levinasian Response to Ricœur on Levinas", in *ibid*, pp. 127-160.

typical “I promise”, but rather by the question “will you marry me?”. I think it is safe to infer from Constantin’s statement that the young man “had been in love for some time..., but now the object of desire was within reach; he had confessed his love and found love in return,”³¹ together with the young man’s later relief caused by the girl’s wedding with someone else, that he was engaged indeed.

Moreover, I regard an engagement as a promise, because it is (in contrast to a marriage) not a judicially binding relation, but a commitment to enter into this relation in the near future, usually within a year. Ricœur does not address this matter, but since he also uses the more general *giving* and *keeping* one’s word in addition to the narrow understanding of promising as an illocutionary act, I think one may legitimately say that the young man has actually promised to marry the girl.

At first glance, things appear to be pretty clear: the young man has broken his promise—after all, he does *not* marry his fiancée, and she subsequently gets married to someone else. From Ricœur’s analysis of the promise as “paradigm case of ipseity”³² one all too readily infers that the young man fails to repeat his self: Instead of re-actualizing the word of his former self under new conditions, he clings to his bachelor identity and to the undisturbed sameness of a boundless life-style which he regards as the life-style of a poet. Reading the wedding announcement in the newspaper, he cries out “I am myself again”³³ and immediately gets excited about the prospect that “no one calls me to dinner, no one expects me for supper. When the idea calls, I abandon everything, or, more correctly, I have nothing to abandon...When I come home, no one reads my face, no one questions my demeanor.”³⁴

³¹ SKS 4, 12 / R, 134.

³² Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, p. 110.

³³ SKS 4, 88 / R, 221.

³⁴ SKS 4, 88 / R, 221.

Due to similarities with *Either/Or*, we are furthermore tempted to conclude that the young man, like the Aesthete, shies away from responsibility, from confining himself to a concrete life style, and instead aims at keeping all opportunities open. To such a life view, events and persons are relevant only as far as they can serve as material for one's poetic imagination, and ethical considerations are regarded as hampering the creative flow. Thus, in Ricœurian terms, the young man does not grasp the chance which the promise offers, that is, the chance to counter the seductive 'I can try anything' with a self-affirming "but 'Here is where I stand!'. ”³⁵

But maybe we should give the young man more credit. Maybe he *did* keep his word, albeit in a complicated way. The next section therefore explores two different perspectives on the young man's promise.

V. Suspending the Link Between Keeping One's Word, Fulfilling a Promise, and Staying Faithful to Oneself

In the following, we will retreat from the story of the young man for a while and take a closer look at the phenomenon of promising. Let us start by considering a rather paradoxical question: *Is it necessary to keep one's word in order to fulfill one's promise?*

Ricœur stresses that we do not have to keep our original intention in order to fulfill what we have promised;³⁶ rather, we keep a promise because it is a *formal obligation*. However, he does not distinguish between different scopes of intention. Imagine two scenarios: In the first one, you have promised a colleague to lend her your car

³⁵ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, pp. 167f.

³⁶ Cf. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, pp. 266f.

on Saturday, because she needs to pick up her parents-in-law from the airport. You make the promise, because you want to help her getting off with the right foot with her in-laws during their visit. In addition, you already planned a bicycle tour for Saturday, so you do not really expect to need the car yourself. The weekend comes and it rains without cease. Now you deeply regret your promise, and you do not really care about your colleague's family issues anymore. Still, you lend her the car, because you *said* you would. This promise therefore belongs to the category of promises in which the unchanged intention is *not* part of the fulfillment of the promise: You do not need to care for your colleague's relation with her in-laws in order to lend her your car. From the perspective of both the one who makes the promise and the one who receives the promise, the promise is fulfilled if the word is kept literally.

There is, however, a different category of promise. Consider a second scenario: Someone is asked to become the godmother of her friend's daughter. The friend asks her to raise the child in case she would die, and the godmother agrees. She promises to care for the little girl, and, urged by her friend, not to let it live with the friend's mother, who is an alcoholic and estranged from her daughter. Now imagine seven years later, the friend and the father of the child both die in a plane crash. The godmother faces a difficult decision: she is bankrupt, going through a divorce and is severely depressed. In contrast, the friend's mother has turned into a marathon runner, claims to be sober, and shows patience and genuine love when interacting with the child. The godmother decides to let her godchild live with the grandmother.

