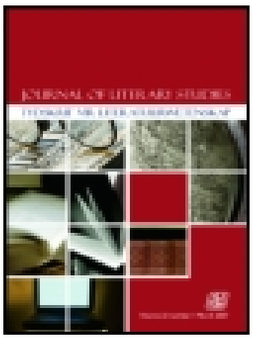

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# "Repetitions with a difference": The case of John Barth's *LETTERS*

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# "Repetitions with a Difference": The Case of John Barth's *LETTERS*

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## Summary

Playing with the memory capacity of language on all narrative levels, John Barth redefines the notion of repetition. In this article a closer look is taken at how Barthian repetition in *LETTERS* relates to Kierkegaardian repetition, Derridean iterability and Heideggerian *Wiederholung*.

## Opsomming

Terwyl hy met die geheuekapasiteit van taal op alle narratiewe vlakke speel, herdefinieer John Barth die begrip herhaling. Hierdie artikel kyk na Barthiaanse herhaling in *LETTERS* en bring dit in verband met Kierkegaardiaanse herhaling, Derrideaanse iterabiliteit en Heideggeriaanse *Wiederholung*.

Todd Andrews is a character in John Barth's seventh novel, *LETTERS* (1979), who tries his hand at a novel within the novel. He is rewriting his earlier *The Original Floating Opera*, the manuscript of which he claims to have handed over to Author John Barth at a party years ago, who in his turn used this particular manuscript as the basis for *The Floating Opera*, his own first novel, originally published in 1956. In a letter to his deceased father dated May 16, 1969, Todd interprets his own past in *LETTERS* on the basis of the earlier texts by himself and the Author by making two columns of events in what he considers to be the two cycles of his life. The left-hand column numbers thirteen events, from the moment he was born to the moment he decided to commit suicide in 1937; the right-hand column numbers ten events so far, numbers eleven, twelve and thirteen are blanks as yet. These events do not at that stage have a correlative in the present, or the future for that matter; nevertheless, they are present in their absence as Todd anticipates their future happening on the basis of their happening in the past. Not all events match entirely: "Okay, the correspondences are not rigorous, and there are as many inversions as repetitions or ironical echoes" (Barth 1979: 259), yet to Todd it is obvious that the past manures the future. As the motto of Mack Enterprises, his lover's husband's firm, already indicates, that is *Praeteritas futuras stercorant,* the past could "(a) fertilize the future, (b) turn into shit in the future, or (c) turn the future into shit" (Barth 1979: 80–81).

As Todd re-reconstructs his life, he achieves a dialogue with the texts of his past: obsessed as he is with his own past experiences he becomes almost seduced by them: "Where will my number 11 land me, this second time around? That's all I'm really curious about, now I've seen the pattern" (Barth 1979: 278). The gaps in the second cycle of his life are going to be filled by the "dialectic of repetition" of the past, to use a phrase deployed by Kierkegaard in his book on repetition.[1] In this way Todd becomes an object of dialectical

existence as he seems to be doomed by the inevitable textual repetitions that identify him. The text not only seems to be writing itself, but also the characters' lives

Like Todd Andrews, Ambrose Mensch, one of the other characters in the novel, is also obsessed with the cyclical pattern of the events in his life, as the text of his life seems to be phylogenetically regenerating itself. The course of his life reminds him of what he calls the first principle of embryology, borrowed from Freud: "Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny: that the evolutionary history of the invididual rehearses the ditto of the race" (Barth 1979: 38). Like Todd, Ambrose re-constructs his life as Arthur Morton King, author of *THE AMATEUR*, and again like Todd, he sees his life partitioned in two cycles:

> . . .the First Cycle is rehearsed retrospectively in course of the Second. . . .Such a pattern might even be discovered in one's own, unheroical life. In the stage of one's professional career, for example, or the succession of one's love affairs. (Barth 1979: 650)

The stages in his present courtship of Lady Amherst duplicate the earlier patterns in his relationships with other women. These stages rigorously follow the order of the alphabet:

> Ad-mi-ra-ti-on, Be-ne-fi-ci-al, Con-so-la-ti-on, De-cla-ra-ti-on, Ex-hor-ta-ti-on, For-ni-ca-ti-on, Ge-ne-ra-ti-on, followed by Ha-bi-ta-ti-on, In-vi-ta-ti-on, & cet. (Barth 1979: 765)

Can the pattern be broken in the Second Cycle of his life? Or is the pattern to be repeated "logarithmically spiralling out as in a snail-shaped temple" (Barth 1979: 649) in order to be "more truly, freely, efficaciously. . .in the world?" (Barth 1979: 651). Likewise, all the Cook and Burlingame characters in the novel are "in flight from the general Pattern of [their] past and the specific course of [their lives'] first cycle(s)" (Barth 1979: 586).

