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Few thinkers have been so consistently misunderstood as Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). Amongst the many myths that have attached themselves to his work is the belief that Kierkegaard was an irrationalist who denied the value of clear and honest thinking. The truth is that Kierkegaard did deny the power of reason to uncover universal and objective truth in matters of value, but in the current philosophical climate there is nothing irrational about that.

The contributors to this companion probe the full depths of Kierkegaard's thought, revealing its distinctive subtlety. The topics covered include Kierkegaard's views on art and religion, ethics and psychology, theology and politics, and knowledge and virtue. Much attention is devoted to the pervasive influence of Kierkegaard on twentieth-century philosophy and theology.

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
KIERKEGAARD

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*The Cambridge Companion to*  
**KIERKEGAARD**

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To the memory of  
Edwin Ellis

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>C</i>	<i>The Crisis (and a Crisis) in the Life of an Actress</i>
<i>CA</i>	<i>The Concept of Anxiety</i>
<i>CD</i>	<i>Christian Discourses</i>
<i>CI</i>	<i>The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates</i>
<i>CUP</i>	<i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments (volumes 1 and 2)</i>
<i>EO I</i>	<i>Either/Or I</i>
<i>EO II</i>	<i>Either/Or II</i>
<i>EO<sup>h</sup></i>	<i>Either/Or (Hannay)</i>
<i>EPW</i>	<i>Early Polemical Writings</i>
<i>EUJ</i>	<i>Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses</i>
<i>FT</i>	<i>Faith and Trembling</i>
<i>FT<sup>h</sup></i>	<i>Faith and Trembling (Hannay)</i>
<i>JF</i>	<i>Journals and Papers</i> [followed by volume and page or by entry number]
<i>KALJC</i>	<i>Kierkegaard's Attack upon "Christendom"</i>
<i>OAR</i>	<i>On Authority and Revelation</i>
<i>Pap.</i>	<i>Søren Kierkegaard's Papers</i>
<i>PC</i>	<i>Practice in Christianity</i>
<i>PF</i>	<i>Philosophical Fragments</i>
<i>PV</i>	<i>The Point of View for My Work as an Author</i>
<i>R</i>	<i>Repetition</i>
<i>SLW</i>	<i>Stages on Life's Way</i>
<i>SUD</i>	<i>The Sickness unto Death</i>
<i>SUD<sup>h</sup></i>	<i>The Sickness unto Death (Hannay)</i>
<i>SV</i>	<i>Samlide Værker</i> [superscripts denote edition]
<i>UDVS</i>	<i>Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits</i>

References to the works of Kierkegaard are to the Hannay and Hong translations, with the following exceptions: *C* [trans. Crites, 1967], *CD* [trans. Lowrie, 1940], *KALJC* [trans. Lowrie, 1944], *OAR* [trans. Lowrie, 1955], and *PV* [trans. Lowrie, 1939].

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
KIERKEGAARD

## Introduction

Myths attach rather easily to some thinkers, especially to those who like Hegel are hard to read or like Kierkegaard hard to place. Such myths are often based on hearsay or a superficial reading of the texts. One lingering myth about Kierkegaard is that he is an irrationalist in some sense that denies the value of clear and honest thinking. Kierkegaard did deny the ability of reasoned thought to arrive at universal and objective truth on matters of value, but today that is considered quite rational. This collection of previously unpublished essays is offered as proof of how wrong it is to suppose that if Kierkegaard's philosophical star is in the ascendant, as it now is, things must be going badly with philosophy.

Besides this general myth, though owing as much to them as they to it, are the particular myths – of Kierkegaard's uncontrolled predilection for paradox, a delight in exaggeration, and his writer's weakness for rhetoric over terseness – myths that have led in their turn to superficial renditions of the ideas and to failures to detect consistency or development in his multiauthored production. More than with any other recent thinker, and for good or ill, the reception of Kierkegaard's work has carried the subjective stamp of the receiver's own preferences. So much so that one might well ask if Kierkegaard has not so much enjoyed as "suffered" his several renaissances.

