

Repetition and Radical Orthodoxy

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Repetition and Identity. By Catherine Pickstock. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. \$21.95 (pb).

Repetition and Identity is a formidable addition to the growing collection of work associated with the largely British Radical Orthodoxy movement. Catherine Pickstock, recently named Norris Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, is one of its central figures. This new book is part of Oxford University Press's series The Literary Agenda, which presents shorter books written by people in a wide range of academic fields on the relevance of literature and the humanities. Rowan Williams's 2016 book *The Tragic Imagination* is a part of the same series.

The word *repetition* signals both Pickstock's central concern and her two key interlocutors. In his book *Repetition*, Søren Kierkegaard claims that repetition is to modern philosophy and theology what recollection is to Plato. With her commitment to Radical Orthodoxy's view of reality as analogically participating in divine ideas, a view developed through readings of Plato, Aquinas, and others, Pickstock is well positioned to unpack and build on Kierkegaard's claims. Her other major interlocutor is the French poststructuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze, one of whose major works was *Difference and Repetition*. Deleuze develops a subtle postmodern view of reality that resembles a transcendental empiricism. His views provide a useful contrast, particularly in the first half of the book, to Radical Orthodoxy's Platonic commitments.

In the first four chapters, Pickstock presents what she calls a "serpentine reology." These chapters are very difficult but necessary for what follows. First, she does the work, "beyond Aquinas but not

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against him” (p. 14), of showing that what is *real*, reology, can be more metaphysically fundamental than what *is*, ontology. Her definition of reology, while not always clear, allows her to include a wider range of phenomena, such as signs and shadowy doubles, that may or may not materially exist, in her field of consideration. Ontology, which has its roots in Aristotle’s definition of substance, is more restrictive. Her reology is best conceived, in this instance following Aristotle, as constant motion because motion is what links space and time. This motion can be conceived as “serpentine” because reality gathers up before it moves forward. This serpentine reology holds throughout the scale of creation. Minerals, in the long view of time, undulate, vegetables generate, and animals imitate. Each rung on this scale of being builds on the previous one. We humans need signs in order to “imitate” and so fully participate in this serpentine reology. In the end, she claims that serpentine reology, which can only hold true through Radical Orthodoxy’s analogical participation, is one of only two accounts of reality that are fully coherent. The other is that of Deleuze and his transcendental empiricism, and Pickstock admittedly only fights Deleuze to a standstill. Ultimately, she argues with a Deuteronomy-like choice, “alternative truths can only be existentially lived out or performed; they are not readily decidable, through the pursuit or wielding of logical or dialectical argument” (p. 87).

Chapters 5 to 7 are focused on more existential concerns, primarily engaging Kierkegaard and Freud. Throughout these three chapters, Pickstock is driving toward a particular kind of repetition, what Kierkegaard calls “reduplication.” Reduplication is a word taken from linguistics and means phrases such as “*hee haw*” and “*hurley burley*” where the second word closely imitates the first. The person Kierkegaard, Pickstock, and the traditional Catholic tropological interpretation of Scripture invites us to “reduplicate” is Jesus. At the conclusion of this section of the book, the author writes that “in this work of reduplication, we can prove the reality of atoning work in the integrity of an ethico-aesthetic ‘style’ which endures and foils evil, anxiety, and tragedy with a saving fortitude and joyful ultimate confidence” (p. 147). This sentence is one of many in the book that rewards careful and creative reflection and that can shift how one prays and serves. A personal challenge is to live with the “style” Pickstock points to in her condensed sentence and invite others to do the same, and so live with this “joyful ultimate confidence.”

The author gets to reduplication as the most plausible Christian stance by using Charles Taylor's insight that the modern self is a "buffered self" and so impervious, for example, to enchantment. The alternative is a "porous self," open to either material or spiritual possession. Through the course of these central chapters, Pickstock argues that the buffered self as a "lone legislator in the cosmos" is not credible. She presents material possession as a serious alternative through the example of Freud, whose theories of the unconscious provide a well-known and formidable account of ultimately material forces that seem to rule our human lives. For Pickstock, though, Freud's version of material possession results in an amoral moralism that, in any case, is still tainted with unresolved spiritual mysteries. She concludes that we therefore must be "spiritually possessed from without, permit(ing) the possibility of the emergence of a spiritual self-integrity which is an ethical continuity in variety within time" (p. 123) With Kierkegaard's reduplication, Pickstock finds a persuasive description of a spiritually possessed Christian with self-integrity that is also consistent with her serpentine reology.

In chapters 8 to 10, Pickstock's argument "metamorphose(s) into a sideways articulation of creation, redemption, apocalypse and God as repetition" (p. xi). Her key words are *recapitulation*, which she derives from Irenaeus, and *reconstitution*, which she gets from Origen. Her exploration of recapitulation is clear, imaginatively compelling, and pastorally useful. One of her central concerns throughout the book is the proper balance among the past, present, and future. In various ways she describes imbalance among the three with, for example, the melancholy pull of the past or the oppressive illusion of the future. Her demonstrations from literature and art in this section are particularly engaging.

Pickstock is less persuasive when she turns to Origen and "reconstitution." In her effort to unpack Kierkegaard's suggestion that "eternity is indeed the true repetition in which history comes to an end and all things are explained" (p. 327), Pickstock finds herself needing to work within Origen's entire theological system. In just ten pages of text she, relying on Origen, presents eternal repetition as universal salvation and then the inner life of the Trinity as the impossible union of two types of repetition that she had, up until that point in the book, kept separate. For this reader, it was too brief and condensed to adequately engage both the huge theological ideas and Origen's

important but controversial claims such as *apocatastasis*, human pre-existence, and the possibility of other creative worlds. It is a bridge too far.

Repetition and Identity is a fruitful and challenging book. Pickstock has mastered the canons of Western literature, philosophy, and theology, and is fluent in the terms of metaphysics, linguistics, semiotics, and poststructuralism. She frequently and rapidly shifts from one mode to another in her dense text. The first two times I read the book, I needed to search online at least once a page for definitions, biographies, and summaries. In addition, I needed to read or reread about twenty-five books to be sure I understood what she was saying. I don't begrudge the effort at all. Pickstock is a benevolent thinker with a beautiful and firm conviction of what's true. The sentence I quoted earlier about reduplication is one of many throughout the book that open up vast avenues for reflection and meditation. To choose just one other rich vein, her frequent reflections on the particular gifts and strengths of women, exemplified by a Kierkegaardian dance through time and the Marian song of the Magnificat, are worthy of embrace and celebration. This is only her second book. I hope she publishes many more.