Fear and Trembling

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

1813–1855

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Frygt og Bæven

Translated from the Danish with AI (Claude) and edited



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INTRODUCTION

Fear and Trembling appeared in Copenhagen in October 1843, under the pseudonym Johannes de silentio, "John of silence." Kierkegaard gave it the subtitle "dialectical lyric," and it is both: a tightly argued essay and a passionate, sometimes comic, meditation on a single story, God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Johannes insists that he does not have faith; he can only admire it, and be appalled by it. If Abraham is the father of faith, then faith is not something we can easily "go beyond," as the philosophers of his day claimed. It means holding that the single individual can stand higher than the ethical, in a direct relation to God that cannot be explained to anyone. Either that is true, or Abraham is simply a man who was ready to murder his son.

The book opens with four retellings of the journey to Mount Moriah and a eulogy on Abraham, then works through three "problems": whether the ethical can be suspended, whether there is an absolute duty to God, and whether Abraham was right to keep silent.

Preface

Forord

Johannes de silentio on an age that wants to "go further" than doubt and faith, and on the modest aims of his own book.

100 Was Tarquinius Superbus in seinem Garten mit den Mohnköpfen sprach, verstand der Sohn, aber nicht der Bote. [What Tarquinius Superbus said in his garden with the poppy heads was understood by his son but not by the messenger.] / *Hamann*[1]

101 Not only in the world of commerce but also in the world of ideas, our age is staging ein wirklicher Ausverkauf [a real clearance sale]. Everything can be had at such a *derisory* price that the question becomes whether in the end there will be anyone who wants to bid. Every speculative billiard-marker who conscientiously keeps score of modern philosophy's momentous progress, every lecturer, tutor and student, every homesteader and lodger in philosophy, does not stop at doubting everything but goes further. It would perhaps be untimely and ill-judged to ask them where exactly they are going; but surely it is polite and modest to take it as settled that they have doubted everything, since otherwise it would be a strange thing to say that they went further.[2] This preliminary movement, then, they have all made, and presumably so easily that they do not find it necessary to

1 Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788), German thinker. The Roman king Tarquinius Superbus answered his son's messenger by silently striking off the tallest poppy heads; the son understood that he should kill the leading men of the city.

2 "Going further" than doubt and faith was the boast of the Danish Hegelians (notably H. L. Martensen), who held that philosophy begins by doubting everything.

drop a word about how. For not even someone who anxiously and worriedly sought a little enlightenment found any—a guiding hint, a little dietary prescription for how one should conduct oneself under this enormous task. "But surely Descartes did it?" Descartes, a venerable, humble, honest thinker, whose writings surely no one can read without the deepest emotion—he did what he said, and said what he did. Alas! Alas! Alas! That is a great rarity in our age! Descartes, as he himself repeats often enough, did not doubt with respect to faith.[3] ("Memores tamen, ut jam dictum est, huic lumini naturali tamdiu tantum esse credendum, quamdiu nihil contrarium [102] a Deo ipso revelatur.... Præter cætera autem, memoriæ nostræ pro summa regula est infigendum, ea quæ nobis a Deo revelata sunt, ut omnium certissima esse credenda; et quamvis forte lumen rationis, quam maxime clarum et evidens, aliud quid nobis suggerere videretur, soli tamen auctoritati divinæ potius quam proprio nostro judicio fidem esse adhibendam." [Mindful, however, as has already been said, that this natural light is to be trusted only so long as nothing contrary to it is revealed by God himself.... Above all, we must impress on our memory as the supreme rule that what God has revealed to us is to be believed as the most certain of all; and even if the light of reason, however clear and evident, should seem to suggest something else to us, we must nevertheless put our faith in divine authority alone rather than in our own judgment.] Cf. Principia philosophiae, Part One, § 28 and § 76.)[4] He did not cry fire and make it everyone's duty to doubt, for Descartes was a quiet, solitary thinker, not a bellowing night watchman; he modestly admitted that his method had significance only for himself and was partly rooted in his earlier muddled learning. (Ne quis igitur putet, me hîc traditurum aliquam methodum, quam unusquisque sequi debeat ad recte regendam rationem; illam enim tantum, quam ipsemet secutus

3 Key terms: "movement" renders *Bevægelse*; "faith" renders *Tro*, which also means "belief" (the verb *troe* is "to believe" or "to have faith"). Cartesius is the Latin name of René Descartes (1596–1650).

4 Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* (1644).

sum, exponere decrevi... Sed simul ac illud studiorum curriculum absolvi (sc. juventutis), quo decurso mos est in eruditorum numerum cooptari, plane aliud coepi cogitare. Tot enim me dubiis totque erroribus implicatum esse animadverti, ut omnes discendi conatus nihil aliud mihi profuisse judicarem, quam quod ignorantiam meam magis magisque detexissem. [So let no one think that I mean to present here a method that everyone ought to follow in order to direct his reason rightly; I have resolved to set out only the one I myself have followed.... But as soon as I had completed that course of study (namely, of my youth) at the end of which it is customary to be admitted to the ranks of the learned, I began to think quite otherwise. For I found myself entangled in so many doubts and so many errors that I judged all my efforts to learn had profited me nothing except that I had discovered my ignorance more and more.] Cf. Dissertatio de methodo, pp.[5] 2 and 3).—What those ancient Greeks, who after all also knew a little about philosophy, took to be a task for a whole lifetime, because skill in doubting is not acquired in days and weeks; what the old veteran warrior attained, who had kept the equilibrium of doubt through every snare, fearlessly denied the certainty of the senses and the certainty of thought, incorruptibly defied the anxieties of self-love and the insinuations of sympathy—that is where everyone begins in our age.[6]

In our age no one stops at faith; everyone goes further. To ask where they are going would perhaps be foolhardy; on the other hand it is surely a sign of good manners and culture that I assume everyone has faith, since otherwise it would be a strange thing to say: to go further. In those old days it was different. Then faith was a task for a whole lifetime, because it was assumed that skill in believing is not [103] acquired in days or in weeks. When the tested old man drew near his end, having

5 Copenhagen's night watchmen called out the hours and raised the alarm for fire. The Latin is from Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1637).

6 The ancient Greek skeptics, who cultivated suspension of judgment as a lifelong discipline.

fought the good fight and kept the faith, his heart was still young enough not to have forgotten that fear and trembling which disciplined the youth, which the grown man mastered, but which no human being ever entirely outgrows—unless, that is, one manages it by going further as early as possible. Where those venerable figures arrived, that is where everyone in our age begins, in order to go further.[7]

The present author is by no means a philosopher. He has not understood the System, whether there is one, whether it is finished; he already has enough for his weak head in the thought of what an enormous head everyone in our age must have, since everyone has such an enormous thought. Even if one were able to translate the whole content of faith into the form of the concept, it would not follow that one has comprehended faith, comprehended how one came into it or how it came into one. The present author is by no means a philosopher; he is, poetice et eleganter [to put it poetically and elegantly], a supernumerary clerk who neither writes the System nor *promises* of the System, who neither stakes his pen on the System nor signs himself away *to* it.[8] He writes because for him it is a luxury, one that gains in pleasantness and obviousness the fewer there are who buy and read what he writes. He easily foresees his fate in an age that has crossed out passion in order to serve science, an age in which an author who wants readers must take care to write so that his book can be comfortably leafed through during an after-dinner nap, and must take care to shape his outward manner after that polite gardener's boy in the advertiser who, hat in hand and with good references from his last place of service, recommends himself to an esteemed public.[9] He foresees his fate: to be entirely ignored. He has a presentiment of the terrible prospect that zealous criticism will make him run the gauntlet

7 "Fear and trembling" (*Angst og Bævelse*) is Philippians 2:12 and gives the book its title; "fought the good fight … kept the faith" is 2 Timothy 4:7.

8 "The System" is Hegel's philosophy and its Danish followers' promises to complete it.

9 Key term: "passion" renders *Lidenskab*. *Adresseavisen* was Copenhagen's advertising paper, full of notices from servants seeking positions.

more than once; he dreads the still more terrible prospect that some enterprising abstractor, some swallower of paragraphs (who, to save science, is always willing to do to other people's writings what Trop, "to save taste," magnanimously did to "The Destruction of the Human [104] Race")—will chop him up into §§, and do it with the same inflexibility as the man who, to serve the science of punctuation, divided up his speech by counting the words, so that 50 words went to a period and 35 to a semicolon.[10] — I fall down in deepest submission before every systematic bag-inspector: "This is not the System; it has not the least thing to do with the System. I call down every blessing on the System and on the Danish shareholders in this omnibus; for a tower it will hardly become. I wish them all, collectively and individually, happiness and blessing."[11]

Respectfully, / Johannes de silentio.[12]

10 Trop, a perpetual student in J. L. Heiberg's vaudeville *The Inseparables* (1827), grandly tears up his own tragedy "The Destruction of the Human Race."

11 Customs officers at the Copenhagen city gates searched travelers' bags. The "tower" recalls the unfinished Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) and the tower in Luke 14:28–30.

12 The pseudonym means "John of silence."

Tuning Up

Stemning
Four retellings of the journey to Mount Moriah, each imagining an Abraham who falls short of faith.

105 Once upon a time there was a man who as a child had heard that beautiful story of how God tempted Abraham, and how he withstood the temptation, kept the faith, and for the second time received a son against all expectation. When he grew older he read the same story with even greater admiration, for life had separated what had been united in the child's pious simplicity. The older he grew, the more often his thoughts turned to that story; his enthusiasm grew stronger and stronger, and yet he could understand the story less and less. At last he forgot everything else for it; his soul had only one wish, to see Abraham, one longing, to have been a witness to that event.[1] His desire was not to see the beautiful lands of the East, not the earthly glory of the Promised Land, not that God-fearing couple whose old age God blessed, not the venerable figure of the aged patriarch, not the vigorous youth of Isaac, God's gift—he would not have minded if the same thing had taken place on a barren heath. His yearning was to go along on the three days' journey, when Abraham rode with grief before him and Isaac at his side. His wish was to be present at the hour when Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw Mount Moriah in the distance, the hour when he left the donkeys behind and went up the mountain alone with

1 Key term: "temptation" renders *Fristelse*, the word of the Danish Bible in Genesis 22:1.

Isaac; for what occupied him was not the ingenious weaving of imagination but the shudder of thought.

That man was not a thinker; he felt no need to get beyond faith. It seemed to him that it must be the most glorious thing of all to be remembered as its father, an enviable lot to possess it, even if no one knew it.

106 That man was no learned exegete; he did not know Hebrew. Had he known Hebrew, then perhaps he would easily have understood the story and Abraham.

I

107 *"And God tempted Abraham and said to him: Take Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on a mountain that I will show you."*[2]

It was early in the morning. Abraham got up early, had the donkeys saddled, and left his tent, and Isaac with him; but Sarah looked out of the window after them, down through the valley, until she could see them no more. They rode in silence for three days; on the morning of the fourth day Abraham still said not a word, but lifted up his eyes and saw Mount Moriah in the distance. He left the servants behind and went up the mountain alone, with Isaac by the hand. But Abraham said to himself: "I will not hide from Isaac where this walk is leading him." He stood still, he laid his hand on Isaac's head in blessing, and Isaac bowed to receive it. And Abraham's face was fatherliness, his gaze was gentle, his words admonishing. But Isaac could not understand him; his soul could not be lifted up. He clasped Abraham's knees, he pleaded at his feet, he begged for his young life, for his fair hopes; he reminded him of the joy in Abraham's house, he reminded him of the sorrow and the loneliness. Then Abraham raised the boy up and walked with him by the hand, and his words were full of comfort and admonition. But Isaac could not understand him. He climbed Mount Moriah, but Isaac did not understand him. Then he turned away from him for a

2 Genesis 22:1–2, slightly abridged.

moment; but when Isaac saw Abraham's face the second time, it was changed: his gaze was wild, his whole form was horror. He seized Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground, and said: "Stupid boy, do you think I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you think this is God's command? No, it is my own desire." Then Isaac trembled and cried out in his anguish: "God in heaven, have mercy on me; God of Abraham, have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, [108] then you be my father!" But Abraham said softly to himself: "Lord in heaven, I thank you; after all, it is better that he believes I am a monster than that he should lose faith in you."[3]

When the child is to be weaned, the mother blackens her breast; it would be a shame, after all, for the breast to look delightful when the child is not to have it. So the child believes that the breast has changed, but the mother—she is the same; her gaze is loving and tender as ever. Happy the one who needed no more terrible means to wean the child!

II

[109] It was early in the morning. Abraham got up early; he embraced Sarah, the bride of his old age, and Sarah kissed Isaac, who had taken away her disgrace, her pride, her hope for all generations. Then they rode in silence along the road, and Abraham's gaze was fixed on the ground until the fourth day; then he lifted up his eyes and saw Mount Moriah far away, but his gaze turned again to the ground. Silently he laid the wood in order, bound Isaac; silently he drew the knife—then he saw the ram that God had chosen. This he sacrificed, and went home.——— From that day on Abraham became old; he could not forget that God had demanded this of him. Isaac flourished as before; but Abraham's eye was darkened, he saw joy no more.

When the child has grown big and is to be weaned, the mother modestly covers her bosom, and then the child no

3 Key term: "anguish" renders *Angst*.

longer has a mother. Happy the child who lost its mother in no other way!

III

110 It was early in the morning. Abraham got up early; he kissed Sarah, the young mother, and Sarah kissed Isaac, her delight, her joy for all time. And Abraham rode thoughtfully along the road; he thought of Hagar and the son whom he drove out into the desert. He climbed Mount Moriah; he drew the knife.[4]

It was a quiet evening when Abraham rode out alone, and he rode to Mount Moriah; he threw himself on his face, he prayed God to forgive him his sin, that he had been willing to sacrifice Isaac, that the father had forgotten his duty to the son. He rode his lonely way more often, but he found no rest. He could not grasp that it was a sin to have been willing to sacrifice to God the best thing he owned, that for which he himself would gladly have laid down his life many times over; and if it was a sin, if he had not loved Isaac in that way, then he could not understand that it could be forgiven; for what sin was more terrible?

When the child is to be weaned, the mother too is not without sorrow that she and the child are more and more separated, that the child who first lay under her heart and later rested at her breast will no longer be so near. So they grieve together the brief grief. Happy the one who kept the child so near and needed to grieve no more!

IV

111 It was early in the morning; everything was ready for the journey in Abraham's house. He took leave of Sarah, and Eliezer, the faithful servant, accompanied him along the road until he turned back again. They rode together in harmony, Abraham and Isaac, until they came to Mount Moriah. But Abraham pre-

4 Abraham drove out his slave Hagar and their son Ishmael at Sarah's demand (Genesis 21:9–21).

pared everything for the sacrifice, calmly and gently; yet as he turned away and drew the knife, Isaac saw that Abraham's left hand was clenched in despair, that a shudder went through his whole body—but Abraham drew the knife.[5]

Then they returned home again, and Sarah hurried to meet them, but Isaac had lost his faith. Not a word has ever been said about it in the world, and Isaac never spoke to anyone about what he had seen, and Abraham had no idea that anyone had seen it.

When the child is to be weaned, the mother has stronger food at hand, so that the child will not perish. Happy the one who has the stronger food at hand!

In this way and in many similar ways the man of whom we speak thought about this event. Each time he returned home after a pilgrimage to Mount Moriah, he sank down in weariness, folded his hands and said: "No one, after all, was as great as Abraham; who is able to understand him?"

5 Eliezer of Damascus, Abraham's steward (Genesis 15:2).

Eulogy on Abraham

Lovtale over Abraham
A hymn of praise to Abraham, greatest of all because he believed and expected the impossible.

112 If there were no eternal consciousness in a human being, if at the bottom of everything there lay only a wild, fermenting power that, writhing in dark passions, produced everything, both what was great and what was insignificant; if a bottomless emptiness, never satisfied, lay hidden beneath everything—what then would life be but despair? If it were so, if there were no sacred bond that knit humankind together, if one generation rose up after another like the leaves in the forest, if one generation succeeded another like the songs of birds in the forest, if the human race passed through the world as a ship passes through the sea, as the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless doing; if an eternal oblivion, ever hungry, lay in wait for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrest it away—how empty and comfortless life would be! But that is precisely why it is not so; and as God created man and woman, so he formed the hero and the poet or orator. The latter can do nothing of what the former does; he can only admire, love, and rejoice in the hero.[1] Yet he too is happy, no less than the hero; for the hero is, as it were, his better self, with which he is in love, glad that it is not himself after all, that his love can be admiration. He is the genius of recollection; he can do nothing but call to mind what has been done, nothing but admire what

1 The generations of men as leaves is a famous simile from Homer's *Iliad* (6.146).

has been done; he takes nothing of his own, but is jealous of what has been entrusted to him. He follows his heart's choice, but when he has found what he sought, he goes from door to door with his song and his speech, so that all may admire the hero as he does, be proud of the hero as he is. This is his achievement, his humble work; this is his faithful [113] service in the hero's house. If he remains true to his love in this way, if he strives day and night against the wiles of oblivion that would trick him out of his hero, then he has accomplished his work; then he is gathered to the hero, who has loved him just as faithfully, for the poet is, as it were, the hero's better self—powerless, to be sure, as a memory is, but also transfigured, as a memory is. Therefore no one who was great shall be forgotten; and even if it takes a long time, even if a cloud of misunderstanding carries the hero away, his lover still comes, and the longer the time that has passed, the more faithfully he clings to him.

No! No one who was great in the world shall be forgotten; but each was great in his own way, and each in proportion to the greatness of what *he loved.* For he who loved himself became great by himself, and he who loved other people became great by his devotion, but he who loved God became greater than all. Everyone shall be remembered, but each became great in proportion to his *expectation.* One became great by expecting the possible, another by expecting the eternal; but he who expected the impossible became greater than all. Everyone shall be remembered, but each was great in proportion to the magnitude of what he *strove* with. For he who strove with the world became great by overcoming the world, and he who strove with himself became greater by overcoming himself; but he who strove with God became greater than all. So there was striving in the world, man against man, one against a thousand; but he who strove with God was greater than all. So there was striving on earth: there was one who overcame everything by his strength, and there was one who overcame God by his powerlessness. There was one who relied on himself and gained everything; there was one who, secure in his strength, sacrificed everything; but he

who believed God was greater than all.[2] There was one who was great by his strength, and one who was great by his wisdom, and one who was great by his hope, and one who was great by his love; but Abraham was greater than all—great by that power whose strength is powerlessness, great by that wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by that hope whose form is madness, great by that love which is hatred of oneself.[3]

By faith Abraham went out from the land of his fathers and became a stranger in the land of promise. He left one thing behind and took one thing with him: he left his earthly understanding behind and took faith with him; otherwise he would surely not have gone out, but would have thought: this is preposterous. By faith he was a [114] stranger in the land of promise, and there was nothing that reminded him of what was dear to him, but everything by its newness tempted his soul to wistful longing. And yet he was God's chosen one, in whom the Lord was well pleased! Indeed, had he been an outcast, banished from God's grace, he could have grasped it better; as it was, it seemed a mockery of him and of his faith.[4] There was also one in the world who lived exiled from the land of his fathers, which he loved. He is not forgotten, nor are his laments, when in his sorrow he sought and found what was lost. Of Abraham there is no lament. It is human to lament, human to weep with those who weep, but it is greater to believe, more blessed to contemplate the one who believes.[5]

By faith Abraham received the promise that in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. Time passed, the possibility was there, Abraham believed; time passed, it became preposterous, Abraham believed. There was one in the world who

2 Striving with God and prevailing recalls Jacob's wrestling at the Jabbok (Genesis 32:22–30).

3 Echoes 2 Corinthians 12:9 (strength made perfect in weakness), 1 Corinthians 1:25 (the foolishness of God) and Luke 14:26 (hating one's own life).

4 Modeled on Hebrews 11:8–9. "Preposterous" renders *urimeligt* (unreasonable), kept distinct from *det Absurde*, "the absurd."

5 "Weep with those who weep": Romans 12:15. The exile is perhaps Ovid, whose *Tristia* lament his banishment from Rome.

also had an expectation. Time passed, evening drew on; he was not wretched enough to have forgotten his expectation, and so he too shall not be forgotten. Then he grieved, and grief did not deceive him as life had done; it did for him all it could; in the sweetness of grief he possessed his disappointed expectation. It is human to grieve, human to grieve with those who grieve, but it is greater to believe, more blessed to contemplate the one who believes. Of Abraham we have no song of mourning.[6] He did not wistfully count the days as the seasons passed; he did not look at Sarah with suspicious glances to see whether she was growing old; he did not stop the course of the sun so that Sarah would not age, and his expectation with her; he did not sing Sarah his mournful lay to lull her. Abraham grew old, Sarah became a laughingstock in the land, and yet he was God's chosen one and heir to the promise that in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. Would it not have been better, then, if he had not been God's chosen one? What is it to be God's chosen one? Is it to be denied in youth the wish of youth, only to have it fulfilled with great difficulty in old age? But Abraham believed and held fast to the promise. If Abraham had wavered, he would have given it up.[7] He would have said to God: "Then perhaps it is not your will after all that it should happen; so I will give up the wish. It was my only one, it was my bliss. My soul is sincere; I harbor no secret resentment because you denied it." He would not have been forgotten, he would have [115] saved many by his example, but he would not have become the father of faith. For it is great to give up one's wish, but it is greater to hold fast to it after having given it up; it is great to grasp the eternal, but it is greater to hold fast to the temporal after having given it up.—Then came the fullness of time.[8] Had Abraham not believed, Sarah would probably have died of grief, and Abraham, dulled by sorrow, would not have understood the fulfillment but smiled at it as at a dream of youth. But Abraham believed; there-

6 The promise: Genesis 12:3 and 22:18.
7 Joshua commanded the sun to stand still (Joshua 10:12–13).
8 "The fullness of time": Galatians 4:4.

fore he was young. For he who always hopes for the best grows old, deceived by life, and he who is always prepared for the worst grows old early; but he who believes preserves an eternal youth. Praised be that story, then! For Sarah, though advanced in years, was young enough to desire a mother's joy, and Abraham, though gray-haired, was young enough to wish to be a father. Outwardly, the wonder lies in its happening according to their expectation; in a deeper sense, the wonder of faith lies in Abraham and Sarah's being young enough to wish, and in faith's having preserved their wish and with it their youth. He received the fulfillment of the promise; he received it in faith, and it happened according to the promise and according to faith. For Moses struck the rock with his staff, but he did not believe.[9]

Then there was joy in Abraham's house, when Sarah stood as a bride on their golden wedding day.

