
A Flaw in the Movement

Pondering on some extensive footnotes in The Concept of Anxiety; with temporary remarks on Kierkegaard's usage of Greek

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Do philosophers ever fulfil their promises? Sometimes they do; most of them certainly mean to fulfil them. (Time and the weird ways of tradition might intervene and mutilate thus breaking many a promise, especially in the domain of antique philosophy. But this activity is only an »accident« in the Aristotelian sense, the integrity of the philosophers in question suffers no damage). Do poets? Poets do not – on grounds of principle. Poetry forbids any assurance in past achievements and demands that the poet always starts from the beginning. This is no »nothing«, but the purely poetical void, out of which, consistently, a *semi*-creation ensues. It is an intermediary state, since poetry comes only second, both to reality and to the theological mode of being. From a different point of view poetry is the kind of substitute that unconditionally assumes a higher status than reality for all persons involved.

How does it come about that S. Kierkegaard, who works as a philosopher – clearly so, among other works, in *The Concept of Anxiety* – achieves this genuine poetical uncertainty; and how is it that this state becomes most intensified precisely when he develops his most crucial concepts, as is the case with movement?

We are not going to decide whether Kierkegaard »is« a poet or a philosopher. As in all similar discussions, sophistry awaits just around the corner. For the purpose of this article we have to assume, purely as a working hypothesis, that the first stage of the authorship, the one composed »uno tenore« from *Either-Or* to the *Postscript*, can be treated as *one* work, the directly theological aspect of it represented by the *Discourses* functioning as a substratum (this cannot remain hidden in the dark but has to appear now and again as a constant reminder); that a principle of simultaneity can even be applied to many of its parts (not only in the synchronical sense, as is the case with the twin books *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling*); to which work even the modern literary term »work-in-progress« might be applied.

We can reflect on whether it is a circle or an ellipse. There seems to be a point towards which this work is gravitating, shifting constantly from *Repetition* to the *Fragments*. The cycle is concluded by an abrupt leap, and we leave the poetical-philosophical unity to enter into another sphere. We might even consider using the Aristotelian concept of »poiesis« for the first

phase and »praxis« for the last.

This is not in agreement with Kierkegaard's own account in *The Point of View*. I am aware of this, but also of the fact that authors' declarations – especially those uttered in retrospect – do not have to be granted absolute weight. In that event every discussion would become superfluous and all creativity of reading annulled and hermeneutics (as an internal pursuit within a closed circuit) would triumph at the expense of any other possible working method. *The Point of View* should certainly be read with the respect and the attention it deserves. But when this is done, we can place it alongside the rest of the work it purports to elucidate. We do not, then, have to treat the author's statements in it as an absolute or necessary key to the structure (the word is used here in its original architectonic sense) of the entire authorship.

I assume it to be perfectly legitimate to use literary terms such as »setting«, »plot« or »inspiration« for this first, pseudonymous part of Kierkegaard's work, instead of reserving them solely for those parts which are generally recognized as being »aesthetic« a priori, and of which »The Diary of the Seducer« is the most prominent example. The same literary terms are practically useless, not to say misleading, after the *Postscript*.

We can equally well apply these terms to the concepts, in observing how they emerge, how they develop, shift, change names or simply disappear – in other words, how concepts *move*.

The association with the very concept of movement is imminent. But before entering into that discussion it is necessary, very briefly, to consider *Repetition* (the book, as distinguished from the concept of the same name) once more.

This work is developed around a void, woven around a little abyss: pages are missing, reality has intruded and changed its course – one might even speak of a perfect deviation. Loss of reality was its subject, and how this reality may be reconquered by a method other than that of Marcel Proust's elaborate literary research. Here the method is by far simpler, in its duplicity, and requires the participation of no less than the whole will. It involves what we might define as deliberate – at times indeed obstinate – maintenance by way of destruction. (Cf. an expression to be found later in the Papers¹: on destroying something in order to secure possession of it. This is a commentary on the stage immediately preceding the optimal, which is the repossession itself, by a sudden though believed in, and therefore expected, stroke of grace. There is also a secondary clause in the Discourse on Job² about the insane insistence on keeping what you lost for ever).