We probably regard it as counterintuitive to say that the godmother has broken her promise. The reason for this is that we assume that the main intention when she gave the promise to raise her godchild was to do whatever is best for the child. At the time when the promise was given, the best scenario for the child was to be raised by

the godmother. At the time when the promise has to be fulfilled, the best option is for it to be raised by the grandmother. The godmother's intention stays the same, and in a way, she is keeping her promise by *breaking her word*. And with regard to the question of a non-identical repetition of the self, it seems adequate to say that despite all the changes she has been going through, she demonstrates self-constancy through dealing with her promise in exactly the way she does.

In order to account for cases like this, the phenomenologist Hans Lipps has stressed the genuine *openness* of a promise: what a given word really means shows itself only in the moment of its fulfillment.³⁷ We therefore promise not so much *something*, but we promise something *to someone*, thereby binding ourselves to his or her wellbeing. Ricœur says something similar: the promise (and thereby ipseity) is based on solicitude.³⁸ In *The Course of Recognition*, this is formulated in the *goodness clause*:

the speaker does not simply limit himself to 'placing himself under a certain obligation to do what he says.' This relation is merely from himself to himself. But the commitment is first of all to the other to whom the promise is made. It is a commitment to 'do' or to 'give' something held to be good for him or her. In other words, the promise has not simply a receiver, but a beneficiary of the promise.³⁹

Let us now see what this means for the young man. What if we choose not to view him through the eyes of Constantin Constantius, who claims that the young man never truly was concerned about the girl? If we take the young man's words at face value, he breaks the engagement because he genuinely cares for her: "My love cannot find

³⁷ Cf. Hans Lipps, *Die Verbindlichkeit der Sprache. Arbeiten zur Sprachphilosophie und Logik*, 2nd ed., Frankfurt/Main: V. Klosterman 1958 [1944], p. 102; discussed in Glöckner, *Das Versprechen*, pp. 175-79.

³⁸ Cf. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 268.

³⁹ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, p. 129.

expression in a marriage. If I do that, she is crushed.”⁴⁰ Thus, one could say that the young man’s *original* inclination towards the girl, temporarily inflamed by romantic feelings and expressed in the promise to marry her, has not changed at all. If an engagement is understood as the promise to care for the other and to will the best for him or her under all conditions, the young man kept his word by breaking it.

However, as has been shown earlier, keeping a promise is not only about the other—it is also about oneself, which leads to the second question: *Is it necessary to keep a promise in order to stay faithful to yourself?* On the one hand, Ricœur appears to be very rigorous with regard to the link between ipseity and keeping a promise. He defines ipseity as the “will to self-constancy, to remaining true to form, which seals the story of a life confronted with changes of circumstances and changes of heart.”⁴¹

Such a will constitutes the *fundamental promise* which “precedes any promise making,” that is, the promise of “keeping one’s word under all circumstances.”⁴² In this case, the one who gives the promise is the same person as the receiver of the promise. In keeping a promise, we would thus *per definitionem* stay faithful to ourselves. This, however, is counterintuitive, as Ricœur himself points out with reference to Nietzsche: “one can promise actions but not feelings; for the latter are involuntary”⁴³—or in Ricœur’s words: “What the speaker commits himself to is to do or give something, not to experience feelings, passions, or emotions.”⁴⁴

What does this mean in the case of the young man’s engagement? On the one hand, if the promise to marry the girl *did* include the suggestion that he would love her until the end of time, he had not only exceeded his own abilities, but also the ca-

⁴⁰ SKS 4, 69 / R, 201.

⁴¹ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, pp. 129f.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, transl. by R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 42, no. 58; quoted in Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, p. 129.

⁴⁴ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, p. 129.

capacity of a promise. On the other hand, if he had simply committed himself to fulfill a legal act in due course without implicating love, this would have been heartless, and it would have been even more heartless to go through with it after his love has withered. So, after all, an engagement might not really be a promise, or if it is, it is deceptive.⁴⁵

In *Either/Or*, Judge William addresses this problem in his letter on *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage*. He distinguishes between three forms of love: romantic love, reflective love, and religious marriage. He then compares these forms by asking whether they fulfill the requirement of an eternal love. Romantic love is characterized as immediate and, since it is based on beauty and erotic attraction, it is temporal, elusive. Reflective love is best illustrated in a marriage of convenience: here, ‘love’ is grounded on an act of will, determined not to let change affect the relationship. However, since this kind of love is subdued by calculation and a “pedestrian commonsensical view that one ought to be cautious..., that life never does yield the ideal,”⁴⁶ this relation succumbs to temporality as well.⁴⁷ According to William, only in the religious marriage the promise of eternal love can be fulfilled.⁴⁸