THE COMMAND

After long waiting Isaac is born, and then God commands Abraham to sacrifice him.

Yet it was not to remain so; once more Abraham was to be put to the test. He had fought with that cunning power that devises everything, with that watchful enemy that never slumbers, with that old man who outlives everything—he had fought with time and kept the faith. Now all the terror of the struggle was gathered into one moment. "And God tempted Abraham and said to him: Take Isaac, your only son, whom you love, go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on a mountain that I will show you."

So everything was lost, more terribly than if it had never happened! So the Lord was only mocking Abraham! Wondrously he had made the preposterous actual; now he wanted to see it destroyed again. It was folly, of course; but Abraham did not laugh at it, as Sarah did when the promise was announced.

9 Moses struck the rock for water without trusting God, and was barred from the Promised Land (Numbers 20:7–12).

Everything was lost! Seventy years of faithful expectation, the brief joy at faith's fulfillment. Who is it, then, who snatches the staff from the old man, who is it who demands that he break it himself! Who is [116] it who makes a man's gray hairs comfortless, who is it who demands that he do it himself! Is there no compassion for the venerable old man, none for the innocent child![10] And yet Abraham was God's chosen one, and it was the Lord who imposed the trial. Now everything was to be lost! The glorious remembrance of the race, the promise in Abraham's seed—it was only a whim, a fleeting thought the Lord had had, which Abraham was now to erase. That glorious treasure, as old as the faith in Abraham's heart, many, many years older than Isaac, the fruit of Abraham's life, sanctified by prayers, ripened in struggles—the blessing on Abraham's lips: this fruit was now to be torn off before its time and become meaningless; for what meaning did it have if Isaac was to be sacrificed![11] That sad yet blessed hour when Abraham would take leave of all that was dear to him, when he would once more lift up his venerable head, when his face would shine like the Lord's, when he would gather his whole soul into a blessing powerful enough to make Isaac blessed all his days—this hour was not to come! For Abraham would indeed take leave of Isaac, but in such a way that he himself would remain behind; death would part them, but in such a way that Isaac became its prey. The old man was not to lay his hand in blessing on Isaac, glad in death, but, weary of life, to lay violent hands on Isaac. And it was God who tested him. Yes, woe! Woe to the messenger who had come before Abraham with such tidings! Who would have dared to be this envoy of sorrow? But it was God who tested Abraham.

Yet Abraham believed, and believed for this life. Indeed, had his faith been only for a life to come, he would surely have found it easier to cast everything away, in order to hurry out of a world to which he did not belong. But Abraham's faith was not of that kind, if there is such a kind; for really it is not faith but

10 Sarah laughed at the promise of a son (Genesis 18:10–15).
11 Key term: "trial" renders *Prøvelse* (test), as distinct from *Fristelse* (temptation).

faith's most remote possibility, which on the very edge of the horizon senses its object, yet is separated from it by a yawning abyss within which despair plays its game. But Abraham believed precisely for this life: that he would grow old in the land, honored among the people, blessed in his descendants, unforgettable in Isaac, the dearest thing in his life, whom he embraced with a love for which it would be a poor expression to say that he faithfully fulfilled a father's duty to love his son—as indeed the [117] summons itself puts it: the son whom you love. Jacob had twelve sons and loved one; Abraham had only one, whom he loved.[12]

But Abraham believed and did not doubt; he believed the preposterous. If Abraham had doubted—then he would have done something else, something great and glorious; for how could Abraham do anything but what is great and glorious! He would have gone out to Mount Moriah, he would have split the wood, lit the fire, drawn the knife—he would have cried out to God: "Do not scorn this sacrifice; it is not the best I have, that I know well; for what is an old man compared with the child of promise? But it is the best I can give you. Let Isaac never come to know of it, so that he may take comfort in his youth." He would have plunged the knife into his own breast. He would have been admired in the world, and his name would not have been forgotten; but it is one thing to be admired and another to become a guiding star that saves the anguished.

But Abraham believed. He did not pray for himself, to move the Lord; it was only when the just punishment went forth over Sodom and Gomorrah that Abraham came forward with his prayers.[13]

We read in those holy scriptures: "And God tempted Abraham and said: Abraham, Abraham, where are you? But Abraham answered: Here I am." You to whom my words are addressed, was it so with you? When you saw heavy dispensations approaching from far off, did you not say to the mountains, Hide

12 Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons (Genesis 37:3).
13 Abraham's intercession for Sodom: Genesis 18:22–33.

me, and to the hills, Fall on me? Or if you were stronger, did your foot not still move slowly along the way, did it not, as it were, long to go back to the old tracks? When you were called, did you answer, or did you not answer, perhaps softly and in a whisper? Not so Abraham: gladly, boldly, trustingly, loudly he answered: "Here I am."[14] We read further: "And Abraham rose early in the morning." He hurried as if to a festival, and early in the morning he was at the appointed place, on Mount Moriah. He said nothing to Sarah, nothing to Eliezer—and who could have understood him? Had not the temptation by its very nature taken a vow of silence from him? "He split the wood, he bound Isaac, he lit the fire, he drew the knife." My listener! There was many a father who thought that in his child he was losing what was dearest to him in the world, being robbed of every hope for the future; but surely there was no one who was the child of promise in the sense that Isaac was for Abraham. There was many a father who lost his child, but then it was [118] God, the unchangeable and unsearchable will of the Almighty, his hand, that took it. Not so with Abraham. A harder test was reserved for him, and Isaac's fate was laid, along with the knife, in Abraham's hand. And there he stood, the old man with his only hope! But he did not doubt, he did not look anxiously to the right or to the left, he did not challenge heaven with his prayers. He knew it was God the Almighty who was testing him, he knew it was the hardest sacrifice that could be demanded of him; but he also knew that no sacrifice was too hard when God demanded it—and he drew the knife.

Who strengthened Abraham's arm, who held his right hand raised so that it did not sink down powerless! Whoever looks at this is paralyzed. Who strengthened Abraham's soul so that everything did not go black before his eyes, so that he saw neither Isaac nor the ram! Whoever looks at this goes blind.—And yet rare enough, perhaps, is the one who is paralyzed and

14 Genesis 22:1 ("where are you?" is not in the biblical text); the mountains and hills echo Hosea 10:8 and Luke 23:30.

blinded, rarer still the one who worthily tells what happened. We all know it—it was only a trial.

If Abraham, when he stood on Mount Moriah, had doubted, if he had looked around him at a loss, if before drawing the knife he had happened to catch sight of the ram, if God had allowed him to sacrifice it instead of Isaac—then he would have gone home, everything would have been the same, he would have had Sarah, he would have kept Isaac, and yet how changed! For his return would have been a flight, his deliverance an accident, his reward disgrace, his future perhaps perdition. Then he would have borne witness neither to his faith nor to God's grace, but to how terrible it is to go up to Mount Moriah. Then Abraham would not have been forgotten, nor Mount Moriah either. It would then be named, not like Ararat, where the Ark landed, but as a horror, because it was here that Abraham doubted.[15]

Venerable Father Abraham! When you went home from Mount Moriah, you needed no eulogy to console you for what was lost; for you gained everything and kept Isaac—was it not so? The Lord did not take him from you again, but you sat gladly at table with him in your tent, as you do in the world beyond for all eternity. Venerable Father Abraham! Thousands of [119] years have passed since those days, but you need no latecomer lover to snatch your memory from the power of oblivion, for every tongue remembers you—and yet you reward your lover more gloriously than anyone: in the world beyond you make him blessed in your bosom; here you captivate his eye and his heart with the wonder of your deed. Venerable Father Abraham! Second father of the human race![16] You who first felt and bore witness to that tremendous passion that disdains the terrible struggle with the raging elements and the forces of creation in order to strive with God; you who first knew that highest passion, the holy, pure, humble expression of the divine madness that the pagans admired—forgive the one who wanted to speak

15 Noah's ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat (Genesis 8:4).
16 "Abraham's bosom" as the place of the blessed dead: Luke 16:22. He is the "second father" after Adam.

in your praise if he has not done it rightly. He spoke humbly, as his heart desired; he spoke briefly, as is fitting; but he shall never forget that you needed a hundred years to get a son of your old age against all expectation, that you had to draw the knife before you kept Isaac; he shall never forget that in 130 years you got no further than faith.[17]

17 The "divine madness" praised by the Greeks recalls Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a–245a. Abraham was 100 when Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5).

Preliminary Expectoration

Foreløbig Expectoration
The opening of the Problemata: the knight of infinite resignation, the knight of faith, and the movement of faith by virtue of the absurd.

123 An old saying, taken from the outward and visible world, says: "Only the one who works gets bread." Strangely enough, the saying does not fit the world where it is most at home; for the outward world is subject to the law of imperfection, and here it happens again and again that the one who does not work also gets bread, and that the one who sleeps gets it more abundantly than the one who works. In the outward world everything belongs to whoever holds it; it is in bondage to the law of indifference, and the spirit of the ring obeys whoever has the ring, whether he is a Noureddin or an Aladdin, and whoever has the world's treasures has them, however he got them. In the world of spirit it is different.[1] Here an eternal divine order prevails; here it does not rain on both the just and the unjust, here the sun does not shine on both the good and the evil; here it holds true that only the one who works gets bread, only the one who was in anguish finds rest, only the one who descends into the underworld saves the beloved, only the one who draws the knife gets Isaac. The one who will not work does not get bread but is deceived, as the gods deceived Orpheus with an airy phantom instead of the beloved—deceived him because he was soft, not

1 In Adam Oehlenschläger's play *Aladdin* (1805), the undeserving Aladdin and the scheming sorcerer Noureddin each command the spirit of the lamp and ring. The saying echoes 2 Thessalonians 3:10.

brave; deceived him because he was a lyre player, not a man.[2] Here it does not help to have Abraham as one's father, or seventeen generations of noble ancestors. To the one who will not work applies what is written of the virgins of Israel: he gives birth to wind; but the one who will work gives birth to his own father.[3]

There is a knowledge that would presumptuously bring into the world of spirit the same law of indifference under which the outward world groans. It thinks it is enough to know what is great; no other work [124] is needed. But that is why it gets no bread; it perishes of hunger while everything turns to gold. And what does it know, anyway? There were many thousands among his Greek contemporaries, countless numbers in later generations, who knew all the triumphs of Miltiades; but there was only one who was made sleepless by them. There were countless generations who knew the story of Abraham by heart, word for word—how many did it make sleepless?[4]

WHAT THE SERMONS LEAVE OUT

Preachers praise Abraham but omit the anguish; a sleepless listener might take them at their word.

Now the story of Abraham has the remarkable property that it is always glorious, however poorly one understands it; yet here again it holds true that it depends on whether one is willing to labor and be heavy laden. But labor one will not, and yet one wants to understand the story. People speak in Abraham's honor, but how? They give the whole thing a perfectly commonplace expression: "The great thing was that he loved God so much that he was willing to sacrifice to him the best." That is

2 Matthew 5:45. In Plato's *Symposium* (179d) the gods show Orpheus only a phantom of Eurydice because, as a mere musician, he would not die for her.
3 "We have Abraham as our father": Matthew 3:9. Giving birth to wind: Isaiah 26:18.
4 King Midas starved because all he touched turned to gold. Plutarch tells that Themistocles could not sleep for thinking of Miltiades' victory at Marathon (490 BC).

very true; but "the best" is a vague expression. In the course of thought and speech one quite comfortably identifies Isaac and the best, and the one meditating can very well smoke his pipe during the meditation, and the listener can very well stretch his legs out in comfort.[5] If that rich young man whom Christ met on his way had sold all his possessions and given the money to the poor, we would praise him, as we do everything great, and would not even understand him without working; but he would still not have become an Abraham, even though he sacrificed the best. What is left out of Abraham's story is the anguish; for toward money I have no ethical obligation, but toward the son the father has the highest and holiest. Yet anguish is a dangerous matter for the soft, so it is forgotten, and in spite of that people want to talk about Abraham. So they talk, and in the course of the talk the two expressions interchange, Isaac and the best, and everything goes splendidly.[6] Suppose, however, that among the listeners there happened to be a man who suffered from sleeplessness—then the most terrible, the deepest, tragic and comic misunderstanding lies very close at hand. He went home, he wanted to do just as Abraham did; for the son is, after all, the best. If that speaker got to hear of it, he would perhaps go to him, summon all his clerical dignity and shout: "Abominable man, dregs of society, what devil has so possessed you that you want to murder your son?" And the pastor, who had not noticed any warmth or perspiration while preaching about Abraham, would be astonished at himself, at the earnest wrath with which he thundered down on that poor man; he would be pleased with himself, for he had never spoken with such 125 force and unction; he would say to himself and to his wife: "I am an orator; what was lacking was the occasion. When I spoke about Abraham last Sunday, I did not feel moved at all." If that same speaker had a little surplus of understanding to spare, I think he would lose it if the sinner calmly and with dignity answered: "But that is what

5 "Labor and are heavy laden": Matthew 11:28.

6 The rich young man: Matthew 19:16–22. "Ethical" anticipates the key term *det Ethiske*, "the ethical."

you yourself preached about last Sunday." And how could the pastor ever get such a thing into his head? And yet it was so, and the only mistake was that he had not known what he was saying. Why is there no poet who could bring himself to prefer such situations to the frippery and trumpery with which comedies and novels are filled! The comic and the tragic touch each other here in absolute infinity. The pastor's speech was perhaps ridiculous enough in and of itself, but it became infinitely ridiculous through its effect, and yet that effect was entirely natural. Or suppose the sinner, without making any objection, was actually converted by the pastor's reprimand; suppose this zealous cleric went home glad, glad in the awareness that he was effective not only from the pulpit but above all, with irresistible power, as a shepherd of souls, since on Sunday he inspired the congregation, while on Monday, like a cherub with a flaming sword, he placed himself before the man who by his deed would put to shame that old saying that things in the world do not go as the pastor preaches[7].[8]

If, on the other hand, the sinner was not convinced, his situation is tragic enough. He would presumably be executed or sent to an asylum; in short, he would become unhappy in relation to so-called reality. In another sense, I suppose, Abraham made him happy; for he who works does not perish.

How is one to explain a contradiction like that preacher's? Is it because Abraham has acquired a prescriptive right to be a great man, so that what he does is great, and when someone else does the same, it is sin, a sin crying to heaven? In that case I do not wish to take part in such [126] thoughtless praise. If faith cannot make it a holy act to be willing to murder one's son, then let the same judgment fall on Abraham as on anyone else. If people perhaps lack the courage to carry their thought through, to say

7 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. In the old days people used to say: it is sad that the world does not go the way the pastor preaches. Perhaps the time will come, especially with the help of philosophy, when people can say: fortunately the world does not go the way the pastor preaches; for in life there is at least a little meaning, and in his sermon there is none at all.

8 The cherub with the flaming sword guarding Eden: Genesis 3:24.

that Abraham was a murderer, then it would be better to acquire that courage than to waste time on undeserved eulogies. The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac. But precisely in this contradiction lies the anguish that can indeed make a person sleepless—and yet Abraham is not who he is without this anguish. Or perhaps Abraham did not do at all what the story tells; perhaps, owing to the circumstances of those times, it was something quite different. Then let us forget him; for what is the point of remembering *that* past which cannot become a present? Or perhaps that preacher had forgotten something, an omission matching the ethical oversight of forgetting that Isaac was the son. For when faith is taken away by being reduced to nil and nothing, only the raw fact remains that Abraham was willing to murder Isaac—which is easy enough for anyone to imitate who does not have faith, that is, the faith that makes it hard for him.

For my part, I do not lack the courage to think a thought through to the end. So far I have feared none; should I come upon such a thought, I hope I would at least have the honesty to say: this thought I fear, it stirs up something else in me, and so I will not think it. If I do wrong in that, the punishment will surely not fail to come. Had I recognized it as the verdict of truth that Abraham was a murderer, I do not know whether I could have silenced my reverence for him. If I had thought it, though, I would probably have kept quiet about it; for one should not initiate others into such thoughts. But Abraham is no illusion. He did not sleep his way to fame; he does not owe it to a whim of fate.

Can one, then, speak without reservation about Abraham without running the risk that some individual will go astray and do likewise? If I dare not, I will keep entirely silent about Abraham, and above all I will not belittle him in such a way that precisely by this he becomes a snare for the weak. For if one makes faith everything—that is, what it is—then I think one may speak of it without danger in our age, which hardly goes to extremes in

faith; and it is only through faith that one comes to resemble Abraham, not through murder. If [127] one makes love a fleeting mood, a voluptuous stirring in a person, then one only lays snares for the weak when one sets out to speak of love's exploits. Everyone, no doubt, has passing stirrings; but if on that account everyone wanted to do the terrible thing that love has hallowed as an immortal exploit, then all is lost, both the exploit and the one who has gone astray.

So one could, after all, speak about Abraham; for the great can never do harm when it is grasped in its greatness; it is like a two-edged sword that kills and saves. If it fell to my lot to speak about it, I would begin by showing what a pious and God-fearing man Abraham was, worthy to be called God's chosen one. Only such a man is put to such a test; but who is such a man? Next I would describe how Abraham loved Isaac. To that end I would ask all good spirits to stand by me, so that my speech might glow as a father's love glows. I would hope to describe it in such a way that there would not be many a father in the King's realms and lands who dared claim that he loved like that.[9] But if he did not love as Abraham loved, then any thought of sacrificing Isaac would be a spiritual trial. On this alone one could preach for several Sundays; there is no need to hurry. The result, if it were spoken rightly, would be that a number of fathers would not ask to hear any more, but for the time being would be glad if they really succeeded in loving as Abraham loved. If there were then one who, having heard the greatness but also the terror of Abraham's deed, ventured to set out on the road, I would saddle my horse and ride with him.[10] At every station until we reached Mount Moriah, I would explain to him that he could still turn back, could repent of the misunderstanding that he was called to be tested in such a struggle, could confess that he lacked the courage, so that God himself would have to take Isaac if he

9 "Two-edged sword" echoes Hebrews 4:12; "the King's realms and lands" is the formula for the Danish monarchy's territories.
10 "Spiritual trial" renders *Anfægtelse*: temptation that comes from within, as distinct from *Fristelse*, ordinary temptation.

wanted him. It is my conviction that such a person is not rejected, that he can be saved along with everyone else—but not in time. Would not people, even in the most believing ages, have judged such a person this way? I have known a man who once could have saved my life if he had been magnanimous.[11] He said straight out: "I see well enough what I could do; but I don't dare. I fear that later I will lack the strength, that I will regret [128] it." He was not magnanimous; but who would not go on loving him all the same?

When I had spoken in this way and moved my listeners, so that they had at least sensed the dialectical struggles of faith and its gigantic passion, I would not want to be to blame for an error on their part—that they should think: "He has faith to such a high degree that it is enough for us to hang on to his coattails." For I would add: "I by no means have faith. By nature I am a shrewd head, and every such head always has great difficulty making the movement of faith—though I do not in itself attach any value *to the difficulty which, when overcome, brought the shrewd head no further than the point that the simplest and plainest person reaches more easily.*"

Love, after all, has its priests in the poets, and now and then one hears a voice that knows how to uphold its honor; but about faith not a word is heard. Who speaks in honor of this passion? Philosophy goes further. Theology sits painted at the window and courts its favor, offering its charms for sale to philosophy. It is supposed to be difficult to understand Hegel, but to understand Abraham—that is a trifle. To go beyond Hegel is a miracle, but to get beyond Abraham is the easiest thing of all.[12] For my part, I have spent considerable time trying to understand Hegel's philosophy, and I believe I have understood it reasonably well. I am rash enough to think that when, despite my efforts, I cannot understand him in certain passages, he was

11 The stations are the posting stations of coach travel, where horses were changed. "In time" means in this temporal life.

12 G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), the German philosopher whose system dominated Copenhagen intellectual life in the 1840s; "going further" was a catchphrase of his Danish followers. The painted woman at the window recalls Jezebel (2 Kings 9:30).

probably not entirely clear himself. All this I do easily, naturally; my head does not suffer from it. But when I set about thinking about Abraham, I am as if annihilated. At every moment I catch sight of that monstrous paradox which is the content of Abraham's life; at every moment I am thrust back, and my thought, for all its passion, cannot penetrate it, cannot get a hair's breadth further. I strain every muscle to get a view—and in the same instant I am paralyzed.

I am not unacquainted with what has been admired in the world as great and magnanimous. My soul feels its kinship with it and is, in all humility, assured that it was my cause, too, that the hero fought for; in the moment of contemplation I call out to myself: jam tua res agitur [now it is your own affair that is at stake]. I can *think* myself *into* the hero; into Abraham I cannot think myself. When I reach the height, I fall down, since what is offered me is a paradox. Yet [129] I by no means think that faith is something inferior; on the contrary, it is the highest, and it is dishonest of philosophy to offer something else in its place and to scoff at faith.[13] Philosophy cannot and should not give faith, but it should understand itself and know what it has to offer, and take nothing away—least of all trick people out of something as if it were nothing. I am not unacquainted with the hardships and dangers of life; I do not fear them, and I go to meet them boldly. I am no stranger to the terrible; my memory is a faithful wife, and my imagination is—what I myself am not—a diligent little girl who sits quietly at her work all day and in the evening knows how to chatter to me so prettily that I have to look at it, even though it is not always landscapes or flowers or pastoral tales that she paints. I have looked it in the eye; I do not flee from it in fear; but I know very well that, even if I go to meet it with courage, my courage is still not the courage of faith and is nothing to compare with it. I cannot make the movement of faith; I cannot shut my eyes and plunge confidently into the absurd—for me that is an impossibility—but I do not boast of it. I am convinced that God is love; this thought has for me a primal

13 The Latin is from Horace, *Epistles* 1.18.84.

lyrical validity. When it is present to me I am unspeakably blissful; when it is absent I long for it more fiercely than the lover for the beloved. But I do not have faith; this courage I lack.[14] God's love is for me, both in a direct and in an inverse sense, incommensurable with the whole of actuality. I am not cowardly enough to whimper and complain about that, but neither am I sly enough to deny that faith is something far higher. I can bear to live in my own way; I am glad and content; but my joy is not the joy of faith, and compared with that it is unhappy. I do not trouble God with my little sorrows; the particulars do not concern me; I gaze only at my love and keep its virgin flame pure and clear. Faith is convinced that God cares about the smallest things. I am content in this life to be married with the left hand; faith is humble enough to ask for the right. For that this is humility I do not deny and never shall.[15]

Is everyone of my generation really able to make the movements of faith? Unless I am much mistaken about it, it is rather inclined to be proud of doing what it probably does not even believe me capable of—namely, the imperfect. It goes against my soul to do what [130] so often happens: to speak inhumanly of the great, as if a few thousand years were an immense distance. I prefer to speak of it humanly, as if it had happened yesterday, and to let only greatness itself be the distance, which either uplifts or judges.