The texts of the past thus seem to be writing themselves as Ambrose's anniversary view of history attests, or are these rewrites, Ambrose wonders, perhaps "Portentous Coincidences, or Arresting But Meaningless Patterns?" (Barth 1979: 384). Even Ambrose's body seems to be writing itself as the cancerous growth inside his body has gone out of control and the cells keep on duplicating. He tries to come to terms with the tumour by attempting literally to write it off in *THE AMATEUR*, the subtitle of which is "A Cure for Cancer" (Barth 1979: 153). His whole family has been affected by cancerous diseases: his grandfather died of prostate cancer, his grandmother of blood cancer, Aunt Rosa's was in her uterus and Uncle Konrad's in his skin, his mother had a radical mastectomy and his father died of a brain tumour. And Ambrose's own birthmark can also be said to rewrite the pattern.

We could read all these cases, and there are many more in the novel, as forms of Kierkegaardian repetition. Both Ambrose and Todd are trapped in a state which comes close to what Kierkegaard suggests is the dialectic of repetition:

> The dialectic of repetition is easy, for what is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated, but precisely the fact that it has been gives to repetition the character of novelty. . . .When the Greeks said that all knowledge is recollection they affirmed that all that is has been; when one says that life is a repetition one affirms that existence which has been now becomes. When one does not possess the categories of recollection or of repetition, the whole of life is resolved into a void and empty noise.
>
> (Kierkegaard 1964: 52–53)

Repetition and recollection are two opposite poles of one and the same axis: recollection seems to be a retreating movement backwards and repetition a movement forwards, anticipating what is to come. Kierkegaard links the notion of repetition to that of irony. The ironical moment is located in the present, between past and future, it is looking in two directions at the same time:

> Irony is the beginning, yet no more than the beginning; it is and it is not. Moreover, its polemic is a beginning which is equally a conclusion.
>
> (Kierkegaard 1964: 237)

Is Todd's textual past fertilizing or blighting the future? Todd seems to be trapped in the dialectic of time and identity, in the confines of his self-, Author- and author-constructed subjectivity. As Todd draws up the two columns, he does not deny the authority of the past. His lover Jane Mack, as we will see below, does by pretending to forget what has happened. So far, even before he starts yet another repetition of his life, already three literary texts have originated from the text of his past: the *Inquiry* into his father's death, the *Letter to his Father* and his own version of *The Floating Opera*. When drawing up the left-hand column he once more repeats his life in recollection, turning himself yet again into language. His memory, he rewrites, is not set in motion by events as was Proust's "O, O, O pale pervert Proust: keep your tea and *madeleine*!", but rather by smells:

> Give me the dainty oils of hair and skin (for all I know it might have been, both then and now, some suntan preparation) to trigger memory and regain lost time!
>
> (Barth 1979: 260)

The past plays with the present, for the smell of suntan lotion was not only the prelude to 8 L, the event in 1932 when he was "seduced by Jane Mack, with Harrison's complaisance, in their Todds Point summer cottage. . . ." (Barth 1979: 258), it also leads him to speculate on what is going to happen in 8 R in 1969: "We shall come to it. Same emotion, not surprisingly. O, O, O" (Barth 1979: 258). It is exactly this moment of simultaneous presence and absence, of being and not being, of the blank area in between the left- and the right-hand columns that irony, and orgasm for that matter, is located.

In a sense John Barth, the author, is like Todd Andrews, as he himself avoids breaking with his own textual past. In an interview in *Caliban* he says: "the trick is. . .to hold the past in one hand, keep it there and acknowledge it constantly without being obsessed or unduly bothered by it".[2] The authority of the past cannot be denied. It haunts the different generations of A.B.

Cooks who cannot escape the pattern of history. It haunts Ambrose Mensch who writes:

> A curse upon tides. . .that turn, and turning, return like misdirected letters what they were to carry off! Thought well drowned, our past floats back like Danae with infant Perseus, to take eventual revenge.
>
> (Barth 1979: 152–153)

The past is compulsive, like the tidal waters that float Barth's later novels *Sabbatical* (1982) and *The Tidewater Tales* (1988).

But unlike Todd Andrews and all the other characters, Todd's lover Jane Mack denies the authority of the past, which could be called a movement of negative repetition. When Todd is once more seduced by her in 1969 ("Todds Point was where she'd lived as well as where she'd 8-L'd me"), she pretends "historical amnesia" and refuses to remember her earlier seduction of him thirty-seven years ago. The ironical echoes of the past are lost on her, as Todd writes to his deceased father:

> A fresh *frisson*: had this been, for Jane, no sweet replay after all? Was she still and forever in that left-hand column, doing everything for the first time?
>
> (Barth 1979: 277)

This is an ironic moment because the past is made present in the presence by the dialectic of repetition.