Repetition is elusive, evading, finally receding. Constantin Constantius, the pseudonymous author, departs in order to make room for the Young Man, his hero, even though the latter has already left us long ago – if we ever met him at all. Was this to be the »forward« and progressive answer to the Greeks, the prelude had announced? In the Platonic dialogues which treat recollection most intensely, such as the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus* and

Phaedo, the movement in the literary sense is only forwards, conducting to eternity through a single path, which certainly implies leaving the world behind. Any pendulum movement is rejected unequivocally.

What is the plot of *Repetition*? Let us recapitulate: an author begins his book with philosophical propositions in the grand metaphysical style – intermitted by sentences witnessing to his personal, detached involvement. Is a repetition possible? How can it actually come about? What is the modality of it? The problem becomes invested with human character. That is to say, there emerges a young person, who is supposed to be other than the author speaking, and who is infinitely involved in the issue and passionately interested in the outcome of the author's investigations.

The plot, really a non-plot, is reduced to the literary locus communis of unhappy love, the new element here being that it is carried out as an experiment on the part of the observing author, and that there is absolutely no outer circumstance to prevent the Young Man from attaining his beloved. The experiment is, in other words, neither physical (no outer obstacle) nor metaphysical, but psychological (paving the way to *Anxiety*), and the scene is the dual hero's inner world. At a second reading this plot appears to be truly labyrinthine. Consequently, the concept of repetition has to follow us everywhere in the book – an invisible reader's companion, leaping suddenly at decisive points into the scene, in order to provide the thin thread necessary for walking in this darkness. Thus, we hear that repetition is very easy dialectics. That it is here metaphysics has its interest at stake, while being indeed what metaphysics has to gain by getting crushed (this leads directly to the *Fragments*). That repetition is the second power of consciousness. Around this thread our young hero screams in agony, even when in company with the patient Job, who proves, especially in his case, to be a very rough comforter. We move inside a crypt. The problem cannot become explicit here. The only explicit thing about it is that it is a riddle. If we insist on more light, we have to wait until the following – or preceding book (according to whether the point of view is temporal or ontological), *Fear and Trembling*, which book, however, is presented on the title page as nothing but »lyrical dialectics«. This is the only place where the concept of repetition is elucidated – under a different name, the »double movement of infinity«, and by an author who is supposedly a different person and has never heard of this reduplicated Constantin Constantius.

I would call this the method of systematic regression, which it undoubtedly might have been, were it not for the poetical key. The same key provides us with yet another parallel explanation for this unprecedented phenomenon of multiple-pseudonymity Kierkegaard has set to practice: the poet begins from the beginning every single time. Even if you have written one thousand poems, you still always begin from the beginning, in total ignorance, and in constant dread of the silence and the void.

In trying, yourself an elusive subject, to study an elusive phenomenon, you are by no means obliged to dwell on the fruitlessness implied in this

type of circular observation.

In *Fear and Trembling*, where one possible key to the repetition was provided, we also find an entirely different angle from which to observe movement: it is defined in the sense of exercise (a study of the *movements* of faith occupies most of the chapter entitled »Preliminary Expectoration«, as in the practice of a dancer. The aim being that the movement is correct, as well as the observer's observation of it.

In 1843, prior to *Anxiety – Fragments*, S. Kierkegaard was among other things absorbed in studying Greek philosophy once more – this time from secondary sources, primarily Tennemann. The C group of journal entries in the *Papirer*, vol. IV, is full of references to that effect. He insists particularly on movement, in its whole spectrum: alteration, transition, change. Later on he confesses (Pap. V A 98) that no direct access to Aristotle was involved at that time. The reader is also struck by a sudden thought that occurs to Kierkegaard (Pap. IV C 48): Possibility in the realm of freedom corresponds to the void and the role it plays in the physical universe. Why did this ethical thought never occur to the Greeks?