Emanuel Hirsch, whose influential German translations reflect personal political leanings, tried to weave Kierkegaard into the tangled web of an existence theology adapted to National Socialism. Herbert Marcuse, the revisionary Marxist, detected in Kierkegaard the makings of a deeply rooted social theory, while his Frankfurt School colleague Theodor Adorno saw in Kierkegaard a fellow can-

poignant against the tyranny of the concept over the particular. The criticisms these two leveled at Kierkegaard's focus on religion and the individual are nevertheless countered by narrowly focused visions of their own. Besides Hirsch, Kierkegaard was heralded by many other theologians. Attempts to see in him the provider of a radical Christian apologetic set in motion yet another school of interpretation. But he was also eagerly read in Max Weber's circle and welcomed by agnostic and atheistic thinkers of widely diverging political views. Heidegger's debt is still to be measured, but Kierkegaard's influence on the foremost Marxist intellectual of the century is well recorded. Though later in life Lukács criticized the "self-mutilating subjectivism" of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel, in his youth he had held Kierkegaard in an esteem that bordered on hero worship. As for yet another dominant twentieth-century tradition, analytical philosophy of language, it is no news that its leading twentieth-century exponent also felt the impact of Kierkegaard's thought. Wittgenstein once described Kierkegaard as the nineteenth century's most profound thinker.

This chameleon-like quality of the Kierkegaard reception can be, and has been, blamed on Kierkegaard himself, on his resort to pseudonymity and on the variety of his themes and writing styles; one gets the impression that behind the writings no one in particular is at home. Others, and not only those like Balthus and Foucault who proclaim "the death of the author," would find in this, on the contrary, a reason for praising the writings. Thus postmodern perspectivity itself provides yet another illustration of the versatile tenacity of Kierkegaard's appeal, bringing a very broad but perhaps precisely on that account still limited perspective of its own to bear on the varied texture of Kierkegaard's writings and on the many levels of meaning they can be made to disclose.

Given the huge space dividing this newest of renewals and straightforwardly theological readings of Kierkegaard, it is surely opportune to look again and carefully *into* as well as *at* the texts. Although some may take the width of the welcome Kierkegaard has enjoyed to be a reliable indication of the perennial topicality of his writings, the sheer heterogeneity of the banners under which the reception has occurred does suggest that justice has still to be done and that a vast middle ground may still be waiting to be charted and reclaimed.

Writing of himself Kierkegaard was reminded of what he had once written pseudonymously about Socrates (see the epigraph to Bruce H. Kirmanse's essay), that "his whole life was a personal preoccupation with himself, and then guidance comes along and adds something world-historical to it."<sup>2</sup> This was Kierkegaard's own perspective on his life in retrospect. He came to believe that he had had a religious mission from the start. The first part of the description seems fitting enough, but how far Kierkegaard's own life contained anything that might attract a biographer looking for a "world-historical" dimension is less clear. With regard to the influence of his writings, however, history has certainly proved Kierkegaard right.

Apart from four visits to Berlin and a trip to his family roots in Jutland, Kierkegaard's short life (like Kafka he lived to be only forty-two) was spent entirely in and around Copenhagen, a city with at the time a population of little over one hundred thousand. He was born there on 5 May 1813, the year being that which also saw the birth of Richard Wagner and of the father of Nietzsche, Wagner's youthful admirer-to-be and later critic. Kierkegaard was born eight years before Dostoevsky and five years before Marx. Among the thinkers who were to influence him, Hamann and Lessing had died a generation earlier, Hegel was forty-three and was to die in Kierkegaard's first year as a student. Schelling, whose famous lectures in Berlin in 1847 Kierkegaard attended along with many others who were to influence the course of European culture, including Marx, was thirty-eight.