IF I HAD BEEN ABRAHAM

Johannes could resign Isaac, but could not believe he would receive him back.

If I (*in the capacity of tragic hero;* for higher I cannot go) had been summoned on such an extraordinary royal journey as the one to Mount Moriah, I know well what I would have done. I would not

14 "The absurd" renders *det Absurde*; faith acts "by virtue of the absurd" (*i Kraft af det Absurde*).

15 A "left-handed" (morganatic) marriage joined a nobleman to a woman of lower rank, who did not share his rank or rights.

have been cowardly enough to stay at home, nor would I have lain about and dawdled on the road, nor forgotten the knife so as to cause a little delay. I am fairly sure I would have been there on the stroke of the hour, with everything in order—perhaps I would even have arrived too early, so that it could soon be over. But I also know what else I would have done.[16] The moment I mounted my horse I would have said to myself: now all is lost; God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and with him all my joy—yet God is love and continues to be love for me; for in the temporal world God and I cannot talk together, we have no language in common. Perhaps someone or other in our age will be foolish enough, envious enough of the great, to want to persuade himself and me that if I had really done this, I would have done something even greater than what Abraham did; for my immense resignation would have been far more ideal and poetic than Abraham's small-mindedness. And yet this is the greatest untruth; for my immense resignation would have been the substitute for faith.[17] Nor could I have done more than make the infinite movement, in order to find myself and rest in myself again. Nor would I have loved Isaac as Abraham loved him. That I was resolved to make the movement might prove my courage, humanly speaking; that I loved him with my whole soul is the presupposition without which the whole thing becomes a crime; yet I did not love as Abraham did, for then I would have held back even at the last minute—though without arriving at Mount Moriah too late on that account. Moreover, by my conduct I would have spoiled the whole story; for if I had gotten Isaac back, I would have been at a loss. What came easiest to Abraham would have been hard for me: to be glad in Isaac again! For he who with all the infinity of his soul, proprio motu et propriis auspiciis [of his own accord and on his own authority], has

16 A "royal journey" (*Kongereise*) was one made on the king's summons or in his service.

17 "Resignation" renders *Resignation*: the "infinite movement" of renouncing everything finite.

made the infinite movement and can do no more, keeps Isaac only in pain.

But what did Abraham do? He came neither too *early* nor too
131 late. He mounted the donkey; he rode slowly along the road. All that time he had faith; he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while he was nonetheless willing to sacrifice him if it was required. He believed by virtue of the absurd; for there could be no question of human calculation, and it was indeed the absurd that God, who demanded it of him, should in the next moment revoke the demand. He climbed the mountain; even in the moment when the knife glinted, he believed—that God would not demand Isaac. He was surprised by the outcome, to be sure, but through a double movement he had returned to his first condition, and therefore he received Isaac more gladly than the first time. Let us go further. We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham had faith. He did not believe that he would one day be blessed in the hereafter, but that he would be happy here in this world. God could give him a new Isaac, call the sacrificed one back to life. He believed by virtue of the absurd; for all human calculation had long since ceased. That grief can unhinge a person, we see, and it is hard enough. That there is a willpower able to tack so hard into the wind that it saves the understanding, even if the person becomes a little strange—that too we see, and I do not mean to belittle it. But to be able to lose one's understanding, and with it the whole of finitude, whose broker it is, and then by virtue of the absurd to win precisely the same finitude back—that appalls my soul. Yet I do not say that it is something inferior; on the contrary, it is the one true marvel. People generally think that what faith produces is no work of art, that it is coarse and clumsy work, fit only for the clumsier natures; but it is quite otherwise. The dialectic of faith is the finest and most extraordinary of all; it has an elevation of which I can well form a conception, but no more than that. I can make the great springboard leap by which I pass over into infinity; my back is like a tightrope dancer's, twisted in my childhood, so it comes easily to me. One, two, three—I can walk on my head in

existence; but the next thing I cannot do; for the marvelous I cannot do, only be amazed at. Indeed, if Abraham, in the moment he swung his leg over the donkey's back, had said to himself: now Isaac is lost, I might just as well sacrifice him here at home as ride the long way to Moriah—then I do not need Abraham; whereas now I bow seven times to his name and seventy times to his deed. For this [132] he did not do, as I can prove from the fact that he was glad to receive Isaac, heartily glad, that he needed no preparation, no time to collect himself for finitude and its joy.[18] If it had not been so with Abraham, then perhaps he would have loved God, but not had faith; for he who loves God without faith reflects upon himself, while he who loves God in faith reflects upon God.

On this pinnacle stands Abraham. The last stage he loses sight of is infinite resignation. He really does go further and arrives at faith. For all those caricatures of faith—the miserable, lukewarm sloth that thinks: there's surely no hurry, no point grieving before the time; the paltry hope that says: you never know what will happen, it might just be possible—these caricatures belong to the wretchedness of life, and infinite resignation has already infinitely despised them.

Abraham I cannot understand; in a certain sense I can learn nothing from him except to be amazed. If one imagines that by pondering the outcome of that story one will be moved to faith, one deceives oneself and means to cheat God of faith's first movement; one wants to suck worldly wisdom out of the paradox. Perhaps someone or other will succeed; for our age does not stop at faith, at its miracle of turning water into wine—it goes further, it turns wine into water.[19]

Would it not be best to stop at faith, and is it not outrageous that everyone wants to go further? When in our age—and it is proclaimed in various ways—people will not stop at love, where do they end up? At worldly shrewdness, petty calculation, at meanness and wretchedness, at everything that can make

18 "Seven times … seventy times" echoes Matthew 18:22.
19 The miracle at Cana, John 2:1–11.

humanity's divine origin doubtful. Would it not be best to stop at faith, and for him who stands to take heed that he does not fall? For the movement of faith must constantly be made by virtue of the absurd—yet, mark well, in such a way that one does not lose finitude but gains it whole and entire. For my part, I can well describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them.[20] If you want to learn the movements of swimming, you can have yourself hung from the ceiling in a harness; you go through the movements, but you are not swimming. In the same way I can describe the movements of faith; but when I am thrown into the water, I do swim, to be sure (for I am not one of the waders), but I make other [133] movements: I make the movements of infinity, whereas faith does the opposite—having made the movements of infinity, it makes those of finitude. Happy is he who can make these movements! He does the marvelous, and I shall never tire of admiring him. Whether it is Abraham or the slave in Abraham's house, whether it is a professor of philosophy or a poor servant girl, is absolutely indifferent to me; I look only at the movements.[21]

THE KNIGHT OF FAITH

Johannes imagines meeting a knight of faith, who looks just like a tax collector.

But at those I do look, and I do not let myself be fooled, either by myself or by anyone else. The knights of infinite resignation are easily recognized: their gait is gliding, bold. Those, on the other hand, who carry the jewel of faith easily deceive, because their outward appearance bears a striking resemblance to what both infinite resignation and faith deeply despise—philistinism.[22]

I frankly confess that in my experience I have not found a single reliable specimen, though I will not therefore deny that

20 "He who stands … fall" echoes 1 Corinthians 10:12.
21 "Waders" are wading birds, which keep to the shallows.
22 "Knight of infinite resignation" renders *Ridder af den uendelige Resignation*; the counterpart is the knight of faith (*Troens Ridder*). "Philistinism" renders *Spidsborgerlighed*, narrow bourgeois respectability.

perhaps every second person is such a specimen. Still, I have searched for one in vain for several years. People generally travel around the world to see rivers and mountains, new stars, gaudy birds, misshapen fish, outlandish peoples; they abandon themselves to the animal stupor that gapes at existence, and they think they have seen something. That does not occupy me. But if I knew where such a knight of faith lived, I would walk to him on foot; for this marvel occupies me absolutely. I would not let him out of my sight for a moment; every minute I would watch how he managed the movements. I would consider myself provided for in life and divide my time between watching him and practicing myself, and so spend all my time admiring him. As I said, I have not found any such person; but I can well imagine him. Here he is. The acquaintance is made; I am introduced to him. The moment I first set eyes on him, I instantly push him away, jump back, clap my hands together and say half aloud: "Good Lord! Is this the man? Is it really him? Why, he looks just like a tax collector!" But it is him all the same.[23] I draw a little closer to him and watch his slightest movement, to see whether some small, incongruous fragment of a signal from the infinite might show itself—a glance, a look, a gesture, a touch of melancholy, a smile—that betrayed the infinite in its incongruity with the finite. No! I examine his figure from head to toe, to see whether there [134] might be a crack through which the infinite peeked out. No! He is solid through and through. His footing? It is firm and belongs wholly to finitude; no townsman in his Sunday best, strolling out to Frederiksberg on a Sunday afternoon, treads the ground more solidly. He belongs wholly to the world; no philistine could belong to it more. There is nothing to detect of that alien and distinguished air by which one recognizes the knight of infinity.[24] He takes delight in everything, takes part in everything,

23 A *Rodemester* was a Copenhagen district official whose duties included collecting taxes.

24 Frederiksberg (colloquially "Fresberg"), with its park and gardens just outside Copenhagen, was a favorite Sunday outing.

and every time one sees him take part in some particular thing, he does it with a persistence that marks the worldly person whose soul clings to such things. He tends to his work. Seeing him at it, you would think he was a clerk who had lost his soul in Italian double-entry bookkeeping, he is so punctilious. On Sunday he takes the day off. He goes to church. No heavenly gaze, no sign of the incommensurable gives him away; if one did not know him, it would be impossible to pick him out from the rest of the crowd, for his hearty, vigorous hymn-singing proves at most that he has good lungs. In the afternoon he walks out to the woods.[25] He delights in everything he sees: the swarm of people, the new omnibuses, the Sound. Meeting him on Strandvejen, you would think he was a shopkeeper out for a spree—that is exactly how he enjoys himself; for he is no poet, and I have tried in vain to catch the poetic incommensurability in him. Toward evening he walks home, his step as tireless as a postman's. On the way he thinks that his wife is sure to have some special little hot dish ready for him when he gets home—say, roast lamb's head with vegetables. If he met a kindred spirit, he could go on all the way to Østerport talking with him about this dish with a passion worthy of a restaurateur.[26] As it happens, he does not have four shillings to his name, and yet he firmly believes that his wife has that tasty dish waiting for him. If she has it, to see him eat would be an enviable sight for the upper classes and an inspiring one for the common people; for his appetite is heartier than Esau's. His wife does not have it—oddly enough, he is exactly the same. On the way he passes a building site and meets another man. They talk for a moment; in an instant he puts up a building, and he has all the resources for it at his disposal. The stranger leaves him thinking that he must surely be a capitalist, while my admired knight thinks: well, if it

25 Double-entry bookkeeping was known as the "Italian" method after its Renaissance Italian origins.

26 The Sound (Øresund) is the strait between Denmark and Sweden; Strandvejen is the coast road north of Copenhagen, and Østerport was the city's eastern gate. Horse-drawn omnibuses had only recently arrived in Copenhagen.

came to that, I could easily manage it.[27] He [135] leans out of an open window and looks at the square where he lives, at everything that goes on—a rat slipping under a gutter plank, children playing—everything occupies him with a calm in existence as though he were a girl of sixteen. And yet he is no genius; for I have tried in vain to spy out in him the incommensurability of genius. In the evening he smokes his pipe; seeing him, you would swear it was the grocer across the street vegetating in the twilight. He lets things slide with a carefreeness as if he were a feckless good-for-nothing, and yet every moment he lives, he buys up the opportune time at the dearest price; for he does not do even the least thing except by virtue of the absurd. And yet, and yet—yes, I could be enraged at it, if for no other reason than envy—and yet this man has made, and at every moment makes, the movement of infinity.[28] In infinite resignation he drains the deep sorrow of existence; he knows the bliss of infinity; he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, the dearest thing one has in the world; and yet finitude tastes just as good to him as to one who never knew anything higher. For his remaining in finitude bore no trace of a cowed, anxious training, and yet he has this sureness in delighting in it, as if it were the most certain thing of all. And yet, and yet, the whole earthly figure he presents is a new creation by virtue of the absurd. He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd. He constantly makes the movement of infinity, but he makes it with such precision and assurance that he constantly gets finitude out of it, and there is not a second in which one suspects anything else. It is said to be the hardest task for a dancer to leap into a particular position in such a way that there is not a second in which he is grasping for the position, but in the leap itself he stands in the position. Perhaps no dancer can do it—this that knight does. The mass of people live lost in worldly sorrow

27 The skilling was a small Danish coin. Esau sold his birthright for a meal of stew (Genesis 25:29–34).

28 "Lets things slide" renders the Danish idiom *lader 5 være lige* ("lets five be even"). "Buying up the time" echoes Ephesians 5:16.

and joy; they are the wallflowers who do not join the dance. The knights of infinity are dancers and have elevation.[29] They make the movement upward and come down again, and this too is no unhappy pastime, nor unlovely to watch. But every time they come down, they cannot immediately assume the position; they waver for a moment, and this wavering shows that they are, after all, strangers in the world. It is more or less noticeable depending on their skill, but even the most skillful 136 of these knights cannot hide this wavering. One need not see them in the air; one need only see them at the moment they touch and have touched the ground—and one recognizes them. But to be able to come down in such a way that in the same second it looks as if one were standing and walking, to transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—only that knight can do it, and this is the one and only marvel.

THE PRINCESS AND THE LAD

A young lad loves a princess, a love that can never be realized.

But this marvel can so easily deceive, so I will describe the movements in a particular case that can shed light on their relation to actuality; for that is what everything turns on. A young lad falls in love with a princess, and the whole content of his life lies in this love; and yet the situation is such that it cannot possibly be realized, cannot possibly be translated from ideality into reality[30]. The slaves of wretchedness, the frogs in life's swamp, naturally shriek: such a love is folly; the rich brewer's widow is every bit as good and solid a match. Let them croak undisturbed in the swamp. The knight of infinite resignation does not act this way; he does not give up the love, not for all the

29 "Elevation" is the ballet term for a dancer's height and lightness in a leap.

30 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. It goes without saying that any other interest in which an individual has concentrated the whole reality of actuality for himself can, when it proves unrealizable, prompt the movement of resignation. I have chosen being in love to show the movements, however, because this interest is presumably easier to understand and so spares me all preliminary considerations, which in a deeper sense could concern only a very few individuals.

glory in the world. He is no fool. First he makes sure that it really is the content of his life, and his soul is too healthy and too proud to squander the least thing on an infatuation. He is not cowardly; he is not afraid to let it steal into his most secret, his most remote thoughts, to let it wind itself in countless coils around every ligament of his consciousness—if the love turns out unhappy, he will never be able to tear himself free of it. He feels a blissful rapture in letting love thrill through every nerve, and yet his soul is as solemn as that of one who has drained the cup of poison and feels how the juice penetrates every drop of blood—for this moment is life and death.[31] When he has thus absorbed the whole of love and immersed [137] himself in it, he does not lack the courage to try and venture everything. He surveys the circumstances of his life; he summons the swift thoughts that, like seasoned doves, obey his every signal; he waves his staff over them, and they scatter in all directions. But when they all return, all as messengers of sorrow, and explain to him that it is an impossibility, then he grows quiet, dismisses them, becomes alone, and then he undertakes the movement. If what I am saying here is to have any meaning, everything depends on the movement's being made normally[32]. In the first place, then, the knight will have the strength to concentrate the

31 The cup of poison recalls the death of Socrates, who drank hemlock in 399 BC.

32 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. *For this, passion is required. Every movement of infinity comes about through passion, and no reflection can produce a movement. This is the continual leap in existence that explains the movement, whereas mediation is a chimera that in Hegel is supposed to explain everything and that is also the only thing he has never tried to explain.* Even to make the well-known Socratic distinction between what one understands and what one does not understand requires passion—and still more, of course, to make the real Socratic movement, that of ignorance. But what our age lacks is not reflection but passion. That is why our age is, in a certain sense, actually too tenacious of life to die; for dying is one of the most remarkable leaps. A little verse by a poet has always appealed to me greatly, because after five or six preceding lines in which he has beautifully and simply wished himself good things in life, he ends like this: ein seliger Sprung in die Ewigkeit [a blessed leap into eternity].

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. "Leap" renders *Spring*. "Mediation" renders *Mediationen*, Hegel's term for the reconciling of opposites in a higher unity. Socrates claimed to know only that he knew nothing.

whole content of life and the meaning of actuality in one single wish. If a person lacks this concentration, this self-containment, if his soul is dispersed in the manifold from the start, then he will never get to make the movement; he will act shrewdly in life, like the financiers who invest their capital in all sorts of securities so as to gain on one when they lose on another—in short, he is no knight. In the second place, the knight will have the strength to concentrate the whole result of his thinking in one act of consciousness. If he lacks this self-containment, if his soul is dispersed in the manifold from the start, he will never find time to make the movement; he will be forever running errands in life, never entering eternity; for even at the moment he is closest to it, he will suddenly discover that he has forgotten something and must go back. [138] In the next moment, he will think, it is possible—and that is quite true, too; but by such reflections one never gets around to making the movement; rather, with their help one sinks deeper and deeper into the mire.

THE KNIGHT OF INFINITE RESIGNATION

The lover renounces the princess infinitely, keeps his love young, and finds peace in pain.

The knight makes the movement, then—but which one? Will he forget the whole thing? For there is a kind of concentration in that too. No! For the knight does not contradict himself, and it is a contradiction to forget the whole content of one's life and yet remain the same. He feels no urge to become someone else, and by no means considers that the great thing. Only the lower natures forget themselves and become something new. Thus the butterfly has completely forgotten that it was a caterpillar; perhaps it can in turn forget so completely that it was a butterfly that it can become a fish. The deeper natures never forget themselves and never become anything other than what they were. The knight, then, will remember everything; but this remembering is precisely the pain, and yet in infinite resignation he is

reconciled with existence. His love for that princess became for him the expression of an eternal love, took on a religious character, was transfigured into a love for the eternal being, which did indeed deny the fulfillment but still reconciled him once more in the eternal consciousness of its validity in a form of eternity that no actuality can take from him. Fools and young people chatter that everything is possible for a human being. That, however, is a great error. Spiritually speaking, everything is possible; but in the world of finitude there is much that is not possible. This impossible thing, however, the knight makes possible by expressing it spiritually; but he expresses it spiritually by renouncing it. The wish that would have led him out into actuality, but was wrecked on impossibility, is now bent inward; yet it is not lost on that account, nor forgotten. Sometimes it is the dim stirrings of the wish in him that awaken the memory; sometimes he awakens it himself; for he is too proud to want what was the whole content of his life to have been the affair of a fleeting moment. He keeps this love young, and it grows with him in years and in beauty. He needs no finite occasion, however, for its growth. From the moment he has made the movement, the princess is lost. He does not need those erotic tremblings of the nerves at the sight of the beloved, and so on; nor does he need, in the finite sense, to be forever taking leave of her, because he remembers her in the eternal sense. And he knows very [139] well that lovers who are so eager to see each other once more, to say goodbye for the last time, are right to be eager, right to think it is the last time; for they forget each other soonest. He has grasped the deep secret that even in loving another person one ought to be sufficient unto oneself. He no longer pays any finite attention to what the princess does, and precisely this proves that he has made the movement infinitely. Here one has occasion to see whether the movement in the individual is true or feigned. There was one who also believed he had made the movement; but look—time passed, the princess did something else, married a prince, for example, and then his soul lost the elasticity of resignation. He thereby showed that he

had not made the movement properly; for he who has resigned infinitely is sufficient unto himself. The knight does not revoke his resignation; he keeps his love just as young as it was in the first moment; he never lets go of it, precisely because he has made the movement infinitely. What the princess does cannot disturb him; it is only the lower natures that have the law for their actions in another person, the premises of their actions outside themselves. If, on the other hand, the princess is of like mind, then something beautiful will come about. She will then induct herself into that order of knighthood to which one is not admitted by ballot, but of which everyone is a member who has the courage to enroll himself—the order of knighthood that proves its immortality by making no distinction between man and woman. She too will keep her love young and healthy; she too will have overcome her grief, even though she does not, as the ballad says, "lie every night by her lord's side."[33] These two will then suit each other for all eternity, with such a rhythmic harmonia praestabilita [pre-established harmony] that if ever the moment came—a moment, however, that does not concern them finitely, for then they would grow old—if ever the moment came that allowed love to be given its expression in time, they would be able to begin exactly where they would have begun had they originally been united. He who understands this, whether man or woman, can never be deceived; for it is only the lower natures who imagine that they are deceived. No girl who is not that proud really knows how to love; but if she is that proud, then all the cunning and shrewdness in the world cannot deceive her.[34]

140 In infinite resignation there is peace and rest. Every human being who wills it—who has not debased himself by something still more dreadful than being too proud, namely by holding himself in contempt—can discipline himself to make this movement, which in its pain reconciles one with existence.

33 The line comes from a Danish folk ballad.

34 "Pre-established harmony" is Leibniz's term for the God-ordained correspondence between substances that do not act on one another.