My mention of Aristotle in this context is intended as a piece of information of secondary importance and can be only of little value to our present concern. Not just because Aristotle is a denier of the void.³ There seems to be no real relation between the notorious pair of forces, potentiality-actuality (on the pattern: adult contained already in child, statue in block of marble, the faculty of cutting in a still unsharpened axe – changes brought about by nature or by art through transition within the continuous) and Kierkegaard's possibility-actuality, held apart by a gap only the audacious leap of the individual can bridge, if at all.

The territory of the possible, considered as a world of its own, does display a continuity: anxiety, the constant factor, vouches for that. The scene is inward, the outside locus is *nothing*.

The presence of continuity can be illustrated by studying closely the long theatre sequence in *Repetition*⁴ and conferring with the chapter re-entitled »The Concept of Anxiety«⁵ in the homonymous book. The musing young theatre-goer, at a stage prior to actual existence though already seized by the »passion of possibility«, very soon arrives at more hazardous thoughts: about the wind, this »image of the consistency and certainty of human freedom«. This wind becomes transformed into the void – the anxiety-breeding Nothing in the latter work – where the individual, just about to plunge into sin, is captured by the »anxious possibility of *being able*«.

This was an instance of evolution within a continuum. What about the disruptive change?

Transition from non-being to being, conditioned not by necessity but by freedom, is analyzed in the »Interlude« of the *Fragments*. Transition to non-being, the simple, thus ineffable, passing to death, has never been examined, except in a poetical reference in a footnote from *Fear and Trembling*.⁶ An unidentified German verse is quoted here – by a very consistent recurring to poetry as the only adequate means of expression, if

the transition to death is not to remain completely alien to the existing individual: *ein seliger Sprung in die Ewigkeit*.

Within existence itself, according to Kierkegaard, the primordial passage from innocence to sin, and its correlative, from sin into salvation, is also discontinuous and must consequently again take place through a leap.

When does this major change occur? When – it is really inadequate to ask »when«, since it does not seem to occur in any *time*, but in the moment, which is its own unit, a time-eternity compound, or eternity intercepting and intercepted by time (to be distinguished from the »moment in and out of time« of the *Four Quartets*, which, incidentally, is closer to Aristotle).

The incognito definition of this has already been given, where else but in *Repetition*, on the outer occasion of describing the state of the soul at the awakening of first love.⁷ The soul is then transformed into a battlefield, where time past and time present fight with one another – to win the favours of an eternity that may vanquish them both. This bitter strife is an *act of recollection*, and the movement of eternity is a »flowing back into the present time«, back home, that is, to where it belongs.

Time is suspended precisely by the unit supposed to sustain it – in much the same style as when Danish Phonology suspends a vowel by casting it back upon itself in the phenomenon of the *stød* (=thrust or »glottal stop«, according to grammar), which is one of its own means of securing the flow of sound.

This structure will be applied to the supreme object of enquiry, the Incarnation, the inflection of the eternal into the temporal, the appearance of god-in-time concrete. The task is reserved for the *Fragments*.

In *The Concept of Anxiety* the scene is confined to man and man confined to himself, surrounded by nothing, with no other to address (anxiety makes lonely and impenetrable), left, in opposition to the verse by Baudelaire (»ange plein de gaité, connaissez-vous l'angoisse ...?«) to the irreversibility of it.

Poetry brings to mind an earlier, momentarily withheld promise. The *Concept of Anxiety* is primarily a book and we have to examine the movement in it, the kind of exercise it makes.

It does not partake too strongly of the poetical mixture to which we alluded in the beginning. Its movement – continuous, where *Repetition* developed along a discontinuous line – goes in the one-way direction of clarifying a concept. It is moving towards a goal that lies outside the boundaries of the book itself. The goal is dogmatics and the method that will make this goal reveal itself is the static one of demarcation with which the book opens. In the survey of the pseudonymous phase of the authorship performed in the *Postscript*⁸ Johannes Climacus seems to doubt the propitiousness of this form of expression and even regards the book from a distance, denouncing it as the only book in pseudonymity that is straightforward and, worse than that, »slightly didactic«.