The early years in Copenhagen were marked by forced proximity to a deeply religious father who had retired from business before Soren was born and by the deaths before he reached the age of twenty-one of his mother and five of the family of seven of which he was the youngest. Kierkegaard spent ten years at the university before completing his dissertation *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (1841). In preparation, it seemed, for a career in the Church. His second major work *Either/Or* (1843) marked a postponement of that career and was the fruit of a fateful decision. In 1841 he broke off his engagement after one year to Regine Olsen, and there followed a period of intense creativity that lasted during and after a four-month trip to Berlin, ostensibly to hear Schelling's lectures. The publication of *Either/Or* in February



1843 (the manuscript was completed in November 1842) was followed in October of the same year by two thinner volumes, *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling* (both written for the most part on a second visit to Berlin following the publication of *Either/Or*). All these works may be said to express the author's "personal preoccupation with himself," in that they take up the question of the status of the "exception" in society with respect to a problem that Judge William in *Either/Or* calls "realizing the universal." In *Fear and Trembling* this problem is grasped first of all in terms of ethical participation, but the theme reappears soon after in *Stages on Life's Way* (1843), with a religious perspective brought more sharply into focus. Prior to that work, however, in June 1844, and within days of each other, there had appeared two books introducing new topics, *Philosophical Fragments* and *The Concept of Anxiety* (or *Dread*). The former, raising what seems on the surface to be an epistemological question, subtly distinguishes a Christian notion of knowledge from that of the philosophical tradition from Socrates to Hegel, a theme elaborated at much greater length in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* (1846). On the other hand, *The Concept of Anxiety* is an examination of the psychological background to the experience of sin and contains Kierkegaard's seminal account of anxiety (*Angest*) in the face of "nothing."

Alongside this already impressive and entirely pseudonymous production, Kierkegaard had also published in parallel twenty-one "edifying" (*opbyggelige*, also translated "upbuilding") discourses, signed works, some of them appearing simultaneously with works written under pseudonyms. As its full title indicates, *Postscript* was intended to "conclude" Kierkegaard's authorial career. However, in the guise of one of his pseudonyms (Frater Taciturnus, in this case), Kierkegaard provoked a feud with a satiric weekly, *The Corsair*, which instead of responding to the pseudonym turned ferociously on Kierkegaard himself. The affair had a deep and lasting effect on Kierkegaard's relationship with his fellow citizens on all social levels.

Partly, it seems, to avoid giving the impression that persecution by a weekly had forced his hand, Kierkegaard decided to abandon whatever plans he had formed for giving up authorship and becoming a cleric. In 1847 he published *Edifying Discourses in Different*

Spirits and the substantial *Works of Love*, followed in the spring of 1848 by *Christian Discourses*, and in 1849 by *The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air* and *Three Discourses at Communion on Fridays*. All were on explicitly Christian themes and published under his own name, though in 1827 he briefly returned to the "aesthetic" genre in a feuilleton essay entitled *The Crisis (and a Crisis) in the Life of an Actress*. During this time Kierkegaard had financial problems, frequently changed apartments, and became increasingly concerned about his position *sub specie aeternitatis* as a writer. A retrospective justification of his authorship was prepared but withheld due to scruples about how its reception might falsify his own polemical position as he was beginning to see it (the work, *The Point of View of [for] My Activity [Virksomhed] as an Author* [the latter Danish term also has the connotation of "effectivity"; the Danish "for" is sometimes translated "for"] was published posthumously, by Kierkegaard's elder brother, in 1856).

At about the same time Kierkegaard was writing two works under a new pseudonym, *Anti-Climacus: The Sickness unto Death* (1849) and *Practices in Christianity* (1850). These, with their clear address to the world around him, mark the intrusion of a "world-historical" dimension. Its roots may be traced to a review Kierkegaard wrote just prior to publishing *Postscript*. The book reviewed was entitled *Two Ages*, and in his comments Kierkegaard brings together and develops certain social and political aspects of what had been written in that earlier pseudonymous period. These two later works, written during and in the aftermath of the 1848 upheavals in Europe, can be read against the background of the political changes brought about in Denmark at that time. These changes included the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and of a people's church, both of which flew in the face of the category of the "single individual" developed by Kierkegaard and which he now believed was of critical polemical importance.