Another instance of this same type of ironic repetition is found in Lady Amherst's letter of 28 June, to the Author, when she writes to him about the reason for her being fired from her post in the Faculty of Letters. She had made a carbon copy of one of her weekly confessional letters to Ambrose Mensch to give it

> at once a more official and (what have I to lose now?) a more *fictitious* aspect: as if I were a writer writing first-person fiction, an epistolary novelist composing – and editing, alas in holograph – . . .I "destroyed" the copy (i.e. wadded and waste-canned it), but posted the letter; and Shirley Stickles got to the wastecan before the custodian did. . .and it was too late. . . .
>
> (Barth 1979: 378)

Is her reconstructed textual self going to fertilize her future and her palimpsestuous self going to destroy it? In the dialectic of repetition the locus of irony is situated in the space between recollection and repetition, as Kierkegaard argues, in this case between writing paper and carbon as well as in the space of the wastecan. The recollection on the writing paper is the retreating movement backwards and the repetition in the carbon the movement forwards, anticipating its retrieval from the wastecan by curious Mrs Stickles. The ironical moment is also located within the presence of the wastecan, between past and future, and is, until it is found, looking in two directions at the same time, "it is and it is not".

In an essay on Kierkegaard and irony, Ronald Schleifer links the Kierkegaardian notion of repetition to Derrida's iterability: the "repetitions of the past," he writes,

> are repetitions with a difference. . . .Irony discovers novelty in repetition and, in so doing, confuses repetition and creation, conclusion and beginning.
>
> (Schleifer 1984: 193)

In Derrida's notion of iterability we find the same problematic of repetition as in Kierkegaard. In "Limited Inc a b c. . ." Derrida argues:

> Iterability supposes a minimal remainder (as well as a minimum of idealization) in order that the identity of the *selfsame* be repeatable and identifiable *in*, *through* and even *in view of* its alteration. For the structure of iteration. . .implies *both identity and difference*. Iteration in its "purest" form – and it is always impure – contains *in itself* the discrepancy of a difference that constitutes it as iteration.
>
> (Derrida 1988:53)

Each individual element is, while it is being constituted, split in a mark and a remainder, says Derrida; this is iterability itself, "passing between the *re-* of the repeated and the *re-* of the repeating, traversing and transforming repetition" (Derrida 1988: 53). This might also account for the ubiquitous presence of the prefix *re-* in the novel, as in recycling (p. 385), reflexion (p. 393), recovered (p. 772), recreation (p. 383), reenactment (p. 384), rerecruit (p. 750), rework (p. 300), redreaming (p. 108), replay (p. 109), revolution (p. 407), recounted (p. 405), revive (p. 438), redream (p. 474), reborn (p. 474), remobilization (p. 473), remark (p. 474), reciprocal (p. 753), re-remarking (439), reappearance (474), resumption (474), regressive (p. 556), resorbed (p. 560), redeposited (p. 560), re-retrieve (p. 570), renascent (p. 578), reworking (p. 596), reviewing (p. 474), repeat (p. 768), repudiate (p. 767), recurrence (p. 473), rebeginning (p. 194), recapitulation (p. 394), rereading (p. 438), rewriting (p. 771), etc., etc. The split or break (*coupure*), says Derrida, intervenes from the moment the mark is made and the remainder is set loose. The remainder is not a sure thing, it has no permanence, on the contrary, "the structure of the remainder, implying alteration, renders all absolute permanence impossible" (Derrida 1988: 54). Iterability has no permanence, repetition becomes *différance*", deferring permanence and therewith, ultimately, meaning. Where Derrida speaks of *différance*, Kierkegaard speaks of "novelty" and Barth of "remobilization" and "rejuvenation". But in contrast to Derrida's concept of repetition, Kierkegaard's repetition involves permanence: in the latter's ironic movement of repetition types and archetypes are the origin, or the "beginning", of the past. These archetypes are used as modes of explanation of the present and the past. This, says Schleifer, is ironic in itself, as "types and archetypes are 'present' only insofar as they negate actuality by repeating an ideal realm" (Schleifer 1984: 192).

Whether the actuality of the ideal realm is accepted or not, both Kierkegaard and Derrida acknowledge the presence of a moment of absence in the dynamics of repetition; Derrida locates it just before the break and Kierkegaard before the ironic movement. This hymeneal moment is as a blank space, a silent passage of time between what is and what is not. In Ambrose's letter of March 31, this blank is even physically present, as he writes to Yours Truly and Lady Amherst:

> I examined the history and origins of the novel, of prose narrative itself, in search of reinspiration; and I found it – not in parodies, travesties, pastiches, and trivializations of older narrative conventions, but
>
> (Barth 1979: 152)

In Todd's letter of May 16, as we have seen above, this blank separates the left- and right-hand column of the events of his life, just as it separates the absence of events R 11, R 12 and R 13 from the presence of R 1 up to R 10 (Barth 1979: 256–259). As repetition is anticipated, this hymen is about to be broken. The blank moment waiting to be inscribed, the text waiting to be repeated is referred to Barth himself as a moment of "dead reckoning". In "Getting Oriented" in *The Friday Book* he writes:

> The themes of [my] work in progress I suppose, are regression, reenactment and reorientation. . .one must sometimes go forward by going back. As an amateur sailor and navigator myself, I like the metaphor of dead reckoning: deciding where to go by determining where you are by reviewing where you've been.
>
> (Barth 1984: 132)

In a recent issue of *Diacritics* Arne Melberg (1990) argues that the Kierkegaardian form of repetition should, as a movement in time, primarily be seen as a textual phenomenon; moreover, he says, the Kierkegaardian text itself moves in temporality, as its narrative mode changes forward and backward between past and present time. The past has become the realm of recollection and the present that of repetition: phrases such as "back and forth" and "the same movement but in opposite directions" have become the conditions for the framework of the Kierkegaard text. Whereas Schleifer saw a direct link from Kierkegaard to Derrida, Melberg sees Kierkegaardian repetition return in early Paul de Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality", in which the latter, like Kierkegaard, insists on the repetitive nature of the ironic break. De Man sees a discontinuous relationship between sign and meaning in irony, for "the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference" (De Man 1983: 209). He sees irony in temporal terms as the "prefiguration of a future recovery" (De Man 1983: 219).

