



Re-: An Errant Glossary, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 107–11

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Repetition

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ABSTRACT: This text examines some of the difficulties arising from any attempt to conceive of repetition. These difficulties are explored through a brief commentary on a proposition concerning the unrepeatability of thought that Johann Georg Hamann introduces in his correspondence — on two occasions.

Repetition

TOM VANDEPUTTE

Is there a concept of repetition? Can repetition be defined clearly, can it be delimited without ambiguity? Can this word, 'repetition', be made to correspond to a concept that is both univocal and stable — a concept that can be iterated again, at another time or place, without difference or alteration? Is there, in other words, a concept of repetition that is *repeatable*? Does such a concept not already presuppose an understanding of what it is yet to grasp? Does it not anticipate the meaning of a word it is yet to define? Has the concept of repetition — and with it every concept — not already proposed that repetition is indeed possible? And has it not already determined this repetition as a repetition of a certain kind — a repetition whose content remains stable and constant, a repetition of one and the same thing, a repetition without alteration? Has one, then, not already spoken of repetition before one has even begun to define it?

These questions form the background to a remark that is found in the writings of Johann Georg Hamann — a

contemporary and close friend of Kant, whose critique of pure reason was the most important target of Hamann's later polemical writings. In an important passage from a letter of 1769 included in the third volume of his collected writings, we read:

There are thoughts that one has only once in one's life and which one is not able to produce again [*Gedanken [...] die man nur Einmal in seinem Leben hat, und nicht Meister ist wieder hervorzubringen*].¹

As an astute reader of Hamann has noted, it is however this thought — precisely this thought — that occurs again in the fifth volume of his collected writings, in a letter composed several years later, in 1773.² Here we read:

It seems to me that there are certain thoughts we are only able to have once in our life [*daß wir gewißer Gedanken nur einmal in unserem Leben fähig sind*].³

Es giebt Gedanken, we read, *gewisse Gedanken*, certain thoughts — but exactly which thoughts are referred to here? Is this merely a reflection on some thoughts and not others, on a specific class of thoughts that only occur once? *Es giebt Gedanken die man nur Einmal in seinem Leben hat*, Hamann writes. What if this remark is read as a reflection on a much broader class of thoughts than it seems to describe at first sight — on the thoughts of finite, human beings as distinct from divine thought? *Es giebt*

1 Johann Georg Hamann, *Schriften*, ed. Friedrich Roth, 7 vols (Berlin: Reimer, 1821–25), III (1822), p. 392.

2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter elektronisk version 1.8.1*, ed. by Karsten Kynde (Copenhagen: Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret, 2014), 'Journaler og papirer', DD:28 <<http://www.sks.dk/DD/txt.xml>> [accessed 16 December 2018].

3 Hamann, *Schriften*, v (1824), p. 25.

Gedanken die man nur Einmal in seinem Leben hat, und nicht Meister ist wieder hervorzubringen. That certain thoughts occur only once, thus, does not seem to be an accident: we think these thoughts only once, writes Hamann, because we are not able to think them again. We are not able to think them again because we do not have absolute mastery over our thoughts; we do not relate to them as a master relates to a servant who can be commanded at will. There would seem to be a force that inheres in these thoughts that impedes our ability to master them, to produce them again at our own will, a dynamic by virtue of which such thoughts are unrepeatable — at least for finite beings.

How this unrepeatability is to be understood is not specified in the remark. That is to say, it is not *stated* here. The remark does not say anything about this impossibility of repeating certain thoughts; it does, however, engage in a repetition itself. Yet it is not immediately clear whether this repetition illustrates the assertion, whether it demonstrates it ‘silently’ — just as Diogenes countered the Eleatic denial of motion by simply pacing back and forth a few times. At first, it may seem as if Hamann’s repeated iteration of this thought does precisely the opposite of what it states — if, at least, the statement is taken to refer to the unrepeatability of the thoughts of finite, human beings as opposed to those of a divine being. Is the thought that is put forward here not the same as before? Is it not one and the same thought that is produced here once again? The fact that the second iteration does not use the exact same words only seems to support this. Does Hamann not say the same thing — only in different words? The differences between the two iterations — the substitution of *man* by *uns*, of *es giebt Gedanken* by *gewisse Gedanken* — can easily be understood as paraphrasing one and the same thought.

The same can be said about the replacement of *Gedanken haben und hervorbringen* in the first iteration and *Gedanken fähig sein* in the second. Is this not merely a paraphrase, a summary with the same semantic content?

Indeed, the comical effect of the two sentences depends precisely on the fact that they can be read as repeated iterations of one and the same thought — the thought that certain thoughts cannot be repeated. If these two sentences would not appear as iterations of the same thought, they would not appear to contradict what they state. And yet at the same time, the repetition complicates the possibility to understand the two remarks as repetitions of one and the same thought. When this same thought is iterated once again, its meaning seems to have shifted. Not that one meaning would have been replaced by another; the repetition of the thought that certain thoughts cannot be repeated rather calls into question whether it means anything at all. Once it is repeated, what is meant in the first iteration no longer seems to be quite so stable: insofar as it appears to contradict itself, it is, suddenly, permeated by the possibility of irony.

This irony is difficult to curtail. Not only is it no longer certain what is meant, it is also uncertain whether it is even possible to decide with certainty whether there is an irony here at all. The possibility of irony first opens up when one perceives a contradiction between the semantic content of the sentence and its repetition. But is it even certain that there is a contradiction? Is it certain that this thought is one of those thoughts that the remark refers to? And is it even certain that this is a repetition of one and the same thought? Or does Hamann, in the second letter, speak of a thought that is quite different from the first? Is it merely an accident that the same words — *Gedanken, Einmal* —

appear here once more? Even the instability of the remark is difficult to determine in a stable way.

The repetition of this thought, of one and the same thought, does not leave it intact. It is not that the alteration of meaning affects only the second iteration; it is not that the second iteration means something different because it has already been said while the first iteration still means the same. The alteration does not only affect the second iteration; it does not leave the meaning of the first iteration intact. What is meant in the first iteration dissolves. It becomes impossible to read this iteration if it is not already read in relation to its double. Likewise, the second iteration has no stable meaning on its own. It becomes possible to read only in relation to the first. The repetition thus not only destabilizes the meaning of the thought but also its unity. It turns out not to be possible to speak of one and the same thought that would be stated twice; the thought — what is supposedly meant by what is said — is never one but already two. It is not a repeated thought, but a thought that is always already a repetition. Hamann's remark thus turns out to be far from a statement on the unicity of thought, a simple assertion of its irreducible *Einmaligkeit*. At the same time as it speaks of the unrepeatability of thought, it conjures up a thought that is constituted only in and as repetition.

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