Over the next few years little was to be seen of Kierkegaard. His relationship with the Church and its higher representatives, notably the primate, L. F. Mynster, was becoming increasingly embittered, but the conflict was not public. Kierkegaard appears to have been biding his time until the appropriate occasion for launching an all-out attack on the Church. That occasion was provided by the death of Mynster in 1854 and an address by his successor, Kierkegaard's

former tutor H. L. Martensen, in which the late bishop was referred to as a "witness to the truth." Kierkegaard, however, still anxious that his own polemic should not be confused with those of others, held back for almost a year before unleashing the assault. When it came, he spent the remainder of his inheritance underwriting the publication of his own polemical broadsheet, *The Moment (or Instant)*. This went through nine issues before Kierkegaard collapsed one day in the street. He died in a hospital some six weeks later, probably of a lung infection. He was forty-two years old. On his sickbed he confided to Emil Boesen, his friend from boyhood, exceeded by that time his only friend, now a pastor and the only member of the Church he would see, including his own brother, that his life had been a "great and to others unknown and incomprehensible suffering." It had looked like "pride and vanity" but "wasn't" that. Kierkegaard said he regretted not having married and taken on an official position. His funeral was the occasion of a demonstration, led by his nephew who was an early supporter and who protested at the Church's insistence on officiating at the committal proceedings, contrary to the deceased's express wishes.

In a historical and biographical perspective, certain coincidences before and after Kierkegaard's death reveal his relationships to his family and country. In "Out with It: The Modern Breakthrough, Kierkegaard and Denmark," Bruce H. Kirmmse connects these occurrences with Kierkegaard's constant intellectual preoccupation with the concept of authority and with his personal struggle to find a voice within his family and in the Copenhagen of his time. There is no denying Kierkegaard's special psychological makeup. Indeed, so social that during the heyday of psychoanalysis it was fashionable to reduce Kierkegaard's thought to its psychological background, as though there was nothing more to his writings than the workings of a melancholic mind. Although such reductive readings are too narrow, personal themes are clearly at work. One of these is the profound impact of his father on his life and works, acknowledged by Kierkegaard in many ways and on numerous occasions. Kirmmse's essay presents more than a glimpse of this complicated relationship, but also of the neglected but strife-torn relationship between Kierkegaard and his elder brother. Kirmmse's essay fills this latter gap and also offers suggestions concerning the influence

of Kierkegaard's filial and fraternal relationships on his final assault on Christendom.

Roger Poole records the influence of Kierkegaard upon others. His "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth Century Receptions" surveys the full spectrum of Kierkegaard's impact on twentieth-century thought. Calling to mind what was referred to above as the chameleon-like character of the reception, Poole observes that thinkers who "fall under Kierkegaard's sway" do so for their own reasons, something that might also be said of those who reject him, as in the dismissive treatment of Kierkegaard in Denmark with which Poole begins. Among those Poole mentions who for their own reasons welcomed Kierkegaard are Jaspers, Heidegger, Benhabber, and Sartre (who "existentialized" Kierkegaard though declined to own to any debt). Through Heidegger Poole also traces Derrida's debt to Kierkegaard. In a Derridian spirit, Poole believes the chameleon-like nature of the reception is in an important respect a good thing, since Kierkegaard intended that his works be received by individuals. The survey is therefore "critical" in the sense that it takes to task those who attempt to fit Kierkegaard into any "overarching-scheme." The extent to which this criticism is justified, and if so to whom it applies, is something individual readers may wish to judge for themselves. Poole also considers the important effect of interpretation on translation, which in the case of the British and American reception's initially "plumb" reading led to a need to re-discover Kierkegaard the writer, which, once done, belatedly allowed the tools of literary criticism to be applied. Poole notes how excesses in the deconstructionist turn have done Kierkegaard a disservice but finds an approach to the texts through their literary form truer to Kierkegaard than the attempts of theologians and philosophers at a systematic reconstruction that ignores the poly-pseudonymity and stylistic variety. Not only truer but more apt for giving the right kind of answer to the question, *How should we read Kierkegaard here and now?*