However, religiosity is not easily achieved. Grace might be involved, and the absurd. The young man of *Repetition* does not appear to have lifted his love to the level of religiosity. He raises it to the level of abstract infinity, to poetry—that is all he is able to do. It might be socially condemnable that he does not keep the promise of

⁴⁵ Nietzsche suggests something similar; since love cannot be promised, it is sufficient to provide the *appearance* of love, that is, to *deceive* the other: “To promise always to love someone therefore means: for as long as I love you I shall render to you the actions of love; if I cease to love you, you will continue to receive the same actions from me, though from other motives: so that in the heads of our fellow men the appearance will remain that love is still the same and unchanged.—One therefore promises the continuation of the appearance of love when one swears to someone ever-enduring love without self-deception.” Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 42, no. 58. Ricœur does not consider such elements of deception and self-deception that can be evoked by a promise.

⁴⁶ SKS 3, 35 / EO2, 27.

⁴⁷ According to Ricœur, such reflective love would not count as an expression of ipseity, but simply as a demonstration of obstinacy, and “we need to place as much distance as possible between self-constancy and the constancy of an obstinate will.” Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, p. 134.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ryan Kemp, “‘A’ the Aesthete: Aestheticism and the Limits of Philosophy”, in *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonyms*, ed. by Katalin Nun, Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate 2015 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 17), pp. 1-25, p. 9.

his engagement, but at least he does not force himself to feel something that is not genuine, thereby betraying not only the girl, but also himself. Re-actualizing his self under new *internal* conditions—he has understood the nature of his love to the girl and takes the responsibility for it—, the young man dares to break with the norms of bourgeois Copenhagen: he willingly repeats his self, even though it is a self “that someone else would not pick up of the street.”⁴⁹

VI. Once Again: Promising and Repetition

What can we conclude? I have provided two perspectives on the young man’s break of the engagement. These two approaches are not easily combined, in fact, they seem to contradict each other. The first one states that the young man kept his promise (understood in a broad sense): when one regards solicitude as the crucial element in promising, the young man has fulfilled the promise to care for the girl. The second perspective, however, claims that since love cannot be promised, the engagement is not actually a promise, or put differently: promises of such magnitude are usually overpowered by the fundamental promise to be faithful to oneself. According to the latter approach, the young man has broken his promise to the girl. Both approaches, however, suggest that through his promise the young man has repeated his self.

Ricœur does not account for self-constancy or ipseity in the case of a broken promise. However, from defining solicitude and care for the other as motivation for giving a promise, it follows that if the reason to break a promise is genuine care for the other, one could argue that self-constancy indeed is achieved: Pondering over a

⁴⁹ SKS 4, 87 / R, 220.

promise's implication at a *new* moment in time, out of care for the other and not because one's own interest, habits and preferences have changed (even though they *might* have changed), implies ipseity: The caring self is repeated under different circumstances.

The second interpretation focused on the *fundamental promise to oneself*. Also here, I expanded Ricœur's considerations and pointed out that the cardinal promise to be faithful to oneself has the capacity to trump a promise given to another (regardless whether it is based on solicitude or not). After all, we cannot willingly evoke a sentiment, thus it is impossible to promise to feel something. If the fulfillment of a promise includes a profound feeling, we can absolve ourselves from the obligation. One could say that in struggling with the enormity of certain promises and negatively relating to their obligations, one repeats one's self under the paradigm of their impossibility. Thus, keeping a promise no matter what does not automatically entail a genuine repetition of one's self.

Ricœur hints at something similar when he warns: "The obligation to maintain one's self in keeping one's promise is in danger of solidifying into the stoic rigidity of simple constancy."⁵⁰ And as *Repetition's* experimenter with the telling name *Constantin Constantius* unwillingly demonstrates in his foundering endeavors to reproduce identical experiences, culminating in the weary submission of his life to "a monotonous and unvarying order,"⁵¹ the *stoic* approach *fails* to repeat the self.

⁵⁰ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 267.

⁵¹ SKS 4, 50 / R, 179.