In later De Man writings, however, ironic repetition disappears as a concept, to be replaced by a notion of repetition in the sense of mirroring and reflexion; this later conception of repetition functions more as mechanical reduplication, without any hint of irony.[3] This, in turn, links up with Derridean "iteration" and "*différance*" and the latter's idea of the linguistic sign as an "originally repetitive structure".[4] All this leads full circle to the concept of poststructuralist mimesis, in which, in Robert Con Davis's definition, the text exists solely as an imitation, not of reality, but as a product of a mimetic act, imitating other works.[5]

The same textual conditions that govern the Kierkegaardian text, seem to govern the Jerome Bray sections in *LETTERS*, where an attempt is made to manipulate the present by rewriting it as a repetition of the past. This is referred to as the reenactment phase: "with the Muse of the Past we have ever gone to school for present direction" (Barth 1979: 31). Whereas ancestor

Napoleon Bonaparte plans a "New, the *2nd* Revolution, an utterly Novel Revolution!" (Barth 1979: 32) to outdo the original Revolution, descendant Jerome Bonaparte Bray is working towards another "restoration," i.e. of what he calls the empire of the novel: "what is wanted to restore its ancient dominion is nothing less than a revolution" (Barth 1979: 33). Napoleon schemes towards a Novel Revolution, Jerome Bray towards a Revolution Novél.

To this end Bray has implemented a computer programme called LILY-VAC, "capable of mimicking prose styles on the basis of analyzed samples, and even of composing hypothetical works by any author on any subject" (Barth 1979: 36). The first version of this programme, called LILYVAC I, succeeds indeed in producing a few pages of mimicry, but "the voice of History" wants Bray to work on a grander project, code-named NOVEL, "The Complete and Final Fiction." In order to bring about the Revolution Novel a new programme, LILYVAC II, is through "e.g. analyses of all extant fiction, its motifs, structures, strategies, etc." to produce an "abstract model of the perfect narrative" (Barth 1979: 37), which is a "document in the guise of an extended fiction of a revolutionary character". Ultimately this will "in part by means of that document" have to lead to "certain novel and revolutionary changes in the world" (Barth 1979: 36). In much the same ways as his ancestor tries to rewrite History and therewith Novel, Jerome Bray attempts to rewrite Novel and therewith History in order to achieve a "higher" Hegelian unity. The "ruptures" in the dynamics of repetition are not only enacted as blanks as argued above, but also as "RESET"s in the text.

"RESET" is another form of Kierkegaardian repetition, "between what has been and what now becomes". At first RESET seems to operate as a computer command, similar to the Back-Space-button on an ordinary key-board. In that sense it would mean restart, that is back to the beginning of the sentence and start anew by rewriting the sentence. By not erasing, however, the first part of the sentence that is RESET, this part operates like the first original *écriture* of the palimpsest, and so the text functions as if "under erasure." It is present and absent at the same time, operating simultaneously in two directions. When Jerome Bray writes to Todd Andrews on 4 March that ". . .we must count on another to RESET Yet we cannot leave this topic without presuming to warn you against Ambrose M. . .." (Barth 1979: 27), we can safely assume that Bray is drafting and redrafting this letter at the same time in *monologue interieur*-like fashion, as if it were a form of "I-I" communication.[6] The absence of the full stop would support this idea. Whenever the RESET command is used the aborted sentence is left to be inscribed, by Jerome Bray who rewrites it, but also by the external reader who tries to reconstruct Bray's original intention by filling in the blank left by RESET. The two sentences then, the aborted and the rewritten, are consequently simultaneously read, "back and forth" in Kierkegaard's terms.