Infinite resignation is that shirt spoken of in an old folk tale. The thread is spun under tears, bleached with tears, the shirt sewn in tears; but then it also protects better than iron and steel. The imperfection in the folk tale is that a third party can make this linen.[35] The secret in life is that each person must sew it for himself, and the remarkable thing is that a man can sew it just as well as a woman. In infinite resignation there is peace and rest and comfort in pain—that is, when the movement is made properly. Yet it would not be hard for me to write a whole book if I wanted to go through the various misunderstandings, the back-to-front positions, the sloppy movements I have come across in my own small practice. People have very little belief in spirit, and yet it is precisely spirit that making this movement requires. What matters is that it not be the one-sided result of a dira necessitas [dire necessity], and the more that is present, the more doubtful it always becomes whether the movement is normal. So if one wants to hold that cold, barren necessity must necessarily be present, one is saying that no one can experience death before he actually dies—which strikes me as crude materialism. But in our age people worry less about making pure movements.[36] If someone who was to learn to dance were to say, "For centuries now one generation after another has learned the positions; it is high time I took advantage of this and started straight in on the quadrilles," people would presumably laugh at him a little; but in the world of spirit this is found extremely plausible. What, then, is education? I thought it was the course the single individual runs through in order to catch up with himself; and whoever will not go through this course is helped very little by having been born in the most enlightened age.[37]

Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith; for only in infinite resignation do I become clear to myself in my

35 The folk tale is of a shirt spun and sewn in tears that shields its wearer.
36 *Dira necessitas*, "dire necessity," echoes Horace, *Odes* 3.24.
37 "The single individual" renders *den Enkelte*. The Danish has *Françaiser*, French set dances whose figures are built on the basic positions.

eternal validity, and only then can there be any question of grasping existence by virtue of faith.

BY VIRTUE OF THE ABSURD

The knight of faith also renounces her, yet believes he will get her back.

141 Let us now have the knight of faith appear in the case described. He does exactly the same as the other knight: he infinitely renounces the love that is the content of his life; he is reconciled in pain. But then the marvel happens. He makes one more movement, more wondrous than anything, for he says: "I nevertheless believe that I will get her—by virtue, that is, of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible." The absurd does not belong among the distinctions that lie within the proper compass of the understanding. It is not identical with the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen. The moment the knight resigned, he assured himself of the impossibility, humanly speaking; that was the result of the understanding, and he had energy enough to think it.[38] In an infinite sense, on the other hand, it was possible—namely, by resigning it. But this possessing is, of course, at the same time a giving up; and yet for the understanding this possessing is no absurdity, for the understanding went on being right that in the world of wretchedness where it rules, it was and remained an impossibility. The knight of faith is just as clearly conscious of this; the only thing that can save him, then, is the absurd, and this he grasps by faith. He acknowledges the impossibility, then, and in the same moment believes the absurd; for if he imagines he has faith without acknowledging the impossibility with all the passion of his soul and with his whole heart, he deceives himself, and his testimony has no ground to stand on anywhere, since he has not even reached infinite resignation.

Faith is therefore no aesthetic emotion but something far higher, precisely because it has resignation before it; it is not the immediate impulse of the heart but the paradox of existence. So

38 "For God all things are possible" echoes Matthew 19:26.

when a young girl, despite all difficulties, remains convinced that her wish will surely be fulfilled, this conviction is not at all that of faith—even though she was brought up by Christian parents and has perhaps spent a whole year going to the pastor.[39] She is convinced in all her childlike naivety and innocence. This conviction, too, ennobles her being and gives her a supernatural stature, so that, like a thaumaturge, she can conjure the finite powers of existence and bring even the stones to weep, while on the other hand, in her flurry, she can just as well run to Herod as to Pilate and move the whole world with her pleas. Her conviction is most lovable, and one can learn much from her; but one thing one does not learn from her: one does not learn to make 142 movements, for her conviction does not dare, in the pain of resignation, to look the impossibility in the eye.[40]

I can understand, then, that it takes strength and energy and freedom of spirit to make the infinite movement of resignation; I can also understand that it can be done. The next thing astonishes me; my brain spins in my head. For after having made the movement of resignation, then by virtue of the absurd to get everything, to get the wish, whole and undiminished—that is beyond human powers; it is a marvel. But this I can understand: the young girl's conviction is mere light-mindedness compared with the unshakability of faith, even though faith has seen the impossibility. Every time I want to make this movement, everything goes black before my eyes; in the same moment I admire it absolutely, and in the same moment a tremendous anguish grips my soul—for what, then, is it to tempt God? And yet this movement is the movement of faith, and remains so, even if philosophy, in order to confuse the concepts, would have us believe that it has faith, even if theology wants to sell it off cheap.

To resign does not require faith, for what I gain in resignation is my eternal consciousness, and this is a purely philosophical

39 "Immediate" renders *umiddelbar* (immediacy, *Umiddelbarhed*): unreflective, simply given. "Going to the pastor" means the year of confirmation classes in the Danish church.

movement that I trust myself to make when it is required, and that I can discipline myself to make; for every time some finitude threatens to grow over my head, I starve myself out until I make the movement, because my eternal consciousness is my love for God, and that is higher to me than everything. To resign does not require faith, but to get the very least thing more than my eternal consciousness requires faith, for this is the paradoxical. People often confuse the movements. People say one needs faith to renounce everything; indeed, one hears something stranger still: a person complains that he has lost faith, and when one checks the scale to see where he is, one sees, strangely enough, that he has only come to the point where he is to make the infinite movement of resignation. Through resignation I renounce everything. This movement I make by myself, and if I do not make it, it is because I am cowardly and soft and without enthusiasm and do not feel the significance of the high dignity assigned to every human being, that of being his own censor—which is far grander than being censor-general for the whole Roman Republic.[41] This movement I make by myself, and what I gain by it is myself in my eternal consciousness, in blissful understanding [143] with my love for the eternal being. By faith I do not renounce anything; on the contrary, by faith I receive everything, precisely in the sense in which it is said that whoever has faith like a grain of mustard seed can move mountains. It takes a purely human courage to renounce the whole of the temporal in order to gain eternity; but eternity I do gain, and to all eternity I cannot renounce it—that would be a self-contradiction. But it takes a paradoxical and humble courage then to grasp the whole of the temporal by virtue of the absurd, and this courage is the courage of faith.[42] By faith Abraham did not renounce Isaac; by faith Abraham received Isaac. By virtue of resignation that rich young man should have given

40 A thaumaturge is a wonder-worker. Running "from Herod to Pilate" (after Luke 23) is a Danish idiom for rushing from one authority to another.

41 In republican Rome the censors kept the citizen rolls and oversaw public morals.

42 The mustard seed: Matthew 17:20.

away everything; but once he had done so, the knight of faith should have said to him: "By virtue of the absurd you will get every penny back—can you believe that?" And these words ought by no means to be a matter of indifference to the formerly rich young man; for if he gave away his possessions because he was tired of them, his resignation was in a sorry state.[43]

Temporality, finitude—that is what everything turns on. By my own strength I can resign everything and then find peace and rest in pain. I can reconcile myself to everything—even if that dreadful demon, more terrible than the Grim Reaper who frightens people, even if madness held up the fool's costume before my eyes and I understood from its look that it was I who was to put it on—I can still save my soul, provided it matters more to me that my love for God triumph in me than my earthly happiness. A person can still, in this last moment, gather his whole soul in a single glance toward the heaven from which every good gift comes, and this glance will be understood by him and by the one it seeks as meaning that he nevertheless remained true to his love. Then he will calmly put on the costume. Whoever does not have this romantic spirit in his soul has sold his soul, whether he got a kingdom for it or a paltry piece of silver. But by my own strength I cannot get the least thing that belongs to finitude, for I am constantly using my strength to resign everything.[44] By my own strength I can give up the princess, and I will not turn sulky but will find joy and peace and rest in my pain; but by my own strength I cannot get her back, for I am using my strength precisely to resign. But by faith, says that marvelous knight, by faith you will get her, by virtue of the absurd.

Look—this movement I cannot make. As soon as I want to begin [144] it, everything turns upside down, and I flee back into the pain of resignation. I can swim in life, but for this mystical floating I am too heavy. To exist in such a way that my opposition to existence expresses itself at every moment as the most

43 The rich young man whom Jesus told to sell all he had (Matthew 19:16–22).
44 "Every good gift": James 1:17.

beautiful and secure harmony with it—that I cannot do. And yet it must be glorious to get the princess; I say so at every moment, and the knight of resignation who does not say it is a fraud: he has not had a single wish, and he has not kept the wish young in his pain. Perhaps there was one who found it convenient enough that the wish was no longer alive, that the arrow of pain had been blunted; but such a one is no knight. A freeborn soul who caught himself at this would despise himself and begin again, and above all would not let his soul be deceived by itself. And yet it must be glorious to get the princess, and yet the knight of faith is the only happy one, the lord and heir of finitude, while the knight of resignation is a stranger and a foreigner.[45] To get the princess in that way, to live happily and joyfully with her day in and day out (for it was also conceivable that the knight of resignation might get the princess, but his soul had seen through the impossibility of their future happiness)—to live happily and joyfully in that way every moment by virtue of the absurd, every moment to see the sword hanging over the beloved's head and yet find not rest in the pain of resignation but joy by virtue of the absurd—that is marvelous. Whoever does it is great, the only great one; the thought of it moves my soul, which was never stingy in admiring greatness.

Now if everyone in my generation who will not stop at faith really is a man who has grasped the horror of life, who has understood what Daub means when he says that a soldier standing alone at his post with a loaded rifle, by a powder magazine, on a stormy night, has strange thoughts; if everyone who will not stop at faith really is a man who had the strength of soul to grasp the thought that the wish was an impossibility, and then took the time to be alone with it;[46] if everyone who will not stop at faith is a man who was reconciled in pain and reconciled by pain; if everyone who will not stop at faith is a man who then (and if he has not done all the preceding, he need not trouble himself when faith is under discussion) did the marvelous

45 "Lord and heir" renders *Stamherre*, the holder of an entailed family estate.
46 Karl Daub (1765–1836), German theologian at Heidelberg, a leading Hegelian.

thing, grasped the whole of [145] existence by virtue of the absurd —then what I write is the highest eulogy of my contemporaries, from the lowest among them, one who could make only the movement of resignation. But why, then, will people not stop at faith? Why does one sometimes hear that people are ashamed to confess that they have faith? This I cannot comprehend. If I ever get so far as to be able to make this movement, I will ride in a coach-and-four from then on.

Is it really so? Is all the philistinism I see in life—which I condemn not by my word but by my deed—is it really not what it seems? Is it the marvel? That is conceivable, after all; for that hero of faith did bear a striking resemblance to it—for that hero of faith was not even an ironist and humorist, but something still higher. There is much talk in our age about irony and humor, especially by people who have never managed to practice them but who nevertheless know how to explain everything. I am not entirely unacquainted with these two passions; I know a little more about them than what is in German and German-Danish compendia. I therefore know that these two passions are essentially different from the passion of faith. Irony and humor also reflect upon themselves and therefore belong in the sphere of infinite resignation; they have their elasticity in the fact that the individual is incommensurable with actuality.

The last movement, the paradoxical movement of faith, I cannot make, whether it is a duty or whatever it is, although I would more than gladly do so. Whether a person has the right to say this must be left to him; whether he can come to an amicable settlement in this respect is a matter between him and the eternal being who is the object of faith. What every person can do is make the movement of infinite resignation, and for my part I would not hesitate to declare anyone a coward who wants to fancy that he cannot. With faith it is another matter. But what no one has the right to do is to make others believe that faith is something lowly, or that it is an easy matter, when it is the greatest and the hardest thing.

ONLY A TRIAL?

Johannes rejects the easy telling of Abraham's story and announces the problemata.

People take the story of Abraham another way. They praise God's grace for giving him Isaac back—the whole thing was only a trial. A trial: this word can say much or little, and yet the whole thing is over as soon as it is said. One mounts a [146] winged horse, in the same instant one is on Mount Moriah, in the same instant one sees the ram; one forgets that Abraham rode only a donkey, which goes slowly along the road, that he had a three days' journey, that he needed some time to split the wood, bind Isaac, and sharpen the knife.

And yet people praise Abraham. The one who is to speak can easily sleep until the last quarter of an hour before he must speak; the listener can easily fall asleep during the speech; for everything goes smoothly enough, with no trouble on either side. If there was a man present who suffered from sleeplessness, he perhaps went home, sat down in a corner and thought: "The whole thing is a matter of a moment; just wait a minute and you'll see the ram, and the trial is over." If the speaker came upon him in this state, I think he would step up to him in all his dignity and say: "Wretch, that you can let your soul sink into such foolishness! No miracle happens, and the whole of life is a trial." As the speaker went on with his outpouring, he grew more and more worked up, more and more pleased with himself, and whereas he had noticed no rush of blood while he spoke about Abraham, he now felt the vein swell in his forehead. Perhaps he would be struck speechless if the sinner calmly and with dignity answered: "But that is what you preached about last Sunday."

So let us either cross Abraham out, or let us learn to be horrified at the tremendous paradox that is the meaning of his life, so that we may understand that our age, like every age, can be glad if it has faith. If Abraham is not a nonentity, a phantom, a bit of finery one uses to pass the time, then the fault can never lie in

the sinner's wanting to do likewise; what matters is to see how great a thing Abraham did, so that the man can judge for himself whether he has the calling and the courage to be tested in such things. The comic contradiction in the speaker's behavior was that he made Abraham into something insignificant and yet wanted to forbid the other to act in the same way.

Should one, then, not dare to speak about Abraham? I think one should. If I were to speak about him, I would first depict the pain of the trial. To that end I would, like a leech, suck all the anguish and distress and torment out of a father's suffering, so that I could describe what Abraham suffered while through it all he nevertheless believed. I would remind people that the journey lasted three days and a good part of the fourth; indeed, these three and a half days [147] should become infinitely longer than the couple of thousand years that separate me from Abraham. Then I would remind them of what I hold: that every person may still turn back before he begins on such a thing, and at every moment may return in repentance. If one does this, I fear no danger; nor am I afraid of arousing in people a desire to be tested as Abraham was. But if one wants to sell off a cut-price edition of Abraham and yet forbid everyone to do likewise, that is ridiculous.

It is now my intention to draw out, in the form of problemata, the dialectical element in the story of Abraham, in order to see what a tremendous paradox faith is—a paradox that can make a murder into a holy act well pleasing to God, a paradox that gives Abraham Isaac back, which no thinking can master, because faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off.[47]

47 *Problemata* (Greek plural of *problema*): questions set for debate; three follow.

Problema I

Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?
The tragic hero stays within the ethical; Abraham oversteps it altogether.

GIVES DER EN TELEOLOGISK SUSPENSION AF DET ETHISKE?

148 The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it is what applies to everyone, which from another side can be expressed by saying that it applies at every moment. It rests immanently in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its τελος [telos, end], but is itself the τελος of everything outside it, and when the ethical has taken this up into itself, it goes no further. Determined immediately as sensuous and psychical, the single individual is the individual who has his τελος in the universal, and this is his ethical task: constantly to express himself in it, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal.[1] As soon as the single individual wants to assert himself in his singularity over against the universal, he sins, and only by acknowledging this can he again be reconciled with the universal. Every time the single individual, after having entered the universal, feels an urge to assert himself as the single individual, he is in spiritual trial, from which he can work his way out only by repentantly giving himself up as the single individual in the universal. If this is the highest that can be said of a human being and of his existence, then the ethical is of the same nature as a person's eternal blessedness, which to all eternity and at every moment is his

1 "The universal" renders *det Almene*. A "teleological suspension" (*teleologisk Suspension*) sets something aside for the sake of a higher end (Greek *telos*).

τελος, since it would be a contradiction that it could be given up (i.e., teleologically suspended); for as soon as it is suspended it is forfeited, whereas what is suspended is not forfeited but precisely preserved in the higher that is its τελος.

If that is how things stand, then Hegel is right when, in the good and in conscience, he determines the human being only as the single [149] individual; he is right to regard this determination as a "moral form of evil" (see especially the Philosophy of Right), which is to be annulled in the teleology of ethical life, so that the single individual who remains in that stage either sins or is in spiritual trial. Where Hegel is wrong, however, is in talking about faith; he is wrong not to protest loudly and clearly against Abraham's enjoying honor and glory as a father of faith, when he ought to be remanded and expelled as a murderer.[2]

For faith is this paradox: that the single individual is higher than the universal—yet, mark well, in such a way that the movement repeats itself, so that, after having been in the universal, he now as the single individual isolates himself as higher than the universal. If this is not faith, then Abraham is lost, then faith has never existed in the world, precisely because it has always existed. For if the ethical—i.e., ethical life—is the highest, and nothing incommensurable remains in a human being except in the sense that this incommensurable is evil, i.e., the singular, which is to be expressed in the universal, then one needs no categories other than those Greek philosophy had, or those that can be drawn from them by consistent thinking. Hegel ought not to have concealed this; after all, he had studied the Greeks.

Not infrequently one hears men who, for want of losing themselves in study, immerse themselves in phrases, declare that a light shines over the Christian world while darkness broods over paganism. This talk has always struck me as strange, since every more thorough thinker, every more serious artist, still renews his youth in the eternal youth of the Greek people. Such

2 "Ethical life" renders *det Sædelige*, Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*: morality embodied in family, society and state. Hegel treats the good and conscience in the *Philosophy of Right* (1821).

a statement can be explained by the fact that one does not know what to say, only that one must say something. It is quite in order to say that paganism did not have faith; but if one is to have said something by that, one must be a little clearer about what one understands by faith, since otherwise one sinks back into such phrases. To explain the whole of existence, faith included, without having any idea what faith is, is easy; and the one who counts on admiration when he has such an explanation is not the worst calculator in life; for, as Boileau says: un sot trouve toujours un plus sot, qui l'admire [a fool always finds a bigger fool to admire him].[3]

Faith is precisely this paradox: that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal, is justified over against it, not subordinate but superior—yet, mark well, in such a way that it is the single individual [150] who, after having been subordinate as the single individual to the universal, now through the universal becomes the single individual who as the single individual is superior to it; that the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation takes place precisely by virtue of the universal; it is and remains to all eternity a paradox, inaccessible to thought. And yet faith is this paradox—or else (these are the consequences I would ask the reader to bear in mind at every point, even if it would be too long-winded for me to write them out everywhere)—or else there has never been faith, precisely because it has always existed, or else Abraham is lost.

That this paradox can easily be confused, for the single individual, with a spiritual trial is certainly true, but one should not hide it for that reason. That many people's whole makeup may be such that it repels them is certainly true; but for that reason one should not make faith into something else so as to be able to have it too, but should rather admit that one does not have it—while those who have faith ought to take care to set out some

3 Nicolas Boileau (1636–1711), French poet and critic; the line ends the first canto of his *Art poétique* (1674).

marks by which the paradox could be distinguished from a spiritual trial.

Now the story of Abraham contains such a teleological suspension of the ethical. There has been no lack of keen minds and thorough scholars who have found analogies to it. Their wisdom comes down to the fine proposition that at bottom everything is the same. If one looks a little more closely, I very much doubt that one will find in the whole world a single analogy—except a later one, which proves nothing—if it stands firm that Abraham represents faith and that faith is normally expressed in him, whose life is not merely the most paradoxical that can be thought, but so paradoxical that it cannot be thought at all. He acts by virtue of the absurd; for it is precisely the absurd that he, as the single individual, is higher than the universal. This paradox cannot be mediated; for as soon as he begins to try, he must admit that he was in a spiritual trial, and if so, he never gets to the point of sacrificing Isaac, or, if he has sacrificed Isaac, he must return in repentance to the universal. By virtue of the absurd he gets Isaac back. Abraham is therefore at no moment a tragic hero, but something quite different: either a murderer or a believer. The middle term that saves the tragic hero, Abraham does not have. That is why [151] I can understand a tragic hero but cannot understand Abraham, even though in a certain mad sense I admire him more than all others.

Abraham's relation to Isaac, ethically expressed, is quite simply this: the father shall love the son more than himself. Yet the ethical has within its own compass various gradations; we shall see whether this story contains any such higher expression for the ethical that could ethically explain his conduct, ethically justify him in suspending the ethical obligation toward the son, without thereby moving beyond the teleology of the ethical.

AGAMEMNON, JEPHTHAH, BRUTUS

Three tragic heroes sacrifice their children for the people, a vow, or the law, staying within the ethical.

When an undertaking that concerns a whole people is thwarted, when such an enterprise is halted by heaven's disfavor, when the angry deity sends a dead calm that mocks every effort, when the seer performs his heavy task and proclaims that the god demands a young girl as a sacrifice—then the father shall heroically make this sacrifice. Nobly he shall hide his pain, though he might wish he were "the lowly man who dares to weep," not the king who must act like a king. And though the pain enters his breast in solitude, though he has only three confidants among the people, soon the whole people shall be privy to his pain, but also privy to his deed: that for the good of the whole he was willing to sacrifice her, his daughter, the lovely young girl.[4] O bosom! O fair cheeks, golden hair! (line 687). And the daughter shall move him with her tears, and the father shall turn his face away, but the hero shall raise the knife.—When the news of it reaches the ancestral home, the lovely maidens of Greece shall blush with enthusiasm, and if the daughter was a bride, her betrothed shall not be angry but proud to share in the father's deed, because the girl belonged to him more tenderly than she belonged to her father.

When the bold judge who saved Israel in the hour of need binds God and himself in one breath by the same vow, then he shall heroically turn the young girl's jubilation, the beloved daughter's joy, to sorrow, and all Israel shall mourn with her over her virgin youth; but every freeborn man shall understand, every stouthearted woman admire Jephthah, and every virgin in Israel shall wish to act as his daughter did; for what good would

4 Agamemnon, whose fleet lay becalmed at Aulis until he sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia; the quotation is from Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

it be that Jephthah was victorious by his vow if he did not keep it—would not the victory be taken from the people again?[5]

When a son forgets his duty, when the state entrusts the father with the sword of judgment, when the laws demand the punishment at the father's hand, then [152] the father shall heroically forget that the guilty one is his son; he shall nobly hide his pain, but there shall not be a single one among the people, not even the son, who does not admire the father, and every time Rome's laws are interpreted it shall be remembered that many interpreted them more learnedly, but none more gloriously than Brutus.[6]

If, on the other hand, Agamemnon, while a favorable wind was carrying the fleet under full sail to its goal, had sent that messenger to fetch Iphigenia in order to sacrifice her; if Jephthah, without being bound by any vow that decided the fate of the people, had said to his daughter, "Mourn now for two months over your short youth, then I will sacrifice you"; if Brutus had had a righteous son and yet had called the lictors to execute him—who would have understood them? If these three men, asked why they did it, had answered, "It is a trial in which we are being tested," would they have been better understood?[7]

When Agamemnon, Jephthah, Brutus at the decisive moment heroically overcome the pain, have heroically lost the beloved and have only to carry out the deed outwardly, there will never be a noble soul in the world who does not have tears of compassion for their pain, tears of admiration for their deed. If, on the other hand, these three men at the decisive moment were to add to the heroism with which they bore the pain the little words, "But it will not happen"—who then would understand them? If by way of explanation they added, "We believe it by virtue of the absurd," who then would understand them better? For who

5 Jephthah vowed to sacrifice whatever first came out of his house to meet him if he returned victorious; it was his daughter (Judges 11).
6 Lucius Junius Brutus, a founder of the Roman Republic, who as consul had his own sons executed for plotting to restore the monarchy (Livy 2.5).
7 Lictors: attendants of Roman magistrates who carried out punishments.

would not easily understand that it was absurd—but who would understand that one could then believe it?

