

A Myth of *Repetition*

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Fußsalbe, Mann von Sinope!
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The philological interpretation given to *Repetition* by Emanuel Hirsch more than sixty years ago, was such a success that it became a cliché, somewhat of a myth¹. Only a brief reminder is therefore necessary.

Regine's nod of the head in church on April 16, 1843, upset Kierkegaard deeply. In reaction to this he planned a second *Doppelwerk*, wherein he could offer her an alternative even more radical than *Either/Or* – and then wrote *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling* straight off, one after the other. The former text, which he finished in Berlin on May 25, was to tell the story of a love-struck young man who ends up committing suicide; the latter, which was started the very same day that the former was completed, envisaged a reunion in the shadow of Abraham. With the news in July of Regine's engagement, however, the alternative became futile and *Repetition* was rendered ridiculous; hence he substituted the references in the manuscript to suicide with references to disappearance, changed the tragic ending to one more in keeping with the events, and had the two texts finally published on October 16.

Hirsch, stressing the novelty of his interpretation, stated that it was supported by „facts as yet unconsidered, but as clear as daylight“². There are, however, other facts. In the manuscript, the first part of *Repetition* appears on highly unusual pale bluish paper, whereas the second part (also entitled „*Repetition*“) was written on his usual writing paper. One could therefore suppose that in Berlin Kierkegaard wrote only the first part, considering it a complete work³.

This hypothesis is supported by a clue in the text. At the very beginning Constantin declares: „About a year ago, I became very much aware of a young man“ [175]. In the present version, that ends with a final letter to the reader dated August 1843, „about a year ago“ sounds absurd, in that the young man's first letter, dated August 15, 1842, was

written when the relationship between the two was already over. As for the suppressed ending, the events were supposed to take place some time after February 17, 1843, date of the last letter before the pages were torn up⁴. If, as Hirsch maintains, the first and the second part were conceived together, „about a year ago“ would therefore necessarily refer, at most, to March 1842, and the Constantin's arrival in Berlin to *allgemeine Buß- und Bettag* [193] of the same year⁵. This would mean, though, that the relationship with the young man only lasted a little more than a month – highly unlikely if one takes into account the time-markers with which the text abounds⁶. If we were to consider the first part in itself complete, then everything would fit into place: *Bußtag* takes place on May 10, 1843, the very day of Kierkegaard's arrival in Berlin; Constantin writes after his return, that is, not before June; the relationship begins in the summer of 1842, and goes on for several months, until the suicide.

Lastly, there is a decisive piece of evidence. The verses from Staf-feldt that are quoted in the young man's first letter come from *Samlede Digte*, that the *Berlingske Tidende* of June 15, 1843, presents as a new publication. Kierkegaard bought both volumes and wrote the verses in his diary with a view to using them⁷. Straight after he copied from *Hamann's Schriften* what was to become the motto of *Fear and Trembling*, and added that he had originally planned to use a quotation from Herder as the motto⁸. From all these facts it must necessarily be concluded that:

I. In May 1843, in Berlin Kierkegaard wrote the first part of *Repetition*.

II. In June 1843, in Copenhagen, having finished *Fear and Trembling*, he substituted the references to suicide, and added a second part.

III. In July 1843, at the news of Regine's engagement, he altered the ending⁹.

The writing of *Repetition* therefore took place in three main phases, not in two. This clearly has a tremendous effect on Hirsch's interpretation. On the one hand, any clue that the suppressed ending could have been the re-enactment of a suicide disappears, and quite the opposite transpires – that it could, in fact, have been a marriage. On the other hand, the thesis of a *Doppelwerk* becomes rather uncertain, in that in the second phase *Repetition* seems to mirror *Fear and Trembling* rather than represent an alternative. That is to say, the thesis still holds in abstract only as regards the first phase, and even there with many reservations¹⁰.

In a letter dated May 15, 1843, Kierkegaard wrote: „In a certain

sense I have already achieved what I might wish for. I did not know whether I needed one hour for it, or one minute, or half a year – an idea – a hint – *sat sapienti*, now I am climbing. As far as that goes, I could return home at once“, *KW XXV* 80. He went to Berlin, therefore, to seek inspiration, and not to conclude what had been started at home¹¹. And just like the journey, the work that resulted from it did not turn out to be a *Blitz*, but an experiment in trial and error, as far from triumph as from catastrophe¹².

Notes

- 1 Cf. E. Hirsch, *Kierkegaard-Studien*, I-II, Gütersloh 1930-33, I, pp. 255-66. As an example *instar omnium* of his success, cf. *Kierkegaard's Writings* VI, pub. and trans. by H. and E. Hong, Princeton 1983, pp. xiv-xx. My quotations from *Repetition* come from *KW* VI, however only indicating the corr. p. of *SV* I III.
- 2 *Op. cit.*, I, p. 261. Essentially, they are: 1- the letter dated May 25, 1843; „I have finished a work of some importance to me, am hard at work on another“, *KW XXV* 82; 2- *Pap.* IV B 97, 5 and 6, where we find the corrections to the suicide references (Hirsch does not mention the analogous *Pap.* IV B 97, 4); 3- *Pap.* IV B 98, where the tearing of five pages is mentioned.
- 3 Ending, that is, with the suicide (and all three corrections are in the first part). It was F.J. Billeskov Jansen who forwarded this hypothesis in S. Kierkegaard, *Værker i Udvalg*, I-IV, Copenhagen 1950, IV, p. 118. The difference of paper types was, however, much too vague a fact, and A. Henriksen, in *Kierkegaards Romaner*, Copenhagen 1954, pp. 128-29, was greatly advantaged in his defence of Hirsch's interpretation, despite almost non-existent arguments. To my knowledge, it was only G. Malantschuk in *Dialektik og Eksistens hos Søren Kierkegaard*, Copenhagen 1968, pp. 232-33, who thereafter doubted of this interpretation, albeit on a purely logical basis (whereas A. McKinnon and N.J. Cappelørn in „The Period of Composition of Kierkegaard's Published Works“, *Kierkegaardiana*, IX, 1974, pp. 133-46, remark on the difference of paper types without drawing any conclusions).
- 4 In the fragments remaining, the text always starts at the top of the page, and since the young man's letters all start fairly low down, the suppressed ending could not have included other letters. In the appendix to S. Kierkegaard, *La Ripetizione*, ed. by D. Borso, Milan 1991, pp. 137-43, I supplemented the collations of *Pap.* IV B 97 and *SV* I III 321-22, marking all the additions in the margins, plus other six new variants (the most significant of which is perhaps in 236, l. 33: *med en fangen Oldenborre* [with a captured beetle], where *fangen* was omitted by an obvious oversight).
- 5 That is, April 20 – since *Buſtag* falls on the twenty-fourth day after Easter, and in 1842 Easter was on March 27 (cf. A. Cappelli, *Cronologia, cronografia e calendario perpetuo*, Milan 1988).
- 6 To quote some: „about a year ago, as I said, he came to me“ [176]; „During the next