Perhaps there are several right kinds of answer, depending on the where and then of the provenance of the text in question. In the later, more "world-historical" phase, Kierkegaard's writing certainly acquired definable historical targets. The question may then be not so much *how to read* the texts as *what can be learned* from them. By

placing one of Kierkegaard's most central concerns in its local context, George Pattison's "Art in an Age of Reflection" provides an opportunity to reflect on just that question. No theme recurs more consistently and problematically in Kierkegaard than "the aesthetic," and no one had more influence on Kierkegaard's understanding of art than the Danish writer and critic E. L. Heiberg. Pattison discusses this influence in the light of a coherent philosophy of art to be found in Kierkegaard that provides criteria for the evaluation of art works and a basis for a critique of art as such. Central to that critique is the notion of the limited role of the aesthetic in the psychological development of the individual. Pattison discusses Kierkegaard's diagnosis of his time as a reflective age, an age without passion, in which have been lost not only the immediacy required of great art but also the conditions for a religious understanding that allows us to see that what currently counts as Christianity is a form of aestheticism. He also notes that despite the narrow scope that Kierkegaard accorded art, he has been embraced by modern artists who, as Pattison explains, are attracted to Kierkegaard because of the tension in his works.

There is a continuing debate on the extent of Hegel's influence on the early Kierkegaard. Whatever the outcome of this debate, there is no doubt that the early pseudonymous authorship, notably *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, contains a scathing and often satirical attack upon Hegel and his Danish epigones. In "Kierkegaard and Hegel," Merold Westphal explores several points of contact between the two thinkers. Regarding one issue, to be revisited in Andrew Cross's essay, Westphal notes that for different reasons both Kierkegaard and Hegel believed that irony, considered as an existence posture, had to be overcome. In an examination of *Fear and Trembling*, Westphal argues that the issue for Kierkegaard was either Hegel or Abraham, speculative philosophy or faith. Finally, Westphal, in examining the epistemology of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, offers a detailed analysis of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel's quest for Absolute Knowledge. Of particular interest here is the fact that Westphal relates Kierkegaard's epistemological critique of speculative idealism to his ethico-religious critique of the same.

As Westphal's essay reveals, not only is Kierkegaard an ironical thinker, irony is a recurrent topic of his thought. Andrew Cross ("Neither Fisher Nor On: The Perils of Reflexive Irony") scrutinizes

Kierkegaard's doctoral thesis, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, and shows that the characteristics Kierkegaard finds in verbal irony, for instance the contradiction between internal and external, detachment, and the ironist's sense of superiority, become features of what some of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, especially Johannes Climacus, were to treat as a distinctive orientation toward existence. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus argues that irony is a transitional phase between the aesthetic and ethical modes of existence. Cross contends that ironists cannot take an ironical attitude toward their own lives, so that for this reason and others, the ironical perspective contains the seeds of its own downfall. It is a downfall, however, that from a Kierkegaardian point of view is not to be regretted.

C. Stephen Evans ("Realism and Antirealism in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*") begins by observing that contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship is divided into two main camps, those who read Kierkegaard, however indirectly, as making truth claims, and those who see him as a proto-poststructuralist, a precursor of Derrida and Lacan. According to the latter, it is a mistake frequently made by bowdlerizing theologians to read Kierkegaard as offering anything akin to positive doctrines about anything. Evans argues that this conflict of interpretation can profitably be understood as a moment in the realism/antirealism debate. Indeed, if Evans is right, Kierkegaard himself is an untapped resource for participants in this debate. After offering a definition of "realism," Evans probes *Postscript*, a text that has been used to support both realist and antirealist readings. Tackling a number of passages that appear to support an antirealist interpretation, Evans forcefully argues that while no less skeptical than Kant about our access to "things in themselves," Kierkegaard did believe that through the "organ" of belief or faith we have access to other realities. Thus, on Evans's reading, Kierkegaard both acknowledges the limits of human knowledge and affirms the realistic and independent character of what is known.