The difference between the tragic hero and Abraham is easy to see. The tragic hero still remains within the ethical. He lets one expression of the ethical have its τελος in a higher expression of the ethical; he reduces the ethical relation between father and son, or daughter and father, to a feeling that has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of ethical life. Here, then, there can be no question of a teleological suspension of the ethical itself.

With Abraham it is different. By his act he overstepped the ethical altogether, and had a higher τελος outside it, in relation to which he suspended it. For I would very much like to know how one will bring Abraham's act into relation with the universal—whether [153] any point of contact whatever can be discovered between what Abraham did and the universal other than that Abraham transgressed it. It is not to save a people, not to uphold the idea of the state, that Abraham does it, not to appease angry gods. If there could be any question of the deity's being angry, he was angry only with Abraham, and Abraham's whole act stands in no relation to the universal; it is a purely private undertaking. So while the tragic hero is great by the virtue of ethical life, Abraham is great by a purely personal virtue. There is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham's life than this: that the father shall love the son. Of the ethical in the sense of ethical life there can be no question here at all. Insofar as the universal was present, it was concealed in Isaac, hidden, so to speak, in Isaac's loins, and would then have to cry out with Isaac's mouth: "Do not do it! You are destroying everything."

Why, then, does Abraham do it? For God's sake and—what is altogether identical with this—for his own sake. He does it for God's sake because God demands this proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake so that he can give the proof. The unity of these is quite rightly expressed in the word that has always been used to describe this relationship: it is a trial, a temptation. A temptation—but what does that mean? What ordinarily tempts a

person is what would hold him back from doing his duty; but here the temptation is the ethical itself, which would hold him back from doing God's will. But what, then, is duty? Duty is, after all, precisely the expression of God's will.

Here the need for a new category in order to understand Abraham becomes evident. Paganism does not know such a relation to the divine. The tragic hero does not enter into any private relation to the divine; rather, the ethical is the divine, and therefore the paradoxical in it can be mediated in the universal.

Abraham cannot be mediated, which can also be put this way: he cannot speak. As soon as I speak, I express the universal, and if I do not, no one can understand me. So as soon as Abraham wants to express himself in the universal, he must say that his situation is a spiritual trial, for he has no higher expression of the universal that ranks above the universal he transgresses.

So while Abraham arouses my admiration, he also appalls me. The one who denies himself and sacrifices himself for duty gives [154] up the finite in order to grasp the infinite; he is secure enough. The tragic hero gives up the certain for the still more certain, and the beholder's eye rests on him with confidence. But the one who gives up the universal in order to grasp something still higher that is not the universal—what does he do? Is it possible that this can be anything other than a spiritual trial? And if it is possible, but the single individual made a mistake, what salvation is there for him? He suffers all the pain of the tragic hero, he destroys his joy in the world, he renounces everything—and perhaps at the same moment he bars himself from the exalted joy that was so precious to him that he would buy it at any price. Him the beholder cannot understand at all, nor let his eye rest on him with confidence. Perhaps what the believer intends cannot be done at all, since it is, after all, unthinkable. Or if it could be done, but the single individual had misunderstood the deity, what salvation would there be for him? The tragic hero needs tears and demands tears; and where was

the envious eye so barren that it could not weep with Agamemnon? But where was the one whose soul was so astray that he presumed to weep over Abraham? The tragic hero accomplishes his deed at a definite moment in time, but in the course of time he does something no less: he visits the one whose soul is gripped by sorrow, whose breast cannot get air for stifled sighs, whose thoughts hang heavy over him, pregnant with tears; he appears to him, he breaks the spell of sorrow, loosens the corset, coaxes out the tear, as the sufferer forgets his own sufferings in the hero's. Over Abraham one cannot weep. One approaches him with a horror religiosus [religious dread], as Israel approached Mount Sinai.—If, then, the solitary man who climbs Mount Moriah, whose peak towers sky-high over the plains of Aulis—if he is not a sleepwalker who walks safely over the abyss while the one who stands at the foot of the mountain and looks up trembles with anguish, and in reverence and dread does not even dare to call out to him—if he becomes confused within himself, if he had been mistaken!—Thanks! Thanks again[8] to the man who offers the one whom life's sorrows have assailed and left naked—offers him the expression, the fig leaf of the word, with which he can hide his wretchedness. Thanks be to you, great Shakespeare, you who can say everything, everything, everything, just as it is—and yet why did you never give voice to this torment? Did you perhaps keep it for yourself, like the beloved whose name one cannot bear to hear the world so much as mention? [155] For a poet buys this power of the word to utter the heavy secrets of all others at the price of one little secret he cannot utter; and a poet is not an apostle: he casts out devils only by the power of the devil.[9]

But now, when the ethical is teleologically suspended in this way, how does the single individual in whom it is suspended exist? He exists as the single individual in contrast to the univer-

8 At Sinai the people were forbidden to approach the mountain on pain of death (Exodus 19).

9 The fig leaf recalls Genesis 3:7. Casting out devils by the devil echoes the charge against Jesus in Matthew 12:24.

sal. Does he then sin? For this is the form of sin, seen in the idea: just as the child, even though it does not sin, because it is not conscious of its existence as such, nonetheless has an existence that, seen in the idea, is sin, and the ethical demands itself of it at every moment. If one denies that this form can be repeated in such a way that it is not sin, then judgment has been passed on Abraham. How, then, did Abraham exist? He had faith. This is the paradox by which he stays at the summit, the paradox he cannot make clear to anyone else; for the paradox is that he, as the single individual, places himself in an absolute relation to the absolute. Is he justified? His justification is, once again, the paradoxical; for if he is justified, he is so not by virtue of being something universal but by virtue of being the single individual.

JUDGED BY THE OUTCOME

Johannes mocks those who judge great men by results, forgetting the anguish of Abraham and Mary.

How, then, does the single individual assure himself that he is justified? It is easy enough to level the whole of existence down to the idea of the state or the idea of a society. If one does that, one can easily enough mediate as well; for then one never arrives at the paradox at all—that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal—which I can also express pointedly in a proposition of Pythagoras: that the odd number is more perfect than the even. Insofar as one now and then hears, in our age, an answer that leans toward the paradox, it usually runs like this: that will be judged by the outcome.[10] A hero who has become the σκανδαλον [skandalon: stumbling block, offense] of his age, conscious that he is a paradox who cannot make himself understood, cries out confidently to his contemporaries: "The outcome will surely prove that I was justified." In our age this cry is heard more rarely; for just as our age has the defect of producing no heroes, it has the merit of producing few caricatures too. So when in our age one hears the words

10 The Pythagoreans ranked the odd numbers, as limited, above the even.

"it will be judged by the outcome," one knows at once whom one has the honor of addressing. Those who talk like this are a numerous tribe, whom I shall call by a single common name: the lecturers.[11] In their thoughts they live secure in existence; they have a *permanent* position and *secure* prospects in a well-organized state; they have centuries, or even millennia, 156 between themselves and the upheavals of existence; they have no fear that such things could happen again—and besides, what would the police and the newspapers say? Their business in life is to judge the great men, and to judge them by the outcome. Such conduct toward greatness betrays a strange mixture of arrogance and wretchedness: arrogance, because one thinks oneself called to judge; wretchedness, because one does not feel one's own life to be even remotely akin to those of the great. Anyone who is even a little erectioris ingenii [of a loftier mind] has at least not turned into an utterly cold and clammy mollusk, and as he approaches greatness it can never slip his mind that ever since the creation of the world it has been the custom for the outcome to come last, and that if one is truly to learn something from greatness, it is precisely to the beginning that one must attend. If the one who is to act wants to judge himself by the outcome, he will never get started. Even if the outcome can gladden the whole world, it cannot help the hero; for he learned the outcome only when the whole thing was over, and it was not by that that he became a hero—he was one by having begun.

Besides, the outcome (insofar as it is finitude's answer to the infinite question) is in its dialectic entirely heterogeneous to the hero's existence. Or is the fact that Abraham received Isaac by a *miracle* supposed to prove that he was justified in relating himself as the single individual to the universal? If Abraham had actually sacrificed Isaac, would he therefore have been less justified?

But people are curious about the outcome, as about the ending of a book; the anguish, the distress, the paradox they want to

11 *Docenterne*: university lecturers, often unsalaried, a favorite target of Kierkegaard's satire.

know nothing about. They flirt aesthetically with the outcome; it comes just as unexpectedly, but also just as easily, as a lottery prize; and once they have heard the outcome, they have been edified. And yet no temple robber toiling in irons is so base a criminal as the one who plunders the holy in this way, and not even Judas, who sold his Master for thirty shekels, is more contemptible than the one who sells greatness in this way.[12]

It goes against my soul to speak inhumanly of greatness, to let it loom dimly at an immense distance in an indistinct shape, to let it be great without the human in it coming forward—whereupon it ceases to be great. For it is not what happens to me that makes me great, but what I do; and surely there is no one who thinks a man became great because he won the big prize in the lottery. Even if a person was born in humble [157] circumstances, I still require of him that he not be so inhuman toward himself that he could think of the king's castle only from a distance, dreaming vaguely of its grandeur, at once wanting to exalt it and cancelling it by exalting it abjectly; I require of him that he be human enough to step forward with confidence and dignity there too. He must not be inhuman enough to want to affront everything insolently by storming straight in from the street into the king's halls—by that he loses more than the king does; on the contrary, he should find joy in observing every rule of propriety with a glad and confident enthusiasm, which is exactly what will make him bold. This is only an image; for that difference is only a very imperfect expression of the distance of the spirit. I require of every human being that he not think so inhumanly of himself that he does not dare to enter those palaces where not only the memory of the chosen dwells, but where they themselves dwell. He must not push himself forward shamelessly and force his kinship on them; he should be blissful each time he bows before them, but he should be frank and confident and always be something more than a charwoman; for if he will not be more, he will never get in. And what is to help him is precisely the anguish and the distress in which the great are

12 Judas: Matthew 26:15.

tried; for otherwise, if he has a bit of backbone in him, they would only arouse his righteous envy. And whatever can be great only at a distance, whatever people try to make into something great with empty and hollow phrases—that they destroy themselves.

Who was as great in the world as that favored woman, the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary? And yet how do people speak of her? That she was the favored one among women does not make her great; and if it did not happen so strangely that those who listen can think just as inhumanly as those who speak, then surely every young girl would have to ask: "Why wasn't I the favored one too?" And if I had nothing else to say, I would by no means dismiss such a question as foolish; for with respect to a favor, seen abstractly, every human being is equally entitled. They leave out the distress, the anguish, the paradox.[13] My thought is as pure as anyone's, and whoever can think such things, his thought will surely become pure; and if it does not, he has something dreadful to expect. For whoever has once called up these images cannot be rid of them again, and if he sins against them, they take a terrible revenge with [158] a quiet wrath, more terrible than the clamor of ten ravenous reviewers. Mary did indeed bear the child miraculously, but it went with her after the manner of women, and that time is one of anguish, distress, and paradox. The angel was indeed a ministering spirit, but he was not an obliging spirit who went round to the other young girls in Israel and said: "Do not despise Mary; the extraordinary is happening to her."[14] But the angel came only to Mary, and no one could understand her. What woman was ever so humiliated as Mary? And is it not true here too that the one whom God blesses he curses in the same breath? This is the spirit's understanding of Mary, and she is by no means—it revolts me to say it, but it revolts me even more that people have thoughtlessly and frivolously conceived of her this way—she is by no means a lady sitting in her finery and playing with a

13 The angel's greeting to Mary: Luke 1:28.
14 "Ministering spirit": Hebrews 1:14.

divine child. When, in spite of all this, she said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord," then she is great, and I think it should not prove hard to explain why she became the Mother of God.[15] She needs no worldly admiration, any more than Abraham needs tears; for she was no heroine and he was no hero, yet both of them became greater than these—not by being spared the distress and the torment and the paradox, but by means of them.

It is great when the poet, presenting his tragic hero for people's admiration, dares to say: "Weep for him, for he deserves it"; for it is great to deserve the tears of those who deserve to shed tears. It is great that the poet dares to hold the crowd in check, dares to discipline people, so that each examines himself whether he is worthy to weep over the hero—for the slop water of blubberers is a degradation of the holy. But greater than all this is that the knight of faith dares to say even to the noble person who wants to weep over him: "Do not weep over me, but weep over yourself."[16]

People are moved; they seek back to those beautiful times; sweet, tender longings lead them to the goal of their wish—to see Christ walking about in the promised land. They forget the anguish, the distress, the paradox. Was it so easy a matter not to be mistaken? Was it not terrifying that this man who walked among the others—that he was God? Was it not terrifying to sit at table with him? Was it so easy a matter to become an apostle? But the outcome, eighteen centuries—that helps; it helps along this shabby deception by which people deceive themselves and others. I do not feel the courage to wish to be contemporary with such events, [159] but for that reason I do not judge harshly those who were mistaken, nor think little of those who saw what was right.

But I return to Abraham. In the time before the outcome, either Abraham was a murderer every minute, or we stand at the paradox that is higher than all mediations.

15 Mary's answer to the angel: Luke 1:38.
16 The last words echo Jesus to the women of Jerusalem, Luke 23:28.

The story of Abraham, then, contains a teleological suspension of the ethical. As the single individual he has become higher than the universal. This is the paradox, which cannot be mediated. It is just as inexplicable how he entered into it as it is inexplicable how he remains in it. If this is not how things stand with Abraham, then he is not even a tragic hero but a murderer. To go on calling him the father of faith, to talk about it to people who care about nothing but words, is thoughtless. A person can become a tragic hero by his own powers—but not a knight of faith. When a person sets out on the tragic hero's road, in a certain sense a hard one, many will be able to advise him; the one who walks the narrow road of faith no one can advise, no one can understand. Faith is a miracle, and yet no human being is excluded from it; for that in which all human life is united is passion[17], and faith is a passion.[18]

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17 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. Lessing somewhere made a similar remark from a purely aesthetic standpoint. In that passage he actually wants to show that grief too can find a witty expression. To that end he cites a line spoken in a particular situation by the unhappy English king Edward II. In contrast he cites, after Diderot, a story about a peasant woman and a remark of hers. He then continues: Auch das war Witz, und noch dazu Witz einer Bäuerin; aber die Umstände machten ihn unvermeidlich. [That too was wit, and a peasant woman's wit at that; but the circumstances made it unavoidable.] Und folglich auch muß man die Entschuldigung der witzigen Ausdrücke des Schmerzes und der Betrübniß nicht darin suchen, daß die Person, welche sie sagt, eine vornehme, wohlerzogene, verständige, und auch sonst witzige Person sey; *denn die Leidenschaften machen alle Menschen wieder gleich:* sondern darin, daß wahrscheinlicher Weise ein jeder Mensch ohne Unterschied in den nämlichen Umständen das nämliche sagen würde. Den Gedanken der Bäuerin hätte eine Königin haben können und haben müssen: so wie das, was dort der König sagt, auch ein Bauer hätte sagen können und ohne Zweifel würde gesagt haben. [And consequently one must not seek the excuse for witty expressions of pain and sorrow in the fact that the person who says them is distinguished, well bred, intelligent, and otherwise witty; *for the passions make all people equal again:* but in the fact that in all likelihood anyone at all, in the same circumstances, would say the same thing. The peasant woman's thought a queen could have had, and must have had; just as what the king says there a peasant could also have said, and no doubt would have said.] Cf. Sämtliche Werke, vol. 30, p. 223.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), German critic and dramatist; the passage is from his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*. Denis Diderot (1713–1784), French philosopher and writer.

18 The "narrow road" recalls Matthew 7:14.

Problema II

Is there an absolute duty to God?
If faith is real, the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute, higher than the universal.

GIVES DER EN ABSOLUT PLIGT MOD GUD?

160 The ethical is the universal, and as such, in turn, the divine. One is therefore right to say that every duty is at bottom duty to God; but if one can say no more than that, one is also saying that I really have no duty to God. Duty becomes duty by being referred to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation with God. Thus it is a duty to love one's neighbor. It is a duty by being referred to God; but in the duty I enter into relation not with God but with the neighbor I love. If, then, in this connection I say that it is my duty to love God, I am really saying only a tautology, insofar as "God" is taken here in an entirely abstract sense as the divine, i.e., the universal, i.e., duty. The whole existence of the human race then rounds itself off, perfectly spherical, within itself, and the ethical is at once what bounds it and what fills it. God becomes an invisible, vanishing point, a powerless thought; his power is only in the ethical, which fills existence. If, then, someone should take it into his head to want to love God in any sense other than the one given here, he is overwrought; he loves a phantom which, if it only had strength enough to speak, would say to him: "I do not ask for your love; just stay where you belong." If someone should take it into his head to want to love God otherwise, this love becomes suspect,

like the love Rousseau speaks of, by which a person loves the peoples of faraway Africa instead of loving his neighbor.[1]

If what has been developed here is correct—if there is nothing
161 incommensurable in a human life, and whatever incommensurable there is exists only by an accident from which nothing follows, insofar as existence is viewed under the idea—then Hegel is right. But where he is not right is in speaking of faith, or in allowing Abraham to be regarded as its father; for by the latter he has passed judgment both on Abraham and on faith. In Hegelian philosophy das Äußere [the outer] (die Entäußerung [externalization]) is higher than das Innere [the inner]. This is often illustrated by an example. The child is das Innere, the man das Äußere; hence the child is determined precisely by the outer, and conversely the man, as das Äußere, is determined precisely by das Innere. Faith, on the other hand, is this paradox: that inwardness is higher than outwardness—or, to recall once more an expression used earlier, that the odd number is higher than the even.

For the ethical view of life, then, it is the single individual's task to strip himself of the determination of inwardness and express it in something outward. Every time the individual shrinks from this, every time he wants to hold back in, or slip back down into, the inward determination of feeling, mood, etc., he sins; he is in a spiritual trial. The paradox of faith is this: that there is an inwardness that is incommensurable with the outward—an inwardness, be it noted, that is not identical with the first but is a new inwardness. This must not be overlooked. Recent philosophy has allowed itself, without further ado, to substitute the immediate for "faith." If one does that, then it is ridiculous to deny that faith has existed in all ages. Faith then comes into rather common company, with feeling, mood, idiosyncrasy, vapeurs [the vapors], etc. To that extent philosophy may be right that one ought not to stop there. But nothing

1 Rousseau, *Émile*, Book I, warns against the philosopher who loves distant peoples so as to be excused from loving his neighbors. Kierkegaard names a southern African people with a term now offensive; it is replaced here.

entitles philosophy to this use of language. Faith is preceded by a movement of infinity; only then does faith enter, nec opinate [unexpectedly], by virtue of the absurd. This I can well understand, without therefore claiming that I have faith. If faith is nothing more than what philosophy passes it off as, then Socrates already went further, much further—instead of its being the other way round, that he did not reach it. In an intellectual respect he made the movement of infinity. His ignorance is the infinite resignation. This task is already one suited to human powers, even if our age disdains it; but only when [162] it has been done, only when the individual has emptied himself in the infinite, only then has the point come where faith can break forth.

The paradox of faith, then, is this: that the single individual is higher than the universal; that the single individual—to recall a dogmatic distinction now seldom heard—determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal. The paradox can also be expressed this way: that there is an absolute duty to God; for in this relation of duty the single individual as the single individual relates himself absolutely to the absolute. When, then, it is said in this connection that it is a duty to love God, something different is being said from before; for if this duty is absolute, then the ethical is reduced to the relative. It does not follow from this that the ethical is to be annihilated; but it receives an entirely different expression, the paradoxical expression—so that, for example, love for God can bring the knight of faith to give his love for his neighbor the opposite expression of what, ethically speaking, is duty.

If this is not how things stand, then faith has no place in existence; then faith is a spiritual trial, and Abraham is lost, since he gave in to it.

This paradox cannot be mediated; for it rests precisely on the single individual's being only the single individual. As soon as this single individual wants to express his absolute duty in the universal, to become conscious of it in the universal, he recog-

nizes that he is in a spiritual trial; and then, if he does resist it, he does not come to fulfill the so-called absolute duty; and if he does not resist it, he sins, even if his deed realiter [in reality] turns out to be what was his absolute duty. What, then, should Abraham have done? If he had wanted to say to another person, "I love Isaac more than anything in the world, and that is why it is so hard for me to sacrifice him," the other would surely have shaken his head and said, "Then why do you want to sacrifice him?" Or, if the other had been a shrewd fellow, he might even have seen through Abraham: seen that he was putting on display feelings that stood in a contradiction crying to heaven with his deed.

In the story of Abraham we find just such a paradox. His relation to Isaac, expressed ethically, is this: the father shall love the son. This ethical relation is reduced to the relative in contrast to the absolute relation to God. To the question why, Abraham has no other answer than that it is a trial, a temptation—which, as [163] noted above, is the unity of its being for God's sake and for his own sake. These two determinations also correspond to each other in ordinary usage. Thus when one sees a person do something that does not fit into the universal, one says: he hardly did that for God's sake—meaning by this that he did it for his own sake. The paradox of faith has lost the intermediate term, i.e., the universal. On the one side it has the expression of the most extreme egoism (doing the terrible thing it does for its own sake); on the other side, the expression of the most absolute devotion, doing it for God's sake. Faith itself cannot be mediated into the universal, for then it is annulled. Faith is this paradox, and the single individual simply cannot make himself understood by anyone. People fancy, to be sure, that the single individual can make himself understood by another single individual who is in the same case. Such a notion would be unthinkable if people in our age did not try in so many ways to sneak slyly into greatness. One knight of faith cannot help another at all. Either the single individual himself becomes a knight of faith by taking the paradox upon himself, or he never becomes

one. Partnership in these regions is utterly unthinkable. Any more precise explanation of what is to be understood by Isaac the individual can only ever give to himself. And even if one could determine ever so precisely, in general terms, what is to be understood by Isaac (which, incidentally, would be the most ridiculous self-contradiction—to bring the single individual, who stands precisely outside the universal, under universal determinations, when he is to act precisely as the single individual who is outside the universal), the individual will still never be able to assure himself of it through others, only through himself as the single individual. So even if a person were cowardly and wretched enough to want to become a knight of faith on someone else's responsibility, he still would not become one; for only the single individual becomes one, as the single individual. And this is the greatness, which I can well understand without entering into it, since I lack courage; but this is also the terrible, which I can grasp even better.