The continuity is nevertheless broken by a couple of footnotes. They are disproportionate and must be distinguished from merely long footnotes,

of the kind we had seen in the *Concept of Irony*. (Apart from that there is no point in comparing these two concept books, because *Irony* is not yet inside the authorship and, in the second place, it was written for a scholarly purpose and had in consequence to be clad in scholarly attire).

The first footnote,⁹ attached to the text at a point where the demarcation of the ethical is discussed, is written in a tone of almost defensive self-explanation (this is the problem Kierkegaard has entangled himself into by pseudonymity: it is difficult to defend oneself other than by way of undertones and footnotes, in a network or maze of elaborate autopathetic cross-references. This is probably one of the reasons why he is in a hurry to terminate this phase and conclude the *Postscript* – to become direct at long last). After a summary exegetic reference to *Fear and Trembling* a digressive passage on *Repetition* unfolds. The reader of today, who has access to all *Papirer IV B* material, is in fact in an infinitely better position to read this note than any of Kierkegaard's contemporaries.¹⁰ The conclusion to be drawn from this passage, irrevocable for any reader from 1844 onwards who for some reason does not have *Repetition* ready at hand (and what if the book were, say, lost? Or has the Conqueror Worm perhaps suspended its operations? How many of these irrevocable interpretations do not haunt our erudite or simply humanistic acquaintance with the past – the Greek antiquity, for example?), the conclusion would be that the book of *Repetition* is a theoretical work on a philosophical concept, which it clearly is not, being far more complex. (The perplexed reader might in time think that it was precisely *The Crisis*, unwritten yet at the time of the *Postscript*, that was being discussed.) This is another instance of how reality, this time represented by J.L. Heiberg,¹¹ now intrudes into the concept itself, which is further defined in the footnote, in the style of telegram dialectics. This does indeed help to fill in some gaps in the earlier exposition, but leaves the concept ultimately open. And repetition remains the longing it always was. Neither a concept nor reality. The personal polemics concluding the footnote make the transition back into the body of the text (on transcending the ethical) a highly laborious matter.

Repetition contained one more desideratum: giving the final answer to the Greeks, at least as far as the concept of time is concerned. This is attempted in the second conspicuous footnote of *Anxiety*, which proceeds from the word »Moment«.¹²

No allusion, of course, to the Moment of the *Fragments* – written in simultaneity – and no shadow of reference to the incognito preparations for it or the various poetical synonyms we mentioned above. No linking of the moment to its natural context – first love; not one whisper about its obvious counterpoint rivals – the different states of loss-of-time and destitution of reality, so vividly portrayed in the first part of *Either-Or*, culminating in the chapter about The Most Unhappy.

The italicized Moment withdraws, immediately upon its appearance, into the footnote, is plunged into a sea of Platonic discussions (on the nature of non-being and the moment, based on the *Sophist* and *Parmenides*

respectively), carried over from *Irony* as it were, though with a far deeper familiarity with the old master now. This familiarity is qualitatively different from the scholarly insight with which *Irony* was written. We do not need to dwell upon Kierkegaard's Platonic exegesis, for the time being. It may suffice to note the closing of the footnote, which discloses the whole passage as Hegelian polemics (in many ways an unfulfilled wish at the stage of *Irony*) thus connecting it with its immediate surroundings in the book.

There is also a goal in this passage, something lacking from *Irony*, and this teleology constitutes the real difference between the two books, which is more than a difference of style or scope. After having exposed the Greek (=Platonic) views on time and the moment, the footnote concludes by denouncing their inadequacy for a Christian view of life. This may appear self-evident, since the juxtaposition has been made quite a few times before – within Christendom – by happy or unhappy lovers of especially Grecian, »serene« paganism.

We do not have to dwell upon that either. But we do have to point out that Kierkegaard disregards here – as also elsewhere in his work – that his inherent kinship with Plato would make it necessary to discriminate between levels of authorship, not only autopathetically but also when engaged in discussing Platonic concepts. It does make a difference to observe that it is the *young* Socrates (*Parmenides* 129bc) or the solemn Parmenides himself (151e) that is the exponent of a view, and that the whole dialogue – as always in Plato – cannot be attributed in the deepest sense to any other than its real master, Memory.