Yet not all RESETs function similarly. In a letter, dated 13 May, to his revolutionary comrade in disguise, Andrews F. Mack, Bray has the paragraphs in the first part of this letter end in RESETs. These RESETs are not written over, they are instead followed by gaps in the text, to be inscribed not

only by himself and the external reader, but also by his fellow conspirator. In this letter there is evidence that the text is not produced on a text processor, as indicated by Bray's own words: "We must scratch out this report by hand no time for epistolary printouts but you would be surprised what LILYVAC can RESET" (Barth 1979: 324), followed by a textual gap. RESET has thus become a code, which in itself is a form of repetition, albeit one only for those initiated, those that have already been inscribed into the code. The only way for non-initiated persons to inscribe themselves into that text is by decoding it. So when Bray writes in the same letter that "we urged him to reply to ours of 3/4 and move against B whom we also rewarned to make reparation by Doomsday i.e. 6:13 PM PST 4/4 or RESET No RESET We are going to have to reprogram LILYVAC not to RESET" (Barth 1979: 325), the internal reader is presumably able to decipher this form of "I-s/he" communication and thus understand the contents of Bray's message; the external reader is presumably unable to do so, and thus, as I have argued in my Ph.D. dissertation, the message could also be read as a form of "I-I" communication in which the addressing "we" is to be read as a royal "we", perhaps alluding to his imperial ancestor, signifying the addresser of the letter. As a matter of fact we can see the two types of RESET functioning in this passage, as the second RESET differs from the first and third in that it addresses the addresser of the message in a form of "I-I" communication, to be inscribed by Bray and the external reader, whereas the other two are forms of "I-s/he" communication, to be inscribed by the internal and external reader alike. Thus all three function as forms of repetition.

In other instances RESET seems to operate as a coded equivalent for revolution or revolutionary activities, as in "...Napoleon has given out the fiction of his death on St. Helena, vive le RESET Peter Minuit has bought Manhattan...." (Barth 1979: 331) and

> ... while funding is available to us from many sources, the voice of History tells us to RESET This is the final battle On Wisconsin Off the pigs Hail to the Chief O say can you see any bedbirds on me Today....
>
> (Barth 1979: 331)

Revolutionary activities can also be regarded as an attempt to appropriate and thus rewrite history.

Likewise, similar forms of repetition in rewriting are to be found in the use of figures and ciphers, the latter especially so with regard to sixes and sevens and the Kabbalistic practices of "Scripture-regarded-as-cipher" (Barth 1979: 330). In his search for the ultimate novel, Bray has loaded LILYVAC II with "Thompson's *Motif-Index to Folk-Literature* plus the fiction stacks of Lily Dale's Marion Skidmore Library plus *Masterplots* plus *Monarch Notes*" (Barth 1979: 327), etc. etc.; what comes out of it is not the Revolution Novel, but "reams and quires of single and double digits" (Barth 1979: 326). This reminds Bray of the E.A. Poe tale *The Golden Bird* in which the protagonist deciphers, or rewrites, a message encoded in numbers. And he is also reminded of the ancient Greek alphabet in which letters were not only used for spelling out words but also for counting. All this leads Bray to think that

"the key to the treasure" is to be found in the Kabbalistic tradition of manipulating numerical equivalents of letters.

As Bray explains, there are basically three approaches to Kabbalism: *Gematria*, *Notarikon* and *Themurah*. The first being the search for meaning in the numerical values of the letters, "thus MARGANA. . .has a value of 55 (13 + 1 + 18 + 7 + 1 + 14 + 1), and LE FAY, a.k.a. YFAEL, 49" (Barth 1979: 330), the second regarding the letters of a word as an acrostic for a sentence or vice versa, such as in the acrosticon of which the title *LETTERS* is made up, and the third being anagrammatical transposition, as in MARGANA LE FAY signifying "*leafy anagram*" (Barth 1979: 331). All three approaches underline the textual nature of Kabbalism, "a Hebrew word for tradition" (Barth 1979: 327), as Bray writes. Kabbalism is in itself a form of rewriting, as becomes apparent from the definitions given in Harvey's *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary:* "the oral tradition handed down from Moses to the Rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud", evolving into "the pretended tradition of mystical interpretation of the Old Testament", and "an unwritten tradition" evolving into "mystery, esoteric doctrine or art" (Harvey 1973: 262).[7] Bray's intention is "to turn LILYVAC's numbers into revolutionary letters" (Barth 1979: 329), but all he ends up with is the acrostic MARGANAYFAEL leading via LEAFY ANAGRAM to the "complete, perfect & final opus NUMBERS" (Barth 1979: 757). The point is that Bray's attempt at the ultimate novel is an attempt to produce a text without any indeterminacy of meaning. For this reason he has to resort to the use of numbers, instead of textual signifiers.

A.B. Cook's ancestors correspond in ciphered letters, such as in "Captain Kidd's code: *+47+(*))**8008011+((82+5849+;:52" (Barth 1979: 584) and once these ciphers are decoded, the Cookes try to undo what their parents tried to achieve in *their* attempt to rewrite History. Both attempts can also be seen as part of the Hegelian dialectic at work in repetition, so as to culminate through mediation in the "higher" unity of revolution. When Drew Mack uses letters of the alphabet to cause a revolutionary bomb to explode, an attempt is made literally and physically to write (oneself into) History, in much the same way as Admiral Cockburn in 1814 tried literally to prevent History from being written by destroying all the uppercase C's in the printshop of the *National Intelligencer* (Barth 1979: 511). In this way he tried to write himself out of History.