HATING FATHER AND MOTHER

Luke 14:26 is read literally, as a teaching about the absolute duty to God.

As is well known, a remarkable teaching about the absolute duty to God is set forth in Luke 14:26: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father, and his mother, and his wife, and his children, and his brothers, and his sisters, yes, even his own soul, he cannot be my disciple." This is a hard saying; who can bear to hear it? For [164] that reason it is also heard very seldom. But this silence is only an evasion that does no good.[2] The theology student, meanwhile, learns that these words occur in the New Testament, and in some exegetical aid or other he finds the information that μισειν [misein, to hate] in this and a couple of other passages per μειωσιν [by meiosis, understatement] means: minus diligo, posthabeo, non colo, nihili facio [I love less, I rank lower, I do not honor, I count as nothing]. The context in which

2 "This is a hard saying; who can bear to hear it?" echoes John 6:60.

these words occur, however, does not seem to bear out this tasteful explanation. For in the very next verse there is a story about how someone who wants to build a tower first works out whether he is able to do it, so that people will not laugh at him afterward. The close connection of this story with the verse quoted seems precisely to indicate that the words are to be taken as terribly as possible, so that each may examine himself whether he can erect the building.[3]

If that pious and tender-minded exegete, who thinks that by haggling in this way he can smuggle Christianity into the world, succeeded in convincing someone that this was the meaning of that passage grammatically, linguistically, and κατ' αναλογιαν [kat' analogian, by analogy], then he will, one hopes, also succeed in the same moment in convincing that same person that Christianity is one of the most pitiful things in the world. For the teaching that, in one of its most lyrical outbursts, where the consciousness of its eternal validity swells most strongly in it, has nothing more to say than a noisy word that means nothing but only indicates that one should be less kindly, less attentive, more indifferent; the teaching that, at the moment it makes as if to say something terrible, ends by drivelling instead of terrifying—that teaching is surely not worth getting to one's feet for.

The words are terrible, yet I do believe one can understand them, though it does not follow that whoever has understood them has the courage to act on them. One ought at least to be honest enough to acknowledge what is written, to admit that it is greatness, even if one does not have the courage for it oneself. Whoever behaves this way will not shut himself out from a share in that beautiful story; for it does, after all, in a way contain comfort for the one who did not have the courage to begin building the tower. But he must be honest, and not explain this lack of courage as humility, since on the contrary it is pride, whereas the courage of faith is the only humble courage.

165 One now easily sees that if the passage is to make sense, it must be understood literally. God is the one who demands abso-

lute love. Now whoever, in demanding a person's love, would think that this love should also prove itself by the person's becoming lukewarm toward everything that was otherwise dear to him is not only an egoist but stupid as well; and whoever would demand such a love signs his own death warrant in the same moment, insofar as he had his life in the love he desired. Thus a man requires that his wife leave father and mother; but if he would regard it as proof of her extraordinary love for him that for his sake she became a lukewarm, listless daughter, etc., then he is stupider than the stupidest. If he had any idea what love is, he would wish to discover that as daughter and sister she was perfect in love, and would see in this an assurance that his wife would love him as no one else in the realm. What one would regard in a human being as a sign of egoism and stupidity, one is supposed, with an exegete's help, to regard as a worthy conception of the Deity.[4]

But how, then, to hate them? I will not bring up here the human distinction "either love or hate"—not because I have so much against it, for it is at least passionate, but because it is egoistic and does not fit here. If, on the other hand, I regard the task as a paradox, then I understand it, i.e., I understand it in the way one can understand a paradox. The absolute duty can then lead one to do what ethics would forbid, but it can by no means lead the knight of faith to stop loving. Abraham shows this. At the moment he is about to sacrifice Isaac, the ethical expression for what he does is this: he hates Isaac. But if he really hates Isaac, he can rest assured that God does not require this of him; for Cain and Abraham are not identical. Isaac he must love with his whole soul; when God demands Isaac, he must love him, if possible, even more, and only then can he *sacrifice* him; for it is precisely this love for Isaac that, by its paradoxical opposition to his love for God, makes his deed a sacrifice. But this is the distress and the anguish in the paradox: that, humanly speaking, he cannot make himself understood at all. Only at the moment when

3 The tower parable: Luke 14:28–30.

4 "Leave father and mother": Genesis 2:24.

his deed is in absolute contradiction to his feeling, only then does he sacrifice Isaac; but the reality of his deed [166] is that by which he belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer.

The passage in Luke must further be understood so that one sees that the knight of faith has no higher expression of the universal (as the ethical) in which he can save himself. Thus if one had the Church demand this sacrifice of one of its members, we would have only a tragic hero. For the idea of the Church is not qualitatively different from that of the state, as long as the individual can enter it by a simple mediation; and as soon as the individual has entered the paradox, he does not arrive at the idea of the Church; he does not get out of the paradox, but must find in it either his salvation or his perdition. Such an ecclesiastical hero expresses the universal in his deed, and there will be no one in the Church, not even his father and mother, etc., who does not understand him. But a knight of faith he is not, and he also has a different answer from Abraham's: he does not say that it is a trial or a temptation in which he is being tested.

People generally refrain from citing passages like the one in Luke. They are afraid of letting people loose; they fear that the worst will happen once the single individual takes it into his head to behave as the single individual. Furthermore, people think that existing as the single individual is the easiest thing of all, and that is exactly why people must be forced to become the universal. I can share neither that fear nor this opinion, and for the same reason. Whoever has learned that existing as the single individual is the most terrible thing of all will not be afraid to say that it is the greatest; but he will also say it in such a way that his words will hardly become a snare for someone gone astray, but will rather help him into the universal—even if his words make a little room for greatness. Whoever does not dare to mention such passages does not dare to mention Abraham either; and to think that existing as the single individual is easy enough contains a very dubious indirect admission about oneself. For whoever truly has respect for himself and concern for

his soul is certain that a person who lives under his own supervision, alone in the whole world, lives more strictly and more chastely than a young girl in her maiden's chamber. That there may be those who need constraint, those who, if set free, would wallow like unbridled beasts in selfish pleasure, is true enough; but one should show precisely that one does not belong among them by knowing how to speak with fear and trembling. And one should speak [167] out of reverence for greatness, so that it is not forgotten for fear of harm—harm that will surely not come if one speaks in such a way that one knows it is greatness and knows its terrors; and without that, one does not know its greatness either.

THE LONELY PATH

The knight of faith gives up the universal, cannot be understood, and is kept sleepless.

Let us, then, consider a little more closely the distress and anguish in the paradox of faith. The tragic hero renounces himself in order to express the universal; the knight of faith renounces the universal in order to become the single individual. As has been said, everything depends on where one is placed. Whoever believes it is easy enough to be the single individual can always be sure that he is not a knight of faith; for drifters and vagabond geniuses are not men of faith. The knight of faith, on the contrary, knows that it is glorious to belong to the universal. He knows that it is beautiful and beneficial to be the single individual who translates himself into the universal, the one who, so to speak, himself prepares a clean, elegant, and as far as possible error-free edition of himself, legible to all; he knows that it is refreshing to become understandable to oneself in the universal, so that he understands it, and every individual who understands him understands the universal in him in turn, and both rejoice in the security of the universal. He knows it is beautiful to be born as the single individual who has his home in the universal, his friendly dwelling place, which at once

receives him with open arms whenever he wants to remain in it. But he also knows that higher up than this there winds a solitary path, narrow and steep; he knows it is terrible to be born in solitude outside the universal, to walk without meeting a single traveler. He knows very well where he is and how he stands in relation to people. Humanly speaking, he is mad and cannot make himself understood by anyone. And yet "mad" is the mildest expression. If he is not regarded that way, then he is a hypocrite, and the higher he climbs on the path, the more dreadful a hypocrite.

The knight of faith knows that it is inspiring to give oneself up for the universal, that it takes courage, but that there is also a security in it, precisely because it is for the universal; he knows that it is glorious to be understood by every noble mind, and in such a way that the one who beholds is himself ennobled by it. This he knows, and he feels as if bound; he could wish that this were the task that had been set him. So Abraham might now and then have wished that the task were to love Isaac as befits a father, understandable to all, unforgettable through the ages; he could wish that the task were to sacrifice Isaac for the universal, so that he might [168] inspire fathers to glorious deeds—and he is almost horrified at the thought that for him such wishes are only spiritual trials and must be treated as such; for he knows that it is a solitary path he walks, and that he accomplishes nothing for the universal but is himself only tried and tested. Or what did Abraham accomplish for the universal? Let me speak humanly about it, really humanly! He spends seventy years getting a son in his old age. What others get quickly enough and enjoy for a long time, he spends seventy years on; and why? Because he is being tested and tempted. Isn't that madness! But Abraham had faith, and only Sarah wavered and got him to take Hagar as a concubine; but for that very reason he also had to drive her away. He gets Isaac—then he is to be tested again. He knew that it is glorious to express the universal, glorious to live with Isaac. But that is not the task. He knew that it is kingly to sacrifice such a son for the universal; he himself would have

found rest in that, and all would have rested, praising, in his deed, as the vowel rests in its quiescent letter; but that is not the task—he is being tested.[5] That Roman general famous by the surname Cunctator [the Delayer] stopped the enemy by his delaying—but what a delayer Abraham is compared with him!—yet he does not save the state. This is the content of 130 years. Who can bear it? Would not his contemporaries, if there could be any talk of such, say: "Abraham is forever dawdling; at last he got a son—it took long enough—and now he wants to sacrifice him; is he not out of his mind?[6] And if only he could explain why he wants to—but it is always a trial." Nor could Abraham explain any more than that; for his life is like a book placed under divine seizure, which never becomes publici juris [public property].

This is the terrible. Whoever does not see it can always be sure that he is no knight of faith; but whoever does see it will not deny that even the most sorely tried tragic hero walks as if in a dance compared with the knight of faith, who advances only slowly, crawling. And when he has seen this and assured himself that he lacks the courage to understand it, he will surely have an inkling of the wondrous glory that knight attains: that he becomes God's confidant, the Lord's friend; that—to speak quite humanly—he says "you" to God in heaven, while even the tragic hero addresses him only in the third person.[7]

169 The tragic hero is soon finished and has soon fought his fight; he makes the infinite movement and is now secure in the universal. The knight of faith, on the other hand, is kept sleepless; for he is constantly being tested, and at every moment there is the possibility of turning back repentant to the universal, and this possibility may just as well be a spiritual trial as the

5 Hagar: Genesis 16 and 21. In Hebrew grammar a "quiescent letter" is a silent consonant in which a vowel is said to rest.

6 Quintus Fabius Maximus "Cunctator" (d. 203 BC), who wore down Hannibal by avoiding pitched battle.

7 Abraham as God's friend: Isaiah 41:8, James 2:23. Danish, like German, distinguishes the intimate "du" from formal address; Kierkegaard means the intimate form.

truth. He cannot get light on this from any human being; for then he is outside the paradox.

The knight of faith, then, has first and foremost the passion to concentrate in one single moment the whole of the ethical that he violates, so that he can give himself the assurance that he really loves Isaac with his whole soul[8]. If he cannot do that, he is in spiritual trial. Next, he has the passion to call up this whole assurance in an instant, and in such a way that it is just as fully valid as in the first moment. If he cannot do that, he never gets off the spot; for then he must always start over from the beginning. The tragic hero also concentrates in one moment the ethical that he teleologically went beyond, but in this respect he has a support in the universal. The knight of faith has himself alone and only himself, and therein lies the terrible. Most people live in an ethical obligation in such a way that they let each day have its sorrow; but then they also never [170] arrive at this passionate concentration, this energetic consciousness. In a certain sense the universal can help the tragic hero to attain it, but the knight of faith is alone in everything. The tragic hero does it and finds rest in the universal; the knight of faith is kept in constant tension. Agamemnon gives up Iphigenia and has thereby found rest in the universal; now he proceeds to sacrifice her.[9] If Agamemnon has not made the movement—if in the

8 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. I will shed light once more on the difference between the collision as it is posed for the tragic hero and as it is posed for the knight of faith. The tragic hero assures himself that the ethical obligation is totally present in him by transforming it into a wish. Thus Agamemnon can say: "For me the proof that I am not violating my duty as a father is that what is my duty is my only wish." So here we have wish and duty facing each other. The happy thing in life is when the two coincide, when my wish is my duty and vice versa, and the task of most people in life is precisely to remain within their duty and, by their enthusiasm, to transform it into their wish. The tragic hero gives up his wish in order to fulfill his duty. For the knight of faith, too, wish and duty are identical, but he is required to give up both. So if he wants to resign himself by giving up his wish, he finds no rest; for it is, after all, his duty. If he wants to remain in his duty and in his wish, he does not become the knight of faith; for the absolute duty required precisely that he give it up. The tragic hero attained a higher expression of duty, but not an absolute duty.

9 "Each day have its sorrow" echoes Matthew 6:34.

decisive moment his soul, instead of passionate concentration, has been lost in the usual twaddle about his having several daughters and how vielleicht [perhaps] das Außerordentliche [the extraordinary] might still happen—then of course he is not a hero but a case for the poorhouse. Abraham too has the hero's concentration, though in him it is far more difficult, since he has no support at all in the universal; but he makes one more movement, by which he gathers his soul back upon the miracle. If Abraham has not done that, he is only an Agamemnon—insofar, that is, as one can otherwise explain how it can be defended to want to sacrifice Isaac when doing so does not benefit the universal.

TRUE AND FALSE KNIGHTS

Sectarians try to share the paradox; the true knight of faith is a witness, never a teacher.

Whether the single individual is really in spiritual trial or is a knight of faith, only the single individual himself can decide. Nevertheless, some distinguishing marks can be constructed from the paradox that even someone who is not in it can understand. The true knight of faith is always absolute isolation; the false one is sectarian. Sectarianism is an attempt to jump off the narrow path of the paradox and become a tragic hero on the cheap. The tragic hero expresses the universal and sacrifices himself for it. Instead of that, the sectarian Master Jackel has a private theater, a few good friends and comrades who represent the universal about as well as the jurymen in *The Gold Snuffbox* represent justice.[10] The knight of faith, on the other hand, is the paradox; he is the single individual, absolutely nothing but the single individual, without any connections or complications. This is the terrible thing that the sectarian weakling cannot endure. For instead of learning from it that he is not capable of doing the great thing, and then plainly admitting it—something I

10 Master Jackel is the clown of Danish puppet shows. *Stokkemænd* were lay jurymen; *Gulddaasen* is a stage comedy of the day.

naturally cannot but approve of, since it is what I do myself—the bungler thinks that by joining up with some other bunglers he will be able to do it. But that will not do at all; in the world of spirit no cheating is tolerated. A dozen sectarians go arm in arm; they know nothing at all of the solitary spiritual trials that await the knight of faith and that he [171] dare not flee, precisely because it would be still more terrible if he presumptuously forced his way forward. The sectarians deafen one another with noise and din, keep anguish at bay with their shouting, and such a whooping Deer Park crowd thinks it is storming heaven, thinks it is going the same way as the knight of faith—who in the solitude of the universe never hears a human voice but walks alone with his terrible responsibility.[11]

The knight of faith is thrown back on himself alone; he feels the pain of not being able to make himself understood by others, but he feels no vain desire to guide others. The pain is his assurance; the vain desire he does not know—his soul is too earnest for that. The false knight readily gives himself away by the mastery he has acquired in an instant. He simply does not grasp what is at issue: that insofar as another individual is to walk the same path, he must become the single individual in exactly the same way, and then he needs no one's guidance, least of all from someone who wants to force himself on him. Here again people jump off; they cannot bear the martyrdom of not being understood, and instead they choose, conveniently enough, the worldly admiration that mastery earns. The true knight of faith is a witness, never a teacher, and therein lies the deep humanity in him, which is worth a good deal more than that silly concern for other people's weal and woe that is honored under the name of sympathy, while it is really nothing but vanity. Whoever wants only to be a witness thereby confesses that no human being, not even the least, needs another human being's concern, or should be demeaned by it so that the other may be raised up. But just as he did not win what he won

11 The Deer Park (Dyrehaven, with its fairground Dyrehavsbakken) north of Copenhagen was a popular place for rowdy outings.

on the cheap, neither does he sell it off on the cheap; he is not base enough to take people's admiration and give them his silent contempt in return; he knows that what is truly great is equally accessible to all.

Either there is an absolute duty to God—and if there is, it is the paradox described: that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal and as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute—or else faith has never existed, because it has always existed; or else Abraham is lost; or else one must explain the passage in Luke 14 the way that tasteful exegete did, and explain the corresponding passages, and similar ones, in the same way.[12]

12 Luke 14:26: whoever comes to Jesus and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, cannot be his disciple. The exegete was discussed earlier in Problema II.

Problema III

Was Abraham ethically defensible in keeping silent about his purpose before Sarah, before Eliezer, and before Isaac? Hiddenness and disclosure, from aesthetic tales to Abraham's last word.

VAR DET ETHISK FORSVARLIGT AF ABRAHAM, AT HAN FORTIEDE SIT FOREHAVENDE FOR SARA, FOR ELIESER, FOR ISAAK?

172 The ethical as such is the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed. The single individual, qualified immediately as a creature of senses and psyche, is the hidden. His ethical task, then, is to work himself free of his hiddenness and become disclosed in the universal. Whenever he wants to remain in hiddenness, he sins and is in spiritual trial, from which he can emerge only by disclosing himself.[1]

Here we stand again at the same point. If there is not a hiddenness that has its ground in the single individual's being, as the single individual, higher than the universal, then Abraham's conduct cannot be defended; for he disregarded the intermediate ethical authorities. If, on the other hand, there is such a hiddenness, then we stand before the paradox, which cannot be mediated, since it rests precisely on this: that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal—but the universal is precisely mediation. Hegelian philosophy assumes no justified hiddenness, no justified incommensurabil-

1 "The disclosed" and "the hidden" render *det Aabenbare* and *det Skjulte*; *Aabenbarelse* is "disclosure" and *Skjulthed* "hiddenness."

ity. It is consistent with itself, then, when it demands disclosure; but it is not clear about itself when it wants to regard Abraham as the father of faith and to talk about faith. For faith is not the first immediacy but a later one. The first immediacy is the aesthetic, and here Hegelian philosophy may well be right. But faith is not the aesthetic—or else faith has never existed, because it has always existed.

THE INTERESTING

Aesthetics rewards concealment and ethics demands disclosure, as examples from drama show.

The best thing here will be to consider the whole matter purely aesthetically and, to [173] that end, to enter into an aesthetic deliberation, to which I would ask the reader to surrender himself entirely for the moment, while I, to contribute my share, will adjust my presentation to suit the subject matter. The category I want to consider a little more closely is the *interesting*, a category that has gained great importance especially in our time, precisely because the age lives in discrimine rerum [at a critical turning point]; for it is really the category of the turning point. One should therefore not, as sometimes happens, after having loved it pro virili [with all one's might], scorn it because one has outgrown it; but neither should one be too greedy for it. For this much is certain: to become interesting, or to have one's life be interesting, is not a task for artful industry but a fateful privilege, which, like every privilege in the world of spirit, is bought only with deep pain. Thus Socrates was the most interesting man who ever lived, his life the most interesting ever led; but this existence was assigned to him by the god, and insofar as he himself had to acquire it, he was no stranger to toil and pain either. To want to take on such an existence out of vanity befits no one who thinks more earnestly about life, and yet in our time one not infrequently sees examples of such striving. The interesting, moreover, is a border category, a confinium [borderland] between aesthetics and ethics. To that extent the deliberation

must constantly stray over into the territory of ethics, while in order to be significant it must seize the problem with aesthetic inwardness and concupiscence. Ethics rarely involves itself in such things nowadays. The reason is supposed to be that there can be no room for it in the System. Then one could do it in monographs; and besides, if one does not want to be long-winded, one can be brief and still achieve the same thing—provided, that is, one has the predicate in one's power; for one or two predicates can betray a whole world. Might there not be room in the System for such little words either?

Aristotle says in his immortal Poetics: δυο μεν ουν του μυθου μερη, περι ταυτ' εστι, περιπετεια και αναγνωρισις [So two parts of the plot turn on these things: reversal and recognition] (cf. ch. 11). Naturally it is only the second element that concerns me here: αναγνωρισις, recognition. Wherever there can be talk of a recognition, there is eo ipso talk of a previous hiddenness. Just as recognition is the resolving, the releasing element, so hiddenness is the element of tension in dramatic life. What Aristotle develops in the earlier part of [174] the same chapter about the differing value of tragedies according to how περιπετεια [reversal] and αναγνωρισις [recognition] carom off each other, and about single and double recognition, I cannot take into account here, however much it tempts by its inwardness and quiet absorption —especially someone who has long enough been wearied by the superficial omniscience of the purveyors of overviews. A more general remark must find its place here. In Greek tragedy, hiddenness (and consequently recognition) is an epic remnant, grounded in a fate in which the dramatic action disappears and from which it has its dark, enigmatic origin. That is why the effect a Greek tragedy produces resembles the impression of a marble statue that lacks the power of the eye. Greek tragedy is blind. That is why a certain abstraction is needed to be properly affected by it. A son murders his father, but only afterward learns that it is his father. A sister is about to sacrifice her brother, but at the decisive moment she learns who he is. Tragedy of this kind can occupy our *reflective* age less. Modern

drama has given up fate, has emancipated itself dramatically, is sighted, looks into itself, takes fate up into its dramatic consciousness. Hiddenness and disclosure are then the hero's free act, for which he is responsible.[2]

In modern drama, too, recognition and hiddenness belong as an essential element. Giving examples of this would take too long. I am polite enough to assume that everyone in our time—being so aesthetically voluptuous, so potent and aroused that they conceive as easily as the partridge, which according to Aristotle needs only to hear the cock's voice or feel him fly overhead—I assume that everyone, merely on hearing the word "hiddenness," can easily shake ten or so novels and comedies out of his sleeve. I can therefore be brief, and simply indicate a more general remark at once.[3] If the one who plays at hiding, and thereby brings the dramatic ferment into the play, is hiding some nonsense, we get a comedy; if, on the other hand, he stands in relation to the idea, he may come close to being a tragic hero. Here just one example of the comic. A man puts on makeup and wears a wig. This same man would like to make a conquest of the fair sex; he is quite sure of victory with the help of the makeup and the wig, which make him absolutely irresistible. He captures a girl and is at the [175] pinnacle of happiness. Now comes the rub: if he can confess it, will he not lose all his bewitching power? When he shows himself to be a plain, ordinary—indeed even a bald—man, will he not then lose his beloved again?—The hiddenness is his free act, for which aesthetics too holds him responsible. This science is no friend of bald hypocrites; it abandons him to laughter. This must suffice merely to indicate what I mean; the comic cannot be the object of this inquiry's interest.