Writing in the hand of Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard pronounced the famous dictum: "subjectivity is truth." While the source of many a myth, the statement indicates the enormous emphasis that Kierkegaard placed on subjectivity, inwardness, and what can loosely be referred to as the emotional life. Cross has pro-

vided an analysis of one form of subjectivity, namely, that of the ironical perspective. Robert C. Roberts ("Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard") reflects on the relation between thought, emotion, and character in a wide range of Kierkegaard's writings. Kierkegaard, no less than Aristotle, believed the good life to be characterized not just by action but by a certain quality of feeling. Roberts shows that on Kierkegaard's view our passions are not simply internal modulations that we passively endure; quite the contrary, we are to a degree responsible for how we interpret ourselves and our world, an interpretation that has everything to do with how we feel. Moreover, the patterns of our thought and feelings are the contours of our character. Finally, focusing on *Christian Discourses*, Roberts specifies a number of distinctively Christian passional dispositions, illustrating them, in the way of the psychologist he is discussing, with a rich gallery of exemplars of the various forms of subjectivity he has extracted from the writings.

Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms make generous use of the image of a leap to describe the transition to faith. Though poststructuralists would disagree, it might be argued that Kierkegaard was consulted with the project of veridically representing the inner transformation from unfaith to faith. In her study of this transformation ("Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap") M. Jamie Ferreira argues that the idea of a qualitative transition is a structural element underlying and winding its way through the entire authorship. Focusing on *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Ferreira examines the variety of ways in which the leap can be understood, ranging from brute one-sided acts of will-power to an ineffable "happening." In the process, she reflects upon the important role attributed to both passion and imagination in Kierkegaard's account of religious transformation.

Ferreira's essay indicates that Kierkegaard's vision of faith is marked by a certain tension if not ambivalence. There are texts that invite a volitionist reading; that is, they would seem to suggest that faith is conditioned by an act of will. There are others, however, in which Kierkegaard stresses that it is only by the mercy and grace of God that God comes into our lives. Timothy E. Jackson ("Arminian Edification: Kierkegaard on Grace and Free Will") reads Kierkegaard as rejecting the claim that we are saved through irresistible grace as well as any "metaphysical account that would claim compatibility

between determinism and freedom of the will." As his title suggests, Jackson submits that Kierkegaard's understanding of grace is similar to that of the Dutch Reformed theologian Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), in that both Kierkegaard and Arminius believed faith to be a universally offered gift that we are free either to accept or reject. But what does Kierkegaard mean when he stresses repeatedly that we are free? Jackson's essay is, among other things, a sustained attempt to answer this difficult but important question.

Ethico-religious phenomena, on Kierkegaard's view, often need to be communicated indirectly. The lack of directness he bestows on his own writings oblique method of communication shows what problems this can give rise to for the reader. Ronald M. Green's "Developing *Fear and Trembling*" finds at least five layers of meaning in that text. On one level, the story of Abraham is being used to prevent faith in all its primitivity, showing that faith is not a simple version of philosophy. Green argues that *Fear and Trembling* is also offered as a course in the psychology of religious transformation, the primary lesson here being the distinction drawn by the pseudonymous author, Johannes de silentio, between the movement of infinite resignation and the movement of faith. Other themes include a commentary on the relation between our moral duties and our duties to God. Green also contends that there is an underlying message about sin, grace, and salvation: If God can forgive Abraham his murderous intentions, surely he can work wonders in our lives too. Finally, Green illuminates the personal dimension of *Fear and Trembling* with respect to Kierkegaard's relationship with his father and his break with Regine.

*Repetition* appeared on the same day as *Fear and Trembling*. Written under the pseudonym Constantin Constantine, it remains one of Kierkegaard's most perplexing works. The author's concept of repetition is notoriously hard to grasp. He tells us that repetition is reflecting forward, that it is the interest of metaphysics, but also that on which metaphysics founders. The idea of repetition is connected also with repentance, atonement, and it is identified with eternity. It is also the "watchword of ethics," Edward F. Mooney ("Repetition: Clearing the World Back") unravels the various strands in this tangle of meanings and argues that, first and foremost, repetition is a form of meaning-acquisition hounded up with the double movement, of giving up and receiving back the world. This brings



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