The use of doubles and the play with imposture in the A.B. Cook sections, the reenactments in the Jacob Horner sections, the second cycles in the lives of Todd Andrews and Ambrose Mensch and the omnipresence of the prefix *re-* can in the Kierkegaardian sense all be seen as repetitions or movements in time and space; re-write, re-enact, re-juvenate, re-cycle etc. are all indicative of a going back in time to what has been. Yet, the repetition also makes it into something new, a movement forward as the prefix indicates. Thus the paradox arises that the temporal movement backward is actually a movement forward in time. Repetition is in other words not a repetition of the same, but rather a creative process, which produces while repeating and at the same time producing what it repeats. As Melberg argues:

> you cannot re-peat/re-take what has been, since what has been has been. The *now* of repetition is always an *after*. But not only: since the movement of repetition also makes it new, makes "the new"..."repetition" suspend the temporal order of before-after in or by that *now* previously called "the instant". The temporal dialectics of "repetition" suspends temporal sequence: the *now* that is always an *after* comes actually *before*, it is the *now* of "the instant", the sudden intervention in sequential time, the caesura that defines what has been and prepares what is to become.
>
> (Melberg 1990:74)

The emphasis on the temporality of repetition indicates the transcendental nature of Kierkegaardian repetition as it privileges "presence", the presence of the *now*. His sense of repetition is thus "existential". In spite of this, Melberg argues, Kierkegaard has modern relevance as he also sees repetition as "a textual category" (Melberg 1990: 75). It is textual in the sense that is temporal, "having grammatical, syntactical, and narratological meaning besides being the very mode for being and becoming. . ." (Melberg 1990: 75). This provides a link with Derridean theorizing as shown above.

As is the case with *différance*, which Derrida himself calls "neither a concept nor a word" (Derrida 1982: 3), Melberg argues that Kierkegaardian repetition, due to its paradoxical movement, could also be seen as a non-concept in that it privileges the *now* that has already been, which implies that what has been, could always become. In other words, the concept dynamically negates the very presence it simultaneously suggests.

It is interesting to see in this respect how the main characters in the A.B. Cook sections literally act out this interplay of absence and presence by their endless imposturing and games of doubles and duplications. The Protean Cookes and Burlingames have a penchant for political intrigue, they have "alter'd & realter'd the course of history, 'tis devilish difficult to say just how, or whether their intrigues & counter-intrigues do not cancel one another across the generations" (Barth 1979: 23), as A.B. Cook IV writes to his unborn child in 1812. Their political intrigues have led to "mirror-like reversals & duplications" (Barth 1979: 113). They even make a farce of Marxian repetition[8] by their farcical pattern of "filial rebellion: since the convergence of the Cooke and Burlingame lines. . .every firstborn son in the line has defined himself against what he takes to have been his absent father's objectives, and in so doing has allied himself, knowingly or otherwise, with his grandfather. . ." (Barth 1979: 407). A.B. Cook IV wants this pattern to be broken, and tries to achieve this by undoing in the second half of his life "his 'wrongheaded' accomplishments in the first" (Barth 1979: 408), ending up where he started from. In 1969 his great-great-grandson, A.B. Cook VI, born in 1918 out of Henri Burlingame VI and Andree Castine, explains in a letter to the Author that this doing and undoing seems to have been the family pattern all along, i.e. the practice of "self-cancelling" and "self-refutation" (Barth 1979: 408), a pattern which he intends breaking by pursuing "activities on behalf of the Second Revolution" (Barth 1979: 409). But just as "the practice of history is (his) *métier*" (Barth 1979: 409), so it is his son's, Henri Burlingame VII, who in his turn, like all ancestors before him, is also involved

in underground activities: the family history is erased and rewritten every time the pattern is inscribed again. As A.B. Cook VI writes to the Author, the "ancient history lies in the future" (Barth 1979: 409), and it is exactly this paradoxical movement of undoing or repetition that privileges the *now* that has already been, implying that what has been, becomes. As in the Kierkegaardian model this form of repetition negates the very presence it at the same time suggests. The "classic Pattern" that governs the Cook and Burlingames family history has, in other words, been turned into a sheer textual phenomenon.

And it is consistently ironical in this respect that the fate of most family members is indeed decided upon by textual or linguistic activities, which phenomenon could be refered to as "letters in action". One such catachrestic example of letters in action may suffice to demonstrate this phenomenon. A.B. Cook VI's grandfather, Andrew Cook V, a closet operative of the Canadian secret service, died in an explosion while committing an act of sabotage on the Niagara Frontier. The secret code to blow up the locks of the canal between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario consisted of all letters of the alphabet, as in the standard typewriter-testing sentence, "THE QUICK BROWN FX JMP*D* V LAZY G" (Barth 1979: 418). Stripped of its redundant characters the code was moreover also stripped of the letter "s", as this character was reserved as the common signal which, when transmitted, would detonate the three set bombs. However, this coded initial for the detonator also happened to be the first letter of the international marine distress signal, and it so happened that both naval and merchant vessels shared the same frequency in wireless telegraphy at that time. So when Andrew Cook V blew up himself and his comrades in arms, this could either have been brought about by an accidentally transmitted SOS signal, which might have caused a premature detonation of the explosives, or an act of self-sabotage, because Cook had personally altered the test sentence into "THE QUICK BROWN FX JMP*S* V LAZY DG" (Barth 1979: 419). Seen from above, these bomb craters were visually patterned in an apocalyptic, monogrammed morse-code s in the landscape: dot-dot-dot, an instant of letters having been used in an appropriationary attempt to write history and simultaneously rewrite the surface of the earth.

