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**Tearing Time Apart: The Paradoxical
Aesthetics of Metafictional Remembrance**

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Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922-1998) is considered the leading spokesman (along with Claude Simon and Robert Pinget) for the French *nouveau roman* which marks a radical departure from the aesthetic conventions of classical realism (Stoltfus 13). In 1953, Robbe-Grillet published The Erasers and for the following decades, his name has been synonymous with experimental and avant-garde writing. Besides novels, he has produced picto-novels, autofictions, films, and theoretical writings. In almost all of his novels, Robbe-Grillet undermines literary clichés: he presents frequent repetitions that make plots seem fragmented; he offers meticulously detailed, precise descriptions that challenge the perceptual clichés that are frequently used in the so-called objective representation of reality; rather than give us characters with family names, personal histories, recognizable identities, such as those given in traditional fiction, he reduces characters to first names, to initials, mostly defined by absence and dissolving identities (Morrissey 48). He calls into question the elements of time, space, narrative perspective, and the narrator. None of them is familiar and recognizable. The reader’s expectations of linear chronology, stability, clarity, or meaning are let down, frustrated.

The Erasers is Alain Robbe-Grillet’s first published novel. It appears to establish the archetypal Robbe-Grillet novel with its circularity, puzzle-like plot, and minute object descriptions. The distinctive feature of this circularity is that it takes the form of a repetition-as-beginning and repetition-as-difference: An isolated protagonist enters a vicious circle that takes him to the beginning of the novel, to his point of departure. The return to this beginning or departure not only re-presents the protagonist’s destiny, albeit with a difference, but also offers a new, a different beginning for the novel right after it ends. In a second reading, the novel is likely to repeat the previous reading in a completely new context.

A brief outline of The Eraser’s plot might be put as follows: in an unidentified northern European city, on 26 October, Monday, at exactly 7.30 p.m., an intruder shoots a professor at his house and slightly wounds him. The professor arranges a phony declaration of his death and his health remains a secret. The local police start an investigation of the so-called murder. Soon, however, the government sends a special agent, called Wallas, to take over the investigation. Wallas, the protagonist of the novel, who turns out to be the professor’s estranged son, ends up committing the murder at the end of the novel with the second shot on 27 October, Tuesday, at exactly 7.30 p.m. In fact, the novel is a repetition of the first shot by Wallas, which he does not remember.

Remarkably, the second shot, and Wallas firing it, seem identical to the first shot: Wallas almost mimics the first shooter’s acts. His entry into the house of the crime, his climbing the stairs, his going into the study, all duplicate, with variations, those of the first shooter at the beginning of the story (Morrissey 50). Wallas’s wristwatch that stops at the time of the first shooting begins to tick again the moment he kills the man. Therefore, when the twenty-four hour gap is closed between the shots, the novel connects the two shots,

declares them a single shot. The circle of time closes after Wallas repeats the crime and all the events prior to it. Yet, everything happens with a difference, and the novel becomes Wallas' re-enactment of the events as repetition-as-difference. In this recapturing of the past, the past and the present interpenetrate and result in a repetition-as-beginning. Although he repeats the past events (like his visit to that city, his looking for his father and his murdering his father), these events happen as if for the first time. With the murder at the end of the novel, Wallas accomplishes an act already presumed to belong to the past (Morrisette 53) but it becomes a new event. The novel's opening with the first shot and its ending with the repetition of the first shot are thus tied. The circularity connects the ending to the beginning, and the ending takes us back to the illusory point of departure the beginning presents.

The narration of the novel is full of surprises. The Erasers employs multiple modes of narration: the omniscient observer, interior monologues, stream of consciousness, free indirect discourse, reversed chronology, rearranged chronology, flashbacks, pseudo flashbacks, 'false' scenes presented literally. These narrative modes result in complexities. The narrative curls inward, repeats itself, returns to the beginning. However, they also make the forward direction of the narrative possible. With nothing determined or closed, the plot always offers new openings through its repetitions and labyrinthine curlings. Put differently, in The Erasers, Robbe-Grillet replaces linear time with retreats into the past, repetitions, imaginings, revisions, and causes the same event to take as many different aspects varying with the observer and his point of view (Morrisette 52).