The path I have to take is to carry hiddenness dialectically through aesthetics and ethics; for the point is that aesthetic hid-

2 Oedipus kills his father Laius unknowingly; in Euripides's *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, Iphigenia is about to sacrifice her brother Orestes when she recognizes him.

3 Aristotle, *History of Animals* 5.5 (541a), on partridges conceiving at the sound or flight of the male.

denness and the paradox should show themselves in their absolute difference.

A couple of examples. A girl is secretly in love with someone, though they have not definitively confessed their love to each other. Her parents force her to marry another (there may, besides, be a consideration of filial piety that decides her); she obeys her parents, she hides her love "so as not to make the other unhappy, and no one shall ever know what she suffers."—A young man could, with a single word, come into possession of the object of his longings and his restless dreams. This little word, however, would compromise—indeed perhaps (who knows?) ruin a whole family; he magnanimously resolves to remain in hiding: "The girl shall never know that she might perhaps find happiness at another's hand." A pity that this pair, each of them hidden from their respective beloved, are also hidden from each other; otherwise a remarkable higher unity could be brought about here.—Their hiddenness is a free act, for which they too are responsible to aesthetics. Aesthetics, however, is a courteous and sentimental science that knows more ways out than any manager of the public pawnshop. So what does it do? It does everything possible for the lovers.[4] By means of a coincidence the respective partners in the planned marriage get a hint of the other party's magnanimous resolve; it comes to an explanation, they get each other, and rank with real heroes into the bargain; for although they have not even had time to sleep on their heroic resolve, aesthetics nonetheless regards it as if they had courageously fought through their purpose for many years. For aesthetics does not care much about time; whether in jest or in earnest, time passes equally quickly for it.

176 But ethics knows nothing of that coincidence or that sentimentality, nor does it have so quick a concept of time. This gives the matter a different look. Ethics is not good to argue with, for it has pure categories. It does not appeal to experience—which of all ridiculous things is just about the most ridiculous, and which, far from making a man wise, rather makes him mad if he

4 The Assistenshus was Copenhagen's public pawnshop and loan office.

knows nothing higher than it. Ethics has no coincidence, so it does not come to an explanation; it does not joke about dignities; it lays an enormous responsibility on the frail heroes' shoulders; it condemns as presumptuous the wish to play providence by one's action, but it also condemns wanting to do so by one's suffering. It bids us believe in actuality and have the courage to fight with all actuality's tribulations rather than with those bloodless sufferings one has taken on at one's own risk; it warns against trusting the clever calculations of the understanding, which are more faithless than the oracles of antiquity. It warns against all untimely magnanimity: leave it to actuality—then it is time to show courage, but then ethics itself offers every possible assistance. If, however, it was something deeper that stirred in these two, if there was earnestness to see the task, earnestness to take it on, then something will surely come of them; but ethics cannot help them. It is offended; for they have a secret from it, a secret they have taken on at their own risk and on their own account.

Aesthetics, then, demanded hiddenness and rewarded it; ethics demanded disclosure and punished hiddenness.

AGAMEMNON AND IPHIGENIA

The tragic hero must disclose his purpose and face his family's tears.

Sometimes, however, aesthetics itself demands disclosure. When the hero, caught in the aesthetic illusion, thinks that by his silence he will save another person, then it demands silence and rewards it. When, on the other hand, the hero by his action intervenes disruptively in another person's life, then it demands disclosure. Here I have reached the tragic hero. I want to consider Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* for a moment. Agamemnon is to sacrifice Iphigenia. Now aesthetics demands silence of Agamemnon insofar as it would be unworthy of the hero to seek comfort from any other person, just as he also, out of consideration for the women, ought to hide it from them as long as pos-

sible.[5] On the other hand, precisely in order to be a hero, the hero must also be tested in the terrible 177 spiritual trial that the tears of Clytemnestra and Iphigenia will prepare for him. What does aesthetics do? It has a way out: it has an old servant ready who discloses everything to Clytemnestra. Now everything is in order.

Ethics, however, has no coincidence and no old servant at hand. The aesthetic idea contradicts itself as soon as it has to be carried out in actuality. Ethics therefore demands disclosure. The tragic hero shows his ethical courage precisely in this: that he, not caught in any aesthetic illusion, is himself the one who announces to Iphigenia her fate. If he does this, the tragic hero is ethics' beloved son, in whom it is well pleased. If he keeps silent, it may be because he thinks he makes it easier for others that way, but it may also be because he makes it easier for himself. But he knows himself free of that. If he keeps silent, he takes on a responsibility as the single individual, insofar as he disregards an argument that may come from outside.[6] This he cannot do as a tragic hero; for ethics loves him precisely because he constantly expresses the universal. His heroic deed requires courage, but part of this courage is that he does not evade any argument. Now it is certain that tears are a terrible argumentum ad hominem, and there has surely been many a one whom nothing moved, yet whom tears moved. In the play Iphigenia is allowed to weep; in actuality she ought to be granted, like Jephthah's daughter, two months to weep—not in solitude but at her father's feet—and to use all her art, "which is only tears," and to twine herself instead of an olive branch around his knees (cf. line 1224).[7]

5 In Euripides's play Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia so that the Greek fleet can sail for Troy.

6 "Beloved son, in whom it is well pleased" echoes the voice from heaven at Jesus's baptism (Matthew 3:17).

7 Jephthah's daughter was granted two months to bewail her fate before he fulfilled his vow to sacrifice her (Judges 11:37–38). The quotation is from Iphigenia's plea in Euripides's play.

Aesthetics demanded disclosure but helped itself out with a coincidence; ethics demanded disclosure and found its satisfaction in the tragic hero.

Despite the rigor with which ethics demands disclosure, it cannot be denied that secrecy and silence are what really make a person great, precisely because they are qualities of inwardness. When Amor leaves Psyche, he says to her: "You will bear a child who will be a divine child if you keep silent, but a human being if you betray the secret." The tragic hero, who is the favorite of ethics, is the purely human; him I can also understand, and all his undertakings are out in the open. If I go further, I 178 always run up against the paradox, the divine and the demonic; for silence is both.[8] Silence is the demon's snare; and the more one keeps silent, the more terrible the demon becomes; but silence is also the deity's shared understanding with the single individual.

Before I go on to the story of Abraham, however, I will call forth a couple of poetic figures. By the power of dialectic I keep them spinning on their point, and by swinging the whip of despair over them I shall certainly keep them from standing still, so

8 From the tale of Cupid (Amor) and Psyche in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*), book 5.

that in their anguish they may, if possible, discover one thing or another.[9]

THE BRIDEGROOM AT DELPHI

A bridegroom warned by augurs abandons his bride; Johannes weighs whether he should speak.

Aristotle tells in his Politics a story of a political disturbance in Delphi that had its origin in a matter of marriage. *The bridegroom, to whom the augurs foretell a misfortune that will have its origin in his marriage, suddenly changes his plan at the decisive moment, when he comes to fetch the bride*—he will not go through with the wedding. I need [179] no more.[10] In Delphi this event hardly passed off without tears; if a poet wanted to adopt it, he

9 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. These movements and positions might still become a subject for aesthetic treatment; whether faith and the whole life of faith can, I leave undecided here. Only, because it is always a joy to me to thank anyone to whom I owe something, I would thank Lessing for the occasional hints about a Christian drama found in his Hamburgische Dramaturgie [Hamburg Dramaturgy]. He, however, fixed his gaze on the purely divine side of this life (the consummated victory), and therefore he despaired of it; perhaps he would have judged otherwise had he paid more attention to the purely human side (Theologia viatorum [the theology of wayfarers]). What he says is admittedly very brief, partly evasive, but since I am always very glad when I get a chance to bring Lessing along, I take it at once. Lessing was not only one of the most comprehensive minds Germany has possessed; he not only had a quite rare precision in his knowledge, which means one can safely rely on him and on his firsthand inspection without fear of being fooled by loose quotations that belong nowhere, half-understood phrases fetched from unreliable compendiums, or of being thrown off by a stupid trumpeting of novelties that earlier writers presented far better—but he also had a most uncommon gift for explaining what he himself had understood. There he stopped; in our time people go further, and explain more than they themselves have understood.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. In the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1767–69) Lessing doubted that a Christian martyr could be a fit subject for tragedy.

10 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. According to Aristotle, the historical catastrophe was as follows: to take revenge, the family smuggles a temple vessel among his household goods, and he is condemned as a temple robber. This, however, does not matter; for the question is not whether the family is clever or stupid in taking revenge; the family has ideal significance only insofar as it is drawn into the hero's dialectic. Besides, it is fateful enough that in trying to escape the danger by not marrying he plunges into it, and that his life comes into contact with the divine in a double way: first through the augur's pronouncement, then by being condemned as a temple robber.

could surely count on sympathy. Is it not terrible that love, which was often enough an exile in life, is now also robbed of heaven's aid? Is not the old saying that marriages are made in heaven put to shame here?[11] Otherwise it is all the tribulations and difficulties of finitude that, like evil spirits, want to part the lovers; but love has heaven on its side, and therefore this holy alliance conquers all enemies. Here it is heaven itself that separates what heaven itself has, after all, joined. And who could have foreseen this? Least of all, surely, the young bride. Only a moment ago she sat in her room in all her beauty, and the lovely girls had conscientiously adorned her, so that they could answer for it before all the world, so that they had not only joy of it but envy—yes, joy that it was impossible for them to be more envious, because it was impossible for her to be more beautiful.[12] She sat alone in her room and was transformed from beauty to beauty; for everything that feminine art could do had been used to adorn the worthy one worthily. But something was still missing that the young girls had not dreamed of: a veil, finer, lighter, and yet more concealing than the one in which the young girls had wrapped her; a bridal gown that no young girl knew anything about or could help her with—indeed, the bride herself did not have the understanding to help herself. It was an invisible, a kindly power, one that takes delight in adorning a bride, that wrapped her in it without her knowing anything of it; for she saw only how the bridegroom walked past and went up to the temple. She saw [180] the door close behind him, and she grew even calmer and more blissful; for she knew that he now belonged to her more than ever. The temple door opened, he stepped out, but she modestly lowered her eyes, and so she did not see that his face was troubled; but he saw that heaven must be envious of the bride's loveliness and of his happiness. The temple door opened, the young girls saw the bridegroom step out; but they did not see that his face was troubled, for they were busy fetching the bride. Then she stepped forth in all her

11 Aristotle, *Politics* 5.4 (1303b–1304a).

12 Echoes Matthew 19:6: "What God has joined together, let no one separate."

maidenly humility and yet like a queen, surrounded by her retinue of young girls, who curtsied to her as a young girl always curtsies to a bride. So she stood at the head of the lovely band and waited—it was only a moment, for the temple was close by—and the bridegroom came—but he walked past her door.

But I break off here; I am no poet and proceed only dialectically. First, it should be noted that it is at the decisive moment that the hero receives that information; he is thus pure and has nothing to reproach himself with, has not frivolously bound himself to the beloved. Second, he has a divine pronouncement for him, or rather against him; so he is not guided, like those frail lovers of both sexes, by his own cleverness. It further goes without saying that this pronouncement makes him just as unhappy as the bride, indeed a little more so, since he is after all the occasion of it. It is true, of course, that the augurs foretold a misfortune only to *him*, but the question is whether this misfortune is not of such a kind that in striking him it will also strike their married happiness. What is he to do now? 1) Should he keep silent and go through with the wedding, thinking: Perhaps the misfortune will not come at once; at any rate I have upheld love and have not been afraid to make myself unhappy; but I must keep silent, for otherwise even that brief moment is wasted? This seems plausible, but it is not at all; for in that case he has wronged the girl. By his silence he has in a way made the girl guilty; for if she had known, she would surely never have consented to such a union. Then in the hour of need he will have to bear not only the misfortune but also the responsibility of having kept silent, and her just anger that he kept silent. 2) Should he keep silent and call off the wedding? In that case he must enter into a mystification by which he annihilates himself in his relationship to her. Aesthetics would perhaps approve of this. The catastrophe could then be shaped along the lines of the [181] actual one, except that at the last moment there would be an explanation—though it would come too late, since, aesthetically considered, it becomes a necessity to let him die, unless that science should find itself able to cancel the ill-fated prophecy.

However magnanimous it may be, though, this conduct contains an affront to the girl and to the reality of her love. 3) Should he speak? One must of course not forget that our hero is a little too poetic for giving up his love to mean no more to him than a failed business speculation. If he speaks, the whole thing becomes an unhappy love story in the same style as Axel and Valborg.[13] They become a couple whom [182] heaven itself separates. In the present case, however, this separation must be thought of somewhat differently, since it also results from the individuals' free act. For the very difficult thing about the dialectic of this case is that the misfortune is to strike only him.[14] So they do not, like Axel and Valborg, have a common expression for their suffering—whereas heaven separates Axel and Valborg alike, because they are equally close kin to each other. Were that the case here, a way out could be imagined. For since

13 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. From this point, incidentally, one could go off in another direction of dialectical movements. Heaven foretells a misfortune for him from his marriage; so he could, after all, forgo the wedding without therefore giving up the girl, and live with her in a romantic union that would be more than reassuring for the lovers. This, however, contains an affront to the girl, because in his love for her he does not express the universal. Still, it would be a task both for a poet and for an ethicist who wanted to defend marriage. In general, poetry, if it became attentive to the religious and to the inwardness of individuality, would find far more significant tasks than those it now busies itself with. Again and again, after all, one hears this story in poetry: a man is bound to one girl, whom he once loved, or perhaps never really loved, for now he has seen another girl, who is the ideal. A man makes a mistake in life: the street was right, but it was the wrong house, for directly across the way, on the second floor, lives the ideal—this is thought to be a task for poetry. A lover has made a mistake: he saw his beloved by candlelight and thought she had dark hair, but look! on closer inspection she was blond—but her sister, she is the ideal. This is thought to be a task for poetry. My opinion is that every such man is a Laban, who may be unbearable enough in life but ought to be hissed off the stage at once when he wants to make himself important in poetry. Only passion against passion makes a poetic collision, not this rummaging about among particulars within the same passion. When, for example, a girl in the Middle Ages, having fallen in love, becomes convinced that earthly love is a sin and prefers a heavenly one, then here is a poetic collision, and the girl is poetic; for her life is in the idea.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. *Laban*, after the biblical Laban who tricked Jacob into marrying Leah (Genesis 29), was Danish slang for a lout.

14 *Axel og Valborg* (1810), a tragedy by Adam Oehlenschläger, whose lovers are kept apart by a church ban on their marriage as kin.

heaven uses no visible power to separate them but leaves it to them, it would be conceivable that they decided together to defy heaven, misfortune and all.

Ethics, however, will demand of him that he speak. His heroism, then, must essentially consist in giving up the aesthetic magnanimity—which in casu [in this case] could not easily be thought to have any admixture of the vanity that lies in being hidden, since it must be clear to him that he is making the girl unhappy anyway. The reality of this heroism depends, however, on its having had and annulled its presupposition; for otherwise one could get heroes enough, especially in our time—our time, which has carried to unparalleled virtuosity the forgery that achieves the highest by skipping over everything in between.

But what is the point of this sketch, since I get no further than the tragic hero? Because it was possible that it might throw some light on the paradox. Everything depends, then, on the relation in which he stands to the augurs' pronouncement, which in one way or another becomes decisive for his life. Is this pronouncement publici juris [public property], or is it a privatissimum [a private lecture for one]? The scene is Greece; an augur's pronouncement is intelligible to all—I mean not merely that the single individual can understand its content lexically, but that the single individual can understand that an augur is announcing heaven's decision to the single individual. The augur's pronouncement, then, is intelligible not only to the hero but to all, and no private relationship to the deity results from it. He can do what he will: what has been foretold will happen, and neither by doing nor by refraining does he come into a closer relationship to the deity, or become the object either of its grace or of its wrath. Every single individual will be able to understand the outcome just as well as the hero, and there is no secret writing legible only to the hero. Insofar as he wants to speak, then, he can do so perfectly well, for he can make himself understood; insofar as he wants to keep silent, it is because, by virtue of being the [183] single individual, he wants to be higher than the universal, wants to delude himself with all sorts of fant-

astic notions about how she will soon forget this business, and so on. If, on the other hand, heaven's will had not been announced to him by an augur, if it had come to his knowledge entirely privately, if it had placed itself in an entirely private relationship to him, then we are at the paradox, if there is such a thing (for my deliberation is dilemmatic)—then he could not speak, however much he might want to. He would not then be enjoying himself in his silence; he would be suffering the pain—but this very pain would be his assurance that he was justified. His silence would then not have its ground in his wanting, as the single individual, to place himself in an absolute relation to the *universal*, but in his having been placed, as the single individual, in an absolute relation to the *absolute*. He would then also, as far as I can imagine, be able to find rest in it, whereas his magnanimous silence would constantly be disturbed by the demands of the ethical. It would be altogether desirable if aesthetics would for once try to begin where for so many years it has ended—with illusory magnanimity. As soon as it did so, it would be working hand in hand with the religious; for this power is the only one that can save the aesthetic out of its struggle with the ethical. Queen Elizabeth sacrifices her love for Essex to the state by signing his death warrant. This was a heroic deed, even if a little personal affront was in play, in that he had not sent her the ring. As is well known, he had in fact sent it, but through the malice of a lady-in-waiting it had been held back. Elizabeth received, so it is told, ni fallor [if I am not mistaken], news of this; then she sat for ten days with one finger in her mouth, biting it without saying a word, and then she died. This would be a task for a poet who knew how to pry the mouth open; otherwise it is at most of use to a ballet master, with whom the poet in our time often enough confuses himself.[15]

15 Elizabeth I had the Earl of Essex executed in 1601; the legend of the ring she had promised to honor, withheld by the Countess of Nottingham, was widely told.

AGNES AND THE MERMAN

The merman, disarmed by Agnes's innocence, must choose between demonic silence and disclosure.

Now I will follow with a sketch in the direction of the demonic. For this I can use the legend of *Agnes and the Merman*. The merman is a seducer who shoots up from the hiding places of the abyss, in wild lust seizes and breaks the innocent flower that stood in all her grace on the shore and pensively bowed her head to the sighing of the sea. This has so far been the poets' view. Let us make a change. The merman was a seducer. He has called to Agnes, with his smooth talk he has coaxed out what was hidden in her; she has found in the merman what she was seeking, [184] what she gazed down after at the bottom of the sea. Agnes wants to follow him.[16] The merman has taken her in his arms, Agnes twines herself around his neck; trustingly, with her whole soul, she gives herself to the stronger one; he already stands on the shore, he leans out over the sea to plunge down with his prey—then Agnes looks at him once more, not fearfully, not doubtingly, not proud of her happiness, not drunk with desire, but absolutely believing, absolutely humble, like the lowly flower she thought herself to be; with this look she absolutely trustingly confides to him her whole fate.—And look! The sea roars no more, its wild voice falls silent, the passion of nature, which is the merman's strength, leaves him in the lurch, a dead calm sets in—and still Agnes looks at him in this way. Then the merman breaks down; he cannot withstand the power of innocence, his element becomes unfaithful to him, he cannot seduce Agnes. He leads her home again, he explains to her that he only wanted to show her how beautiful the sea was when it is calm, and Agnes believes him.—Then he returns alone, and the sea storms, but the despair in the merman storms more wildly. He can seduce Agnes, he can seduce a hundred Agneses, he can

16 "Agnes" renders the Danish *Agnete*. In the Danish folk ballad she follows a merman into the sea; it was retold by Baggesen, Oehlenschläger and others.

bewitch any girl—but Agnes has won, and the merman has lost her. Only as prey can she become his; he cannot faithfully belong to any girl, for he is, after all, only a merman. I have allowed myself a small change[17] in the merman; [185] basically I have also changed Agnes a little; for in the legend Agnes is not entirely without guilt, just as it is in general nonsense and flattery and an insult to womankind to imagine a seduction in which the girl has no, no, no guilt at all. In the legend Agnes is—if I may modernize my expression a little—a woman who craves the interesting, and every such woman can always be sure there is a merman nearby; for mermen spot that sort of thing with half an eye and steer for it like the shark after its prey. It is therefore very stupid—or else it is a rumor a merman has had spread—that so-called cultivation protects a girl against seduction. No, existence is more just and even-handed: there is only one means, and that is innocence.