Forms of repetition or texts writing and rewriting themselves through decoding or deciphering abound in *LETTERS*, the posthumous letters, received by his wife after his death, written by Andrew Cook IV to his wife in the period 1814–1821 in "the simple family cipher" (Barth 1979: 480) being a case in point. The first letter opened for instance with "SLLORD & SREMAERD" and was "ciphered )0+(+&)(8958(+". His wife Andree Castine knew the code but refused to decipher it. Approximately 150 years later these same letters are found in the family library and transcribed by descendant A.B. Cook VI. "With a little practice," he writes to his absent son Henry,

> one can read and write it readily as English. Omit the first step and you have the code cracked by William Legrand in Edgar Poe's story *The Gold Bug* (1843). (Barth 1979: 480)

The letters are encoded by means of the inversion device, the same as used by Captain Kidd in the Poe story, herewith also setting up an intertextual link on at least two additional levels.

How should both internal and external readers of *LETTERS* read this reference to the Captain Kidd-code? Is internal reader Henry, whose reaction the external reader does not know, expected to take out the Poe-story and check his father's theory, or is the external reader herself supposed to do so? Or are both? Or is this another case of the text rewriting itself? Does the mentioning of the name Poe serve an internymic function, in the same way as a quotation does, and should the Poe story be read as a metaphor to the Cooke story? Or is the reference merely based on the device of cryptography as used in *The Gold Bug*? Is it in other words a meaning-generating device?

The protagonist of the Poe story, William Legrand, is an impoverished Southern gentleman who lives with his black servant Jupiter. One day they find a scarab beetle, which leads them to the discovery of a piece of parchment on which a secret cipher is inscribed. This code can only be seen when heated. Legrand cracks the code, and finds the hidden treasure of a certain Captain Kidd; now he can re-establish himself as a gentleman. The text on the parchment allows Legrand to reinscribe and thus rewrite himself in society. In *Sabbatical* Susan's nephew is named after E.A. Poe, as is Katherine's in *The Tidewater Tales*. Poe takes on interfigural importance as an intertextual reference in both later novels. It must be self-evident that these references can also be considered as forms of repetition, of a text rewriting itself.

From Kierkegaardian dialectics it is an easy jump to Heideggerian repetition. Repetition goes to the heart of Heidegger's ontology of "the circular Being of Dasein", writes John D. Caputo in a study called *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987). Charles B. Harris reads *LETTERS* against Heidegger's hermeneutical model of repetition, "since the 'force' it seeks to recover lies not 'in what has already been thought,'" but "in something that has not been thought and from which what has been thought receives its essential space" (Harris 1983: 166). Harris sees Barth's reappropriation of the past and the texts of the past in terms of Barth's reinterpretation of that past, in an attempt to lay bare the "presence" of the original "Being" and to see whether all has not yet been bricked up by language and tradition. Through repetition Barth seeks to retrieve "something that has not been thought". This something is the sheer presence of what Heidegger refers to as "Being", the presence of which has in the course of time become obscured through "objectification". That is to say, through representational thinking the thing-as-it-is has assumed the "position of object". Because it has become an object, it exists. "Being", however, is prelinguistic; language reduces it to an object, "being". Heidegger insists that "being" must be unconcealed, and that

> this unconcealment is achieved through poetic language. The world exists within the word – not as the structuralists insist, because man is trapped in a prisonhouse of language, but because, in Heidegger's elegant formula, language is "the house of Being".
>
> (Harris 1983: 167)

If Being precedes language, being is to be found in the crystallization processes characteristic of language. Heidegger attempts to restore the "truth of Being" by overcoming the "confusion between beings and Being" that arises when language constructs a world. By means of deconstructive repetition the original "being" then is to be fractured and opened up to "Being." In this way, Harris argues, "Barth rehearses the forms and figures of the traditional novel in order to locate the something that has not been thought in that tradition" (Harris 1983: 169). Barth's greatest discovery, he continues, is that he "finds concealed or forgotten in the history of his genre. . .*history* itself (as opposed to historio-graphy, a distinction A.B. Cook VI also makes) – that is, the temporality of being" (p. 169). This insight as phrased by Harris, is not unambiguous: is Barth searching for history, history "under erasure" or History, as he was searching for novel, novel "under erasure" or Novel? If he is, his use of repetition leads to substantialism as the guiding principle of his search, whereas, on the other hand, if he is not, the temporality of being, in a post-structuralist sense, is an imitational and non-referential construction. In this sense being has moved beyond substantialist representation. Harris's postulate that John Barth has found "*history* itself" seems untenable, which in itself, however, does not explode the applicability of Heideggerian repetition to Barthian fiction.