It is also important that The Erasers is a modern version of the Oedipus story. The epigraph of the novel is taken from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The epigraph reads, "Time that sees all has found you out against your will". For our purposes, this statement could be paraphrased as: the happening of temporality as repetition is independent of will, or any determination. Both the form and the content of The Erasers resembles the ancient story: the protagonist swears to uncover a murder but the outcome is both guaranteed and doomed from the beginning because the protagonist is himself the murderer he seeks to detect. In running away from becoming a murderer, he becomes the murderer whom he will look for. In other words, "like Oedipus, Wallas ends up being the murderer he seeks" (Smith 26).

The echo of the Oedipal situation is revealed at the beginning. When Wallas is called to the city for the investigation of the first shot, and the phony murder, he remembers having come to the city as a child with his mother for the purpose of visiting someone. That someone, Wallas much later remembers, was his father. Once in this city, Wallas goes on endless walks in the maze of streets. He stops at stationery stores and asks for a rare brand of eraser. The middle letters of the brand is "di" which is an apparent allusion to the middle letters of Oedipus. In addition, by the end of the novel, Wallas' feet are swollen from too much walking. Oedipus, which means 'swollen foot', is echoed with its literal meaning. Such allusions to Oedipus abound in the novel.

Robbe-Grillet's last novel, entitled Repetition, deliberately repeats almost all the aspects of The Erasers and presents them in a new context. The oedipal revenge, the journey to the past and the unconscious re-enactment of past events as new events, multiple and shifting narratives, flashbacks, reversed and rearranged chronologies are among the many common points between the two novels. The last novel is generally considered a kind of summation, or re-summation of Robbe-Grillet's entire career. Perhaps, the novel is a repetition of The Erasers in the form of a repetition-as-difference, since every repeated element gains a new identity, changes inexorably. In any case, Robbe-Grillet repeats and revisits his previous themes, as well as exploring once more the uncanny force of repetition, the complications of the reinvention of the past with a futural opening. In Repetition,

Robbe-Grillet writes, “The old words already spoken repeat themselves, always telling the old story from age to age, repeated once again, and always new”.

The novel, Repetition, takes place in the ruined post-war Berlin of 1949. The protagonist is a French spy called Henri Robin, who was born in 1903. He has many aliases like Boris Wallon, Ascher and Franck Matthieu. On the train to Berlin, he encounters his double, and while in Berlin, his childhood memories of a previous visit to Berlin surface. His mission is to watch a murder, but he becomes the suspect of an attempted murder. The victim is called Dany von Brücke, who had twin sons in 1903 by the names Walther and Marcus. Dany von Brücke’s second wife is called Jöelle Kast. In the end, Dany von Brücke is killed by his son Marcus, who, of course, is the real name of the protagonist, Henri Robin.

The novel is made up of repetitions. In the prologue, we read:

Here, then, I repeat, and I sum up. During the endless train journey which took me from Eisenach to Berlin across a Thuringia and Saxony in ruins, I noticed, for the first time in I don’t know how long, that man whom I call my double, to simplify matters, or else my twin, or again and less theatrically, the traveler. (Repetition 1)

Near the end of the prologue, the narrator takes a white sheet of paper, and “in tiny script without making any mistakes, [begins] to write [his] narrative without a single hesitation:”

During the endless train journey which took me from Eisenach to Berlin across a Thuringia and Saxony in ruins, I noticed, for the first time in I don’t know how long, that man whom I call my double, to simplify matters, or else my twin, or again and less theatrically, the traveler. (Repetition 19)

Such an obvious repetition locates the compulsion of presenting and re-presenting at the heart of the novel. In such re-presentations, what is repeated almost becomes a fresh presentation, as the narrative seems ignorant of its repeating. Sometimes, the account a character gives is repeated in a completely new context a few pages later. The growing impression that the reader cannot rely on any account in the novel seems to show that Robbe-Grillet is signaling the pointlessness of the recollection and the verifiable representation of memories by his ever-changing accounts of past events.

Furthermore, a second narrative voice that uses footnotes, refers to the statements of the first narrative voice, corrects them, contradicts them, or repeats them with alterations. Although the subject matters are the same, the primary voice and the paratextual voice, both omniscient, have different memories regarding the events. The second narrative voice has fourteen footnotes that cover almost one third of the novel and speaks with the paratextual authority of footnotes that is mostly seen in historical writing. In the epigraph, Robbe-Grillet ironically guards the first narrator against the second narrator: “And I don’t want to be bothered with eternal complaints about inexact or contradictory details. This report is concerned with objective reality, not with some so-called historical truth”.