The Greeks had no concept of the moment, Kierkegaard argues, because they simply had no concept of history. He makes a rather arbitrary identification of τὸ ἐξ᾿αἰφνης as the moment, whereas in *Parmenides* the two are clearly distinguished. Plato uses¹³ (as also Aristotle after him) τὸ νῦν, the »now«, for the moment and τὸ ἐξ᾿αἰφνης for a particular instance or aspect of the moment, namely the moment within or rather »into« which change (especially the primordial one from rest to movement) takes place. »Into« cannot be used in any literal sense, because this moment is »nowhere«, and it cannot be assigned any time – being itself the root of temporality – because both its locus and its modus is the sudden. Thus, change is self-alteration and the deepest estrangement. Kierkegaard has missed this paradox: in order to become rooted in time – which implies alteration, »becoming« – you have to pass *suddenly* outside time and outside space. Existence is ecstatic. And this stepping aside constitutes the very continuity of existence. And self-realization is in reality self-estrangement. This is the closest possible approximation to a »Greek« view of life, if there exists any *one* such view. We might even add that, seen in this light, the Incarnation itself is not a gap but a fulfilment.

In disregarding this paradox, Kierkegaard, for all his respect for Plato in quoting him, is doing him some injustice, besides making a smooth, straightforward writer out of the author of *both* the *Symposium* and the *Laws*. In much the same way as he is being unjust towards himself when

referring to his own work backwards.

What is his own alternative for a concept of time within Christianity? He has already established the absolute opposition of quantity versus quality and, in so far as time is quantity, any change in the deeper sense, i.e. change in quality, must be attained through an irrevocable leap. The consequence of this is that you leave time behind. This tremendous act of transition does literally take place in the moment. Which, in this case, we conclude, not only becomes spacious but split. Time and eternity, true to the account in *Repetition*, are in conflict with one another. And the gaping void avidly awaits the individual who is about to fall and get crushed, »any time«.

This is the void of possibility that was to constitute the firm presupposition for freedom: the freedom of getting crushed. This freedom is an absolutely necessary condition, if any higher form of existence is to begin.

It is not without significance that the fullest treatment of the sudden (for Kierkegaard, a synonym for the moment) is to be found in the account of the daemonic,¹⁴ thus essentially becoming less an account of movement than of the psychopathology of it.

Aristotle had squarely removed the moment out of the continuity of time and assigned it to function strictly as a boundary, safeguarding the continuity of time, as it were, in parallel behaviour to that of the mathematical point towards the line stretching ahead.

After having broken the continuity of time Kierkegaard proceeds to divide the indivisible – the moment – in total opposition to the traditional patterns of philosophy. This was revolutionary, anticipating the splitting of the atom (indivisible). Aristotle had not provided for it, and he was proven wrong. This potentiality did indeed reside in the atom.

To bridge the gap through a leap has now assumed the status of a strict necessity, being in fact the only possible movement. Hence our last question: is this poetics or theology?

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SV: *Søren Kierkegaards samlede Værker*, ed. by A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg and H.O. Lange, I-XIV, Copenhagen 1901-1906.

KW: *Kierkegaard's Writings*, English edition directed by Howard V. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1978-

1. Pap. IV B 117, p.282 / KW, VI, p.302.
2. SV, IV, 17.
3. Cf. *Physics* 213a12 sq.
4. SV, III, 194-195 / KW, VI, p.154-155.
5. SV, IV, 313 / KW, VIII, p.41 sq.
6. SV, III, 93n. / KW, VI, 42n.
7. SV, III, 179 / KW, VI, 137.
8. SV, VII, 229.
9. SV, IV, 289-291n. / KW, VIII; p.17-19n.
10. Cf. Karsten Friis Johansen, *Kierkegaard og den græske dialektik*, *Fønix* 4(1980)281-305, in particular p.296.
11. I am referring to his condescending mention of *Repetition* in *Urania*, 1844, now accessible in English in KW, VI, p.379-383.
12. SV, IV, 352-354n. / KW, VIII, p.82-84n.
13. *Parmenides* 152b.
14. SV, IV, 396 / KW, VIII, 129 sq.