"Repeating is handing down explicitly – that is to say, going back into the possibilities of the *Dasein* that has been there", writes Heidegger.[9] This circular movement is called "*Wiederholung*"; as a movement between *Dasein's* futurity and its having been, it projects forth upon the possible, and comes back to the possibilities that constitute its heritage.

> But when one has, by repetition handed down to oneself a possibility that has been, the *Dasein* that has-been-there is not disclosed in order to be actualized over again. The repeating of that which is possible does not bring again (*Wiederbringen*) something that is "past", nor does it bind the "present" back to that which has already been "outstripped". Arising, as it does, from a resolute projection of oneself, repetition does not let itself be persuaded of something by which is "past," just in order that it, as something which was formerly actual, may recur.
>
> (Heidegger 1962: 437–438)

It is obvious that although Heidegger's sense of repetition also has a historical dimension to it, it is the recovery of future possibilities that constitutes the link with Kierkegaardian repetition. In both concepts we recognise a movement away from the source or origin, which produces something that was not there before. This movement returns in the dynamics of Kristeva's intertextuality and Derrida's *différance*.

Derrida links Being with repetition in his essay on Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. He calls Being another form of repetition, as Being as form is repeated in the word:

> For there is no word, nor in general a sign, which is not constituted by the possibility of repeating itself. A sign which does not repeat itself, which is not already divided by repetition in its "first time", is not a sign. The signifying

> referral must therefore be ideal – and ideality is but the assured power of repetition – in order to refer to the same thing each time.
>
> (Derrida 1978: 246)

In his theatre Artaud wanted to erase repetition, writes Derrida, but even this theatre of non-representation fails to escape from the dialectics of repetition[10], as the sign, by its nature of repetition, governs everything: "Being is the key word of eternal repetition" (Derrida 1978: 246). As soon as a sign emerges, it begins by repeating itself (Derrida 1978: 297), because without it it would not be a sign. The repetition is, however, no longer exactly the same as the original, since "the ring no longer has exactly the same centre, *the origin has played*. Something is missing that would make the circle perfect" (Derrida 1978: 296). Thus Derrida distinguishes in the inscription of origin between Being-as-writing and Being-as-inscribed, or between function and locus (Derrida 1978: 296). As the origin itself is missing in writing, both the act of writing and that of inscribing constitute the form of the eternal return: "the return of the same does not alter itself – but does so absolutely – except by amounting to the same" (Derrida 1978: 296). By implying that pure repetition does not exist, Derrida is in line with Kierkegaardian and subsequent Nietzschean repetition, whose eternal return is his conception of the same.[11] Barthian rewriting could thus also be seen as a form of the eternal return in the sense that it plays around the centre all the time, being a form of repetition in which "the self-identity of the origin" (Derrida 1978: 296) disappears. We have arrived at poststructuralist mimesis again.[12]

## Notes

1. Sören Kierkegaard. *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology* (1964: 12, 52). Quoted in Schleifer 1984: 151, 192.
2. Annie Le Rebeller, 1975: 130.
3. Cf. Melberg, 1990: 85.
4. Derrida 1967: 56. "*La structure originairement répétitive*". Quoted by Melberg 1990: 85.
5. See Robert Con Davis 1985 and my article in *JLS/TLW* 8 (1 & 2), 1992.
6. The term "I-I" communication is borrowed from Yuri Lotman (1990). On the basis of Jakobson's communicative model Lotman has developed a model in which an addresser "I" sends a message to him/herself. This form of "I-I" communication is not necessarily redundant as it can acquire supplementary information by virtue of the accumulative memory function of language.
7. Harold Bloom defines *Kaballah* in *A Map of Misreading* as texts of interpretation of "a central text that perpetually possesses authority, priority and strength" (Bloom, 1975: 40), and in *Kaballah and Criticism* he actually refers to *Kabbalah* as a "theory of writing" (Bloom, 1975: 52).
8. Karl Marx argues in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1869) that all historical events occur twice, first as tragedy, then as farce: repetition, in other words, produces difference. Marx uses the example of Napoleon's nephew, Louis Bonaparte, who had tried to legitimize his usurpation of power by an appeal to filial repetition while masquerading as his uncle's substitute. Marx argues that this form of repetition is a form of counterfeit, leading to a farce; the repetitive pattern thus leads to debasement.

9. Quoted in Caputo, 1987: 89–90.
10. Quite significantly, in postmodern theatre, as for instance in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, we witness a movement against repetition and thus an embrace of the particularity of the present; as a matter of fact this form of theatre, unlike other movements in postmodern art, denies all operations of repetition and appropriation. Yet, as Jacques Derrida has rightly argued in "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation" (Derrida 1978: 232–250), this can never happen. We are faced with a paradox here, as theatre, by its very nature, always is a form of representation. So even if an attempt is made at presence of origin, this is being denied as theatre will always be a fiction, that is, a linguistic presence through repetition and representation.
11. See Derrida, 1978: 339, note 3.
12. See Nas, 1992.

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