Let us now give the merman a human consciousness, and let his being a merman signify a human preexistence in whose consequences his life was entangled. Nothing prevents him from

17 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. That legend could also be treated in another way. The merman does not want to seduce Agnes, even though he has seduced many before. He is no longer a merman, or, if you like, he is a poor wretched merman who has long sat grieving on the bottom of the sea. Yet he knows, as the legend in fact teaches, that he can be saved by the love of an innocent girl. But he has a bad conscience where girls are concerned, and dares not approach them. Then he sees Agnes. Many times already, hidden in the reeds, he has watched her walking along the shore. Her beauty, her quiet absorption in herself, draw him to her; but all is melancholy in his soul, no wild desire stirs in it. And when the merman mingles his sigh with the whispering of the reeds, she turns her ear toward it, she stands still and sinks into dreams, lovelier than any woman and yet beautiful as a saving angel who inspires the merman with confidence. The merman takes courage, he approaches Agnes, he wins her love, he hopes for his salvation. But Agnes was no quiet girl; she was very fond of the roaring of the sea, and the melancholy sigh by the water pleased her only because it made the roaring within her stronger. She wants to be off, off, to storm wildly out into the infinite with the merman she loves—and so she inflames the merman. She scorned his humility; now his pride awakens. And the sea roars, and the wave foams, and the merman embraces Agnes and plunges into the abyss with her. Never had he been so wild, never so full of desire; for in this girl he had hoped for his salvation. He soon grew tired of Agnes, yet her body was never found; for she became a mermaid who tempted men with her songs.

becoming a hero; for the step he now takes is reconciling. He is saved by Agnes, the seducer is crushed, he has bowed before the power of innocence, he can never seduce again. But at that same instant two powers contend for him: repentance; and Agnes together with repentance. If repentance alone takes him, then he is hidden; if Agnes and repentance take him, then he is disclosed.[18]

Now insofar as repentance seizes the merman and he remains hidden, he has certainly made Agnes unhappy; for Agnes loved him in all her [186] innocence, and she believed it was the truth that at that moment, when even to her he seemed changed, however well he hid it, he only wanted to show her the beautiful stillness of the sea. Meanwhile, in terms of passion, the merman himself becomes still more unhappy; for he loved Agnes with a multitude of passions, and had besides a new guilt to bear. The demonic in repentance will now no doubt explain to him that this is precisely his punishment, and that the more it tortures him, the better.

If he gives himself over to this demonic element, he may perhaps make one more attempt to save Agnes, in the way that, in a certain sense, one can save a person with the help of evil. He knows that Agnes loves him. If he could wrest this love from Agnes, she would in a way be saved. But how? The merman is too sensible to count on a frank confession arousing her disgust. So he will perhaps try to stir up all the dark passions in her, to scorn her, mock her, make her love ridiculous, and if possible goad her pride. He will not spare himself any torment; for this is the deep contradiction in the demonic, and in a certain sense there dwells infinitely more good in a demonic person than in trivial people. The more selfish Agnes is, the more easily she will be deceived (for only very inexperienced people think it is easy to deceive innocence; existence is exceedingly profound, and the easiest thing is for the clever to fool the clever)—but the more terrible the merman's sufferings will be. The more cunningly his deception is laid, the less will Agnes modestly hide

18 "Repentance" renders *Anger*.

her suffering from him; she will use every means, and these will not be without effect either—that is, not in shaking him, but in tormenting him.

With the help of the demonic, then, the merman would be the single individual who as the single individual was higher than the universal. The demonic has the same property as the divine: that the single individual can enter into an absolute relation to it. This is the analogy, the counterpart, to that paradox of which we are speaking. It therefore has a certain resemblance that can deceive. Thus the merman apparently has proof that his silence is justified, in that he suffers all his pain in it. Nevertheless there is no doubt that he can speak. So he can become a tragic hero—in my view a grandiose tragic hero—if he speaks. Perhaps only a few [187] will grasp what the grandeur consists in[19]. He will then have the courage to wrest from himself every self-deception that he can make Agnes happy by his art; he will have the courage, humanly speaking, to crush Agnes. Incidentally, I will just make a psychological observation here. The more selfishly Agnes has developed, the more dazzling the self-deception will be; indeed, it is not unthinkable that it could happen in reality that a merman, by his demonic cunning, had, humanly speaking, not only saved an Agnes but brought something extraordinary out of her; for a demon knows how to torture strength out of even the weakest person, and in his way he can mean very well by a person.

The merman stands on a dialectical point. If he is saved out of the demonic in repentance, two ways are possible. He can hold

himself back, remain in hiddenness, but not rely on his cunning. Then, as the single individual, he does not enter into an absolute relation to the demonic, but finds rest in the counterparadox that the deity will save Agnes. (This is presumably how the Middle Ages would make the movement; for by its conception the merman obviously belongs in the monastery.) Or he can be saved by Agnes. This must not be understood as if by Agnes's love he would be saved from becoming a seducer in the future (that is an aesthetic rescue attempt, which always evades the main [188] point, namely the continuity in the merman's life); for in that respect he is saved; he is saved insofar as he becomes disclosed. He then marries Agnes. Nevertheless he must have recourse to the paradox. For when the single individual has through his guilt come outside the universal, he can return to it only by virtue of having come, as the single individual, into an absolute relation to the absolute. Here I will now make a remark by which I say more than has been said at any point in the preceding[20]. Sin is not the first immediacy; sin is a later immediacy. In sin the single individual is already, in the direction of the demonic paradox, higher than the universal, because it is a contradiction on the part of the universal to want to demand itself of one who lacks the conditio sine qua non [indispensable con-

19 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. Aesthetics sometimes treats something similar with its usual flirtatiousness. The merman is saved by Agnes, and the whole thing ends in a happy marriage. A happy marriage! That's easy enough. But if ethics is to give the address at the wedding, then I think it will be another matter. Aesthetics throws the cloak of love over the merman, and then all is forgotten. It is also careless enough to think that things go at a marriage as at an auction, where everything is sold in the condition in which it is found when the hammer falls. It only makes sure that the lovers get each other; the rest it does not care about. If only it would see what happens afterward! But it has no time for that; it is at once in full swing pairing off a new couple of lovers. Aesthetics is the most faithless of all the sciences. Anyone who has truly loved it becomes in a certain sense unhappy; but whoever has never loved it is and remains a pecus [brute beast].

20 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. In the preceding I have deliberately kept away every consideration of the question of sin and its reality. The whole is centered on Abraham, and him I can still reach in immediate categories—that is, insofar as I can understand him. As soon as sin appears, ethics founders, precisely on repentance; for repentance is the highest ethical expression, but precisely as such the deepest ethical self-contradiction.

dition]. If philosophy, among other things, also considered that it might occur to someone to want to act according to its teaching, a strange comedy would come of it. An ethics that ignores sin is an altogether idle science; but if it acknowledges sin, it is eo ipso [by that very fact] beyond itself. Philosophy teaches that the immediate must be annulled.[21] That is true enough; but what is not true is that sin is simply the immediate, any more than faith is simply the immediate.

As long as I move in these spheres, everything goes easily; but nothing said here explains Abraham either; for Abraham did not become the single individual through sin—on the contrary, he was the righteous man, God's chosen one. So the analogy to Abraham will appear only after the single individual has been brought to the point of being able to realize the universal, and now the paradox repeats itself.

I can therefore understand the merman's movements, while I cannot understand Abraham; for it is precisely through the paradox that the merman comes to want to realize the universal. For if he remains hidden and dedicates [189] himself to all the torments of repentance, he becomes a demon, and as such is annihilated. If he remains hidden, but does not cleverly suppose that by being tortured himself in the bondage of repentance he can work Agnes free, then he may well find peace, but he is lost to this world. If he becomes disclosed, if he lets himself be saved by Agnes, then he is the greatest human being I can imagine; for it is only aesthetics that thoughtlessly believes it praises the power of love by having the lost man loved by an innocent girl and thereby saved; it is only aesthetics that sees wrongly and believes that the girl is the heroine, instead of the merman. So the merman cannot belong to Agnes unless, after having made the infinite movement of repentance, he makes one movement more: the movement by virtue of the absurd. By his own strength he can make the movement of repentance, but for that he also uses absolutely all his strength, and therefore he cannot

21 "Annulled" renders *ophæves*, the Danish for Hegel's *aufheben*, to cancel and at the same time preserve.

possibly come back again by his own strength and grasp actuality. When one does not have passion enough to make either the one movement or the other, when one muddles through life, repents a little and thinks the rest will take care of itself, then one has once and for all renounced living in the idea; and then one can very easily attain the highest, and help others to it—that is, delude oneself and others into thinking that in the world of spirit things go as in a game of *gnav*, where everything happens by the luck of the draw.[22] One can then amuse oneself by reflecting how strange it is that precisely in an age when, after all, everyone can do the highest, doubt about the immortality of the soul can be so widespread; for whoever has really made even just the movement of infinity hardly doubts. The conclusions of passion are the only reliable ones, that is, the only convincing ones. Fortunately existence is here more loving, more faithful, than the wise men claim; for it excludes no one, not even the lowliest; it fools no one, for in the world of spirit only the one who fools himself is fooled. It is everyone's opinion, and so far as I may permit myself to judge, it is mine too, that entering a monastery is not the highest; but it is by no means my opinion that therefore in our age, when no one enters a monastery, everyone is greater than the deep and earnest souls who found rest in a monastery. How many in our age have passion enough to think this, and then to judge themselves honestly? Merely the idea of taking time upon one's conscience in this way, of giving it time, in its sleepless tirelessness, to search out every secret thought, so that, [190] if one does not at every moment make the movement by virtue of what is noblest and holiest in a human

22 *Gnav*: a Danish parlor game of chance played with numbered counters that the players swap around the table.

being, one may discover with anguish and horror[23], and if by nothing else then by anguish lure out, the dark stirring that nonetheless hides in every human life—whereas, living in company with others, one so easily forgets, so easily gets away with it, is held up in so many ways, gets the chance to start afresh—merely this idea, grasped with due reverence, would, I thought, chasten many an individual in our age who already believes he has reached the highest. But our age, which has reached the highest, cares little about this, even though no age has been so given over to the comic as precisely this one. And it is incomprehensible that it has not already happened that the age, by a generatio aequivoca [spontaneous generation], has brought forth its own hero, the demon who will ruthlessly stage the terrible spectacle of making the whole age laugh and making it forget that it is laughing at itself. Or what is existence worth but to be laughed at, when one has already reached the highest at twenty? And yet what higher movement has the age discovered since people gave up entering monasteries? Is it not a pitiful worldly wisdom, prudence, faintheartedness, that sits at the head of the table, that cowardly makes people imagine they have done the highest, and slyly keeps them from even attempting the lesser? Whoever has made the monastic movement has only one movement left: that of the absurd. How many in our age understand what the absurd is? How many in our age live in such a way that they have renounced everything, or received everything? How many are even honest enough to know what they can do and what they cannot? And is it not true that, insofar as one finds such people, one is most likely to find them among the less educated, and in part among women? In a kind of clairvoyance the

23 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. People do not believe this in our earnest age, and yet it is remarkable enough that even in paganism, which by its nature is more lighthearted and less thoroughly reflected, the two true representatives of the Greek view of existence, γνωθι σαυτον [know yourself], each in his own way, have indicated that by delving into oneself one first and foremost discovers the disposition to evil. That I am thinking of Pythagoras and Socrates I hardly need say.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. "Know yourself": the inscription at the temple of Apollo at Delphi, taken up by Socrates as his watchword.

age reveals its failing, just as a demonic person always reveals [191] himself without understanding himself; for it demands the comic again and again. Should that really be what the age needed? Should the theater perhaps need a new play in which it was made ridiculous that someone died of love? Or would it not rather be saving for the age if this happened among us, if the age witnessed such an event, so that for once it might gain courage to believe in the power of spirit, courage to stop cowardly stifling what is better in itself, and enviously stifling it in others —by laughter? Should the age really need a ridiculous Erscheinung [apparition] of one of the awakened in order to have something to laugh at, or should it not rather need such an inspired figure to remind it of what has been forgotten?[24]

SARAH AND TOBIAS

Sarah, whose seven bridegrooms died on the wedding night, is the true heroine of Tobit.

If one wanted a sketch in a similar style, but one that would be more moving because the passion of repentance was not set in motion, one could use a story that occurs in the Book of Tobit. The young Tobias wants to marry Sarah, the daughter of Raguel and Edna. There is a sad story attached to this girl. She has been given to seven men, all of whom perished in the bridal chamber. For my sketch this is a blemish on the story; for the comic effect is almost unavoidable when one thinks of a girl's seven fruitless attempts to get married, though she came quite close each time —as close as a student who failed his final examination seven times.[25] In the Book of Tobit the accent falls elsewhere, and therefore the high number matters and is in a certain sense even a tragic contributing factor; for young Tobias's magnanimity is all the greater, partly insofar as he is his parents' only son

24 "The awakened" (*en Opvakt*): the name for adherents of the pietist revival movements then active in Denmark.

25 The Book of Tobit, in the Apocrypha, which the Danish Bible of the day included; the story is told in chapters 6–8. The student failing his *Attestats* is a theology candidate failing the state degree examination.

(6:15), partly because the deterrent presses itself on him more forcefully. This, then, must go. Sarah, then, is a girl who has never loved, who still keeps a young girl's bliss, her immense first mortgage on existence, her "Vollmachtbrief zum Glücke" [warrant for happiness]—to love a man with all her heart. And yet she is unhappier than anyone, for she knows that the evil demon who loves her will kill the bridegroom on the wedding night. I have read of much sorrow, but I doubt that there is anywhere a sorrow as deep as the one in this girl's life. When misfortune comes from outside, there is after all comfort to be found. If existence did not bring a person what could have made him happy, it is still a comfort that he could have received it. But the unfathomable sorrow that no time can dispel, no time can heal: to know that it would help nothing [192] if existence did everything! A Greek author hides so infinitely much in his simple naïveté when he says: πάντως γὰρ οὐδεις Ἔρωτα ἔφυγεν ἢ φευξεται, μέχρι ἄν κάλλος ᾖ καὶ ὀφθαλμοι βλέπωσιν [for no one has ever escaped Love, or ever will, so long as there is beauty and eyes to see] (cf. Longus, *Pastoralia*).[26] Many a girl has become unhappy in love, but she *became* so; Sarah *was* so before she became so. It is hard not to find the one to whom one can give oneself, but it is *unspeakably* hard not to be able to give oneself. A young girl gives herself, and then people say: now she is no longer free. But Sarah was never free, and yet she had never given herself. It is hard if a girl gave herself and was deceived, but Sarah was deceived before she gave herself. What a world of sorrow lies in what follows, when Tobias at last wants to marry her! What wedding ceremonies, what preparations! No girl has been deceived as Sarah was; for she was cheated of the most blessed thing of all, the absolute wealth that even the poorest girl possesses, cheated of the secure, unbounded, unfettered, unbridled abandon of self-giving; for first there had to be the fumigation, with the heart and liver of the fish laid on glowing embers. And how the mother must take leave of her daughter,

26 Longus, Greek author of the pastoral romance *Daphnis and Chloe* (2nd or 3rd century AD); the line comes from its prologue.

who, just as she herself is cheated of everything, must in continuity with this cheat her mother of the most beautiful thing! Just read the story. Edna prepared the chamber and led Sarah into it, and wept, and she received her daughter's tears. And she said to her: "My child, take heart! May the Lord of heaven and earth give you joy for this sorrow of yours! Daughter, take heart."[27] And now the moment of the wedding—read it, if you can for tears: But when the two of them were shut in together, Tobias rose from the bed and said: "Get up, sister, and let us pray that the Lord may have mercy on us" (8:4).

If a poet read this story, if he wanted to use it, I bet a hundred to one he would stake everything on young Tobias. That heroism of being willing to risk his life in so obvious a danger—which the story reminds us of once more, for on the morning after the wedding Raguel says to Edna: "Send one of the maids and let her see whether he is alive, but if not, so that I may bury him and no one will know of it" (cf. 8:13)—that heroism would become the theme. I permit myself to propose another. It is bravely, boldly and chivalrously done by Tobias; but any man who lacks the courage for it is a weakling who knows neither what love is, nor what it is to be a man, nor [193] what is worth living for; he has not even grasped the little mystery that it is better to give than to receive, and has no inkling of the great one: that it is far harder to receive than to give—that is, when one has had the courage to do without, and did not turn coward in the hour of need. No, Sarah—she is the heroine.[28] Her I will approach as I have never approached any girl, or felt tempted in thought to approach any I have read about. For what love of God it takes to be willing to let oneself be healed, when one has thus been botched from the beginning through no fault of one's own, from the beginning a spoiled specimen of a human being! What ethical maturity, to take on the responsibility of permitting the beloved such a daring deed! What humility before another human being! What

27 Tobit 6–7: the smoke of the burned fish heart and liver drives off the demon Asmodeus; Edna's words are from Tobit 7:16–18.
28 "It is better to give than to receive": Acts 20:35.

faith in God, that she would not in the next moment hate the man to whom she owed everything!

Let Sarah be a man, and the demonic is close at hand. The proud, noble nature can bear everything, but one thing it cannot bear: it cannot bear pity. There lies in it a humiliation that can be inflicted on him only by a higher power; for by himself he can never become its object. If he has sinned, he can bear the punishment without despairing; but to be singled out from his mother's womb, without guilt, as a sacrifice to pity, a sweet savor in its nostrils—that he cannot endure.[29] Pity has a strange dialectic: one moment it demands guilt, the next it will not have it; and so to be predestined to pity becomes more and more terrible the more the individual's misfortune lies in the direction of the spiritual. But Sarah has no guilt; she is cast out as prey to every suffering, and on top of that must be tortured by people's pity; for even I, who admire her more than Tobias loved her, even I cannot say her name without saying: the poor girl. Let a man be in Sarah's place, let him know that if he wants to love a girl, a spirit from hell will come and murder the beloved on the wedding night—then it might well be that he chose the demonic; he shut himself up within himself and said, the way a demonic nature talks in secret: "Thanks, I'm no friend of ceremonies and fuss; I don't in the least demand the pleasures of love; after all, I can become a Bluebeard who takes his delight in seeing girls sink down dead on the wedding night." In general [194] one learns very little about the demonic, even though this territory, precisely in our age, has a valid claim to be explored, and even though the observer, if he knows how to put himself a little in rapport with the demon, can make use of almost any human being, at least for a moment.[30] In this respect Shakespeare is and remains a hero. That dreadful demon, the most demonic figure Shakespeare has portrayed—and portrayed incomparably—

29 "A sweet savor": the Old Testament phrase for a sacrifice pleasing to God (e.g. Genesis 8:21).

30 Bluebeard: in Charles Perrault's tale (1697), a nobleman who murders his successive wives.

Gloucester (later Richard III): what made him a demon? Evidently this, that he could not bear the pity to which he had been exposed since childhood. His monologue in the first act of *Richard III* is worth more than whole systems of morality that have no inkling of the terrors of existence, or of their explanation.

> ...Ich, roh geprägt, und aller Reize baar,
> Vor leicht sich dreh'nden Nymphen mich zu brüsten;
> Ich, so verkürzt um schönes Ebenmaß,
> Geschändet von der tückischen Natur,
> Entstellt, verwahrlost, vor der Zeit gesandt
> In diese Welt des Athmens, halb kaum fertig
> Gemacht, und zwar so lahm und ungeziemend
> Daß Hunde bellen, hink' ich wo vorbei. [...I, roughly
> stamped and bare of every charm
> To strut before the lightly twirling nymphs;
> I, cut so short of fair proportion,
> Wronged by treacherous nature,
> Misshapen, neglected, sent before my time
> Into this breathing world, scarcely half
> Made up, and that so lame and so unseemly
> That dogs bark as I limp by.][31]

Natures like Gloucester's cannot be saved by mediating them into an idea of society. Ethics really only makes fools of them, just as it would be mockery of Sarah if it were to say to her: why don't you express the universal and get married? Such natures are from the ground up in the paradox, and they are by no means more imperfect than other people, only they are either lost in the demonic paradox or saved in the divine. Now people have forever taken pleasure in the fact that witches, goblins, trolls, etc. were misshapen figures, and it is undeniable that every human being has a tendency, on seeing someone whose body is misshapen, to attach at once the notion of moral depravity to it. What a monstrous injustice! For the relation must

31 *Richard III*, 1.1, quoted in the German translation of Schlegel and Tieck.

rather be reversed: existence itself has spoiled them, as a stepmother makes children turn out badly. To be placed outside the universal from the outset, by nature or by historical circumstances, is the beginning of the demonic, for which the individual himself is nonetheless not to blame. Thus Cumberland's Jew is also a demon, even though he does good. Thus the demonic can also express itself as contempt for people, [195] a contempt which, mark well, does not lead the demonic person himself to act contemptibly; on the contrary, his strength lies in knowing that he is better than all who judge him.—About all such things the poets ought to be the first to raise the alarm.[32] God knows what books the younger versifiers now living read! Their study probably consists in learning rhymes by heart. God knows what their significance in existence is! At this moment I know of no use they serve except to furnish an edifying proof of the immortality of the soul, since one can confidently say of them to oneself what Baggesen says of the town poet Kildevalle: if he becomes immortal, then so shall we all.—What has been said here in connection with Sarah, chiefly with a view to poetic production and therefore on a fantastic presupposition, has its full significance when one wants, with psychological interest, to delve into the meaning of the old saying: nullum unquam exstitit magnum ingenium sine aliqua dementia [there has never been a great genius without some touch of madness].[33] For this dementia is the genius's suffering in existence; it is the expression, if I may say so, of divine envy, while his genius is the expression of divine favor. Thus the genius is from the start disoriented in relation to the universal and brought into relation to the paradox—whether, in despair over his limit, which in his eyes transforms his omnipotence into impotence, he seeks a demonic reassurance and therefore will not admit it either before God or before men, or whether he reassures himself reli-

32 Richard Cumberland's comedy *The Jew* (1794), whose Sheva, despised as a miser, secretly acts as a benefactor; it was staged in Copenhagen.

33 Jens Baggesen (1764–1826), Danish poet; Kildevalle is a poetaster in one of his comic verses. The Latin saying is from Seneca, *On Tranquility of Mind* 17.10.

giously in love for the deity. Here lie psychological tasks to which, it seems to me, one could gladly devote a whole life, and yet one so seldom hears a word about them. In what relation does insanity stand to genius? Can one construct the one out of the other? In what sense and to what extent is the genius master of his insanity?—for it goes without saying that to a certain degree he is master of it, since otherwise he really would be insane. Such observations, however, call for great ingenuity, and for love; for to observe one who is superior is exceedingly difficult. If one were to read through some of the most brilliant authors with an eye to this, it might perhaps be possible, just once in a while and with much effort, to discover a little.

FAUST THE DOUBTER

A sympathetic Faust keeps his doubt silent to spare others.

I will imagine one more case: that an individual, by being hidden and by his silence, wants to save the universal. For this I can

use the legend [196] of *Faust*. Faust is a doubter[34], an apostate of the spirit who goes the way of the flesh. This is the poets' view, and while it is repeated again and again that every age has its Faust, one poet after another still goes undaunted down the same beaten track. Let us make a little change. Faust is the doubter κατ' εξοχην [par excellence]; but he is a sympathetic nature. Even in