Like The Erasers, Repetition has many allusions to Oedipus. When Henri Robin enters the ruined post-war Berlin, his flashbacks begin and he vaguely remembers visiting the city in his childhood with his mother. The ruins of the city remind him of “some now vanished ancient city, Hierapolis, Thebes, or Corinth” (Repetition 14). It is hinted that the protagonist probably killed his father and was seduced by his mother. The novel explicitly alludes to the myth by calling the victim’s second wife Jöelle Kast, and thus echoes the name of Oedipus’ mother: Jocasta. Later in the novel, Henri Robin becomes sexually engaged with Jöelle Kast. At the end, when he kills his father, Dany von Brücke, Henri Robin is suffering from bad eyesight and this is a reference to Oedipus who blinds himself after he recognizes himself as a patricide.

What is especially striking in these two novels is that both characters' actions, and their narration are open to repetition. In addition, the second novel is, in many ways, a repetition of the first. The repetitive cycles of Robbe-Grillet in these two novels enable the narrative to have infinite possibilities of openings. It is as if the narrative system, the identification system, the characterization, the plot are systems that are under the threat of closure. Through repetition, Robbe-Grillet seems to eliminate such a threat. In this way, nothing ends, everything begins afresh. The last novel becomes a repetition of the first novel that writes it anew.

After drawing attention to the function and manifestation of repetition in two works of Robbe-Grillet, a decisive question can be asked: how to account for repetition as a concept, as a category? The clue for the answer comes from Robbe-Grillet himself. The writer says that the concept of repetition he employs in his works may have been suggested by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Robbe-Grillet makes two references to Kierkegaard and directs the reader to him.

First, in an interview with Thomas McGonigle, Robbe-Grillet explains:

If you are going to read Repetition, you have to have philosophical training, and it would help to know Kierkegaard. And I'm perfectly aware of the fact that readers without that education can also read it on another level, but my books are especially approachable by people who have some philosophical background.

The second reference appears in the epigraph to the novel Repetition. Robbe-Grillet quotes from Kierkegaard's book, Repetition: "Repetition and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been: it is repeated backward, whereas repetition properly so-called is recollected forward".

In a sense, Robbe-Grillet's works, especially his last novel, seem to be repetitions of Kierkegaard's category of repetition. The remaining of this essay will try to do justice to the lead Robbe-Grillet gives us in terms of understanding the repetitive structure he so brilliantly employs. Kierkegaard's approach to repetition can be used as a way of mapping out a territory and raising questions regarding repetition. However, it is not my intention to give a philosophical analysis of Kierkegaard. Rather, following the framework Kierkegaard presents, I hope to provide a context for the discussion of the function of repetition as manifested in the works of the novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet.

Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writing Repetition is one of the most influential inquiries into the nature of repetition. It is a philosophical study on the meaning and function of repetition, and Kierkegaard questions the possibility of repetition and its relation to recollection in two narratives. In the narrative of a young man's failed love affair, Kierkegaard asks whether recollection can possibly fulfill desire. Secondly, seeing that recollection fails, the narrator's, Constantin Constantius', account of his failed return trip to Berlin is given. With this trip, the narrator decides to carry out an experiment in order to determine "whether a repetition in the form of a concrete realization of an abstract desire is possible at all" (Mazur 1). In the case of both recollection and repetition, the reconstitution of happiness is the goal, but both projects fail.

For Kierkegaard, recollection is a kind of repetition in the form of repeating the ideal in actuality, and according to him, the young man has failed to repeat the ideal (his love) in the form of the actual (relationship). In fact, the young man continues his repetitions in the realm of the ideal by talking about love, reading and writing love poems. He is thus engaged in "mere verbal repetitiveness" (Mazur 1). Kierkegaard dismisses recollection for it never actualizes the ideal.

Upon the young man's failure at recollection, the narrator, Constantin Constantius, decides to try the possibility of actualizing the ideal through repetition and applies the test on himself. His plan is simple: he will go to Berlin and try to repeat his previous visit to Berlin which had given him immense pleasure. Although Constantin repeats everything he had done in his previous visit, his second Berlin visit fails to duplicate the original. Like the young man, he fails at his mission and he realizes that "he is unable to repeat a previous experience without changing its meaning" (Mazur 3). When he repeats his activities of the previous visit in a mechanical way, "the repetition is exact but, apparently, meaningless" (Mazur 3). Each of his various repetitions produces "an entirely new significance to the event" (Mazur 3). "Berlin remains for Constantin an idealized image of pleasure, which cannot be recovered" (Mazur 3). But that is not all. Now Constantin has in his hands a series of unwanted repetitions, tending toward, but not ever reaching, a series of meanings. The search for the repetition of an original experience and meaning has unwittingly led Constantin, not to *that* meaning, not to a plethora of other meanings, but to a disturbing pattern of blockage, or disruption, of such polysemy. Thus, "The trip to Berlin ends in a moment of dissemination rather than self-gathering" (Kangas 111).