two weeks, I saw him occasionally at my place... As time went on, his state became more and more anguished" [179]; „One day he came up to me... From that time on, he never visited me again... When we met, he avoided me" [180]; „he approached me again... he proposed that we meet in out-of-the-way places at specified times. I agreed" [181]; „Time passed. When possible, I attended this nightly vigil" [182]... And Henriksen, in defense of Hirsch, reformed the calendar: „Constantin's short trip surely took place in July", *op. cit.*, p. 130!

- 7 Cf. *Pap.* IV A 118. Kierkegaard preceded the verses with an „NB" and copied them accurately, starting with „Men" in place of the „thi" of *Repetition*. It is highly unlikely that he would have been quoting from an earlier edition (only this one appears in the *Auktionsprotokol*) or even from memory (there is mention of Staffeldt only on this occasion). Moreover, the position of the verses in the manuscript is central, separated from the rest – hence they were not added at a later date. Nor was the entire letter added later (though this is possible, in that the manuscript is made up mainly of separate sheets), but was certainly written first, since it bears the signature „Alphons", which was then changed to the definitive signature in the other letters.
- 8 Cf. *Pap.* IV A 122 and 126. In the final draft of *Fear and Trembling*, in fact, the quotation from Herder is erased and rewritten with a slight variation, erased yet again, and substituted with another, that is in the end replaced by the quotation herein (cf. *Pap.* IV B 96, 1). On reflection, such a thorough revision must surely have gone on throughout the writing of the entire final version.
- 9 In fact, in the ending, there is a great difference between the scribbled incidental observations abounding in misogynist outbursts (subsequently deleted) and the final letter to the reader which is written neatly, in a firm hand, without crossings out or corrections (the few corrections that there are were made at the time of printing), using Roman numerals and not Arabic as in the rest. It is therefore much more likely that it was written later, at the same time that the deletions were made, and very close to publication.
- 10 One must ask the question: why the change of plan from the first to the second phase? Of the few documents available, just one alludes to a turning point: „If I had had faith, I would have stayed with Regine. Thank Heavens, now I know... She has not become a stage-princess, so she might become my wife", *Pap.* IV A 107. This note is dated May 17, in the midst of the first phase, therefore. At the end of the first part of *Repetition*, Constantin says: „My young friend thought: Let it pass – and he was [the Hongs mistakenly translate this as „he would have been"] thereby far better off than if he had wanted to start with repetition. Then he would have gained the beloved again in the same way as the lover in the folk song who wanted repetition... and the repetition killed him" [212]. In a long note to S. Kierkegaard, *Gesammelte Werke V/VI*, Düsseldorf 1955, p. 156, Hirsch declares: „In the original version of *Repetition*, the passage was supposed to signify that the escape from repetition into death is, in all events, a better fate... In the present version, it is unmotivated and obscure". Having discussed this with Grethe Kjær, I have arrived at the opposite conclusion – that the passage can only make sense if the term of comparison is no longer a suicide, but a disappearance. And since all three of the corrections are at the beginning of the first part, the change of plan might well have occurred halfway through the first phase, at the same time that the idea for *Fear and Trembling* dawned.
- 11 It is very clear from the context that „an idea" is the idea for a literary work. The first part of *Repetition*, in fact, is headed „Berlin May 1843", *Pap.* IV B 97, 3 (undoubtedly in reference to the actual time of writing, because in the narrative, Constantin writes from Copenhagen), and in that there are no drafts of *Repetition* that go back to April, a direct derivation of the „idea" from Regine's nod of the head would also seem foundless. It is on the basis of this letter and the one included (both of which Hirsch ignores, al-

though they are already in C. Koch, *Søren Kierkegaard og Emil Boesen*, Copenhagen 1901, pp. 50-52), that I reconstructed the first phase in my postscript to S. Kierkegaard, *La ripetizione*, *cit.*, pp. 145-84 (wherein *Pap. IV A 101* plays a determining role as regards inspiration, and that was also ignored by Hirsch).

- 12 Hirsch talks of „catastrophe“ referring both to the aesthetic achievement of *Repetition* („what was to be his most beautifully poetic piece of writing went irretrievably wrong“, *Kierkegaard-Studien*, 1, *cit.*, p. 261), and to the whole authorship (end of the poetic and „religious *Neuwerden*“, *ibid.*, p. 266). It is superfluous to point out that *Stages on the way of life* will belie one and the other, despite Hirsch's specious reassurances (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 277-88).