In attending to his own experience, Constantin discovers that repetition entails difference. With this discovery, Kierkegaard provides the ground for modern philosophers who define repetition as repetition-as-difference. In John Caputo's explanation,

To repeat is to produce and to alter, to make and to make anew. Repetition is a principle of irrepressible creativity and novelty; it would be impossible to repeat without altering what is already made. Even to repeat 'exactly the same thing' is to repeat it in a new context which gives it a new sense. (qtd. in Mazur 6)

Thus, modern philosophy places difference at the core of repetition and "insists that repetition is a dynamic process, capable of generating movement and change" (Mazur 6). Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze offer alterity and creativity as key concepts in their discussions of repetition and Kierkegaard is the precursor of these modern definitions of repetition with his distinction between recollection and repetition. For instance, Deleuze argues that Kierkegaard reverses Platonism (Mazur 13) by asserting the distinction between the original and the repetition rather than sameness. In this way, repetition poses a threat to the authority of the original which does not return.

Kierkegaard differentiates repetition from recollection and connects the young man's failure to his confusion of repetition and recollection. For Kierkegaard, explains Krystyna Mazur, recollection is "based on [the desire for] the recovery of a prior presence and [the production] of a faithful duplicate of the original" (Mazur 5). Repetition, however, entails difference. "Recollection is the backward movement of memory, which [would] ideally reproduc[e] the past; repetition is a forward movement, which creates as it repeats" (Mazur 5). The difference of the meaning of 'before' in recollection and repetition marks the change in consciousness. According to David Kangas, in recollection, consciousness is re-presented; in repetition, consciousness "undergoes itself or finds itself passively related to itself" (Kangas 89). In other words, Kangas seems to mean that in repetition, consciousness allows itself to become anew, lets itself absorb, or embody that otherness called repetition. If repetition succeeds, consciousness will have begun again, or will have restarted.

According to Kierkegaard, the difference between recollection and repetition points to the "shift from ancient to modern philosophy" (Mazur 5). Kierkegaard writes:

Repetition is a crucial expression for what 'recollection' was to the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowing is a recollecting, modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition. . . . Repetition and

recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward (Repetition 131).

In the Greek model, Kierkegaard argues, recollection is presented to posit all knowledge “because knowledge relies on rediscovering the original truth” (Mazur 5). In Platonic ‘recollection’, there is a temporal succession of presence, loss, and recovery. What is recovered is assumed identical to what was present in the first place (Mazur 5). Kierkegaard writes, “recollection has the great advantage that it begins with the loss; the reason it is safe and secure is that it has nothing to lose” (Repetition 136). In other words, for Kierkegaard, the self-assurance of recollection is somewhat cynical, in that it starts from the memory of the original rather than from the original itself, whose loss has already been covertly accepted by recollection. Therefore, recollection is the backward movement of memory and it has nothing to lose, because there is, strictly speaking, nothing to be lost there. Here, Kierkegaard seems to be exposing the ironic manoeuvre underlying recollection.

According to John Caputo, Kierkegaard’s questioning of the presence of backward and forward movements of memory in recollection and repetition is a questioning of repetition under the guise of a questioning of movement. As Mazur states, “If recollection is an attempt to arrest movement, to still the flux, repetition is a way of constructing meaning within the flux, taking time and change as its elements” (Mazur 16). Caputo explains,

Recollection is an intelligible and frank attempt to undo the movement of time and becoming because it understands the sharp difference between eternity and time, logic and existence, being and becoming. Kierkegaard thought there really were only two ways to address the question of movement: either to affirm it, with the category of repetition, or to negate it, through the category of recollection. Either way, one makes sense of the flux. . . Without either recollection or repetition there is nothing but the flux, nothing but a meaningless turmoil. Recollection stills the turmoil; repetition finds a way to maintain one’s head in the midst of it. (qtd. in Mazur 16)

Repetition, as Kierkegaard suggests, is also fed by the past but it moves forward in time. In its forward movement, repetition “forges a new presence” (Mazur 5). Kierkegaard writes, “That which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new” (Repetition 149). “Consequently, repetition proper, as defined by Kierkegaard, is a creation as well as a repetition, or a repetition with a difference” (Mazur 6).

Kierkegaard’s repetition cannot point at the origin of repetition. Rather than turning back and becoming fixated on the past, repetition moves forward by employing the *infinite beginning*, which Kierkegaard names *the instant*. In *the instant*, temporality begins and it is the name for a beginning that cannot be interiorized, appropriated, recollected, represented, or possessed (Kangas 4). *The instant* makes repetition a beginning, “the infinite beginning, the instant of coming-into-existence, which it can neither posit nor recollect” (Kangas 8). To understand *the instant*, we firstly need to consider Kierkegaard’s notion of internalization.

For Kangas, through problematizing beginning and presenting it as anarchic, Kierkegaard also problematizes the egological interpretation of subjectivity, or *interiority*, which explains the ego’s self-intimacy, self-possession, and self-positing. For Kierkegaard, *interiority* is a paradoxical concept because he believes that *the interior* is constituted precisely as what self-consciousness cannot interiorize. The failure to interiorize is a result of the consciousness being exposed to temporality. For Kierkegaard, temporality *cannot* be recollected, anticipated, or brought to presence (Kangas 196). Rather, the interior is the

incessant opening of self-consciousness to its outside. By means of its interiority, “self-consciousness is never finished and is never in full possession of itself” (Kangas 196).

In *the instant*, the repetition of past events is not so much recollection as it is re-enactment. What makes such re-enactment repetition and not recollection is that in Robbe-Grillet, the events, although they have a prior, a “before”, are experienced and presented as beginning. Or repetition-as-beginning. Here, Kierkegaard’s problematization of self-consciousness and internalization, the function of *the instant* that opens the present both to past and future are illuminating. The instant is the rupture or the event through which presence opens. It signifies the birth of presence: not only the temporal present as the “now” of self-consciousness in its distinction from past and future, but presence also as parousia, presence as salvation” (Kangas 161). “By means of the instant the horizon of temporality opens as past, present, and future. The instant, eternity’s destruction of presence, opens the present time to consciousness” (Kangas 190).

There is a sense in which the repetitions in Robbe-Grillet’s texts appear as fractures. These fractures may be seen as manifestations of the Kierkegaardian *instant*. In Kierkegaard, the instant marks a discontinuity within temporality (Kangas 31). Thus, the narrators’ flashbacks function as ruptures in temporality. In such discontinuities of time, Kierkegaard finds an origin “that has always already withdrawn, and that therefore is irrecoverable, or one that withholds itself within a future that cannot be anticipated” (Kangas 32). In Robbe-Grillet, the repetition, that is the beginning, “never departs toward any end, [it is] a beginning doubled upon itself, a pure departure absolved from any determinate goals” (Kangas 46). Thus, repetition in Robbe-Grillet becomes an anarchic beginning where the paradox is that there is an ‘about-to-be’ that never becomes. Suspended eternally between departure and arrival, beginning and ending, a present never opens up (Kangas 46). Therefore, what is repeated, as an anarchic beginning, is “prior to all presence” (Kangas 46). In the end, reality becomes “a departure without any goal or end” (Kangas 46). A thing that is repeated is never the same thing. In this sense, repetition “reveals the non-identity of the object within itself” (Mazur 17). Through repetition, present can be imagined not as a re-presentation but rather like a beginning. If it was possible to re-present time, it would be recollection. For repetition, the future is “what escapes anticipation, foresight, calculability, and so on. Hence, quite simply, repetition is a relation to the *absolute future* (the future that remains unrepresentable)” (Kangas 195).

In Alain Robbe-Grillet’s novels and Kierkegaard’s essay, both entitled Repetition, the notion of repetition illuminates to things: First, “the distinction between the time of the event, originary time, and the time of the project (between the instant and any duration)” (Kangas 124) becomes evident, visible. Neither Constantin’s return to Berlin, nor Henri Robin’s return to Berlin integrates their consciousness to their own temporality. The horizon of presence is different from the memories past presents. Yet, not being able to re-present memories, consciousness cannot return to past. Because, second, when consciousness appears as ‘before’, it becomes the denied or the repressed Other. What repetition signifies in both Kierkegaard and Robbe-Grillet is thus that “if there is repetition, it would not, in all strictness, be a matter of return, but rather departure” (Kangas 44), a boundary-seeking, boundary-crossing operation, in search of an identity to come, and an impossible closure. Repetition, as difference, as beginning, as the Kierkegaardian instant, and as Robbe-Grillet-like indeterminacy, is nothing but a radical openness toward the future, toward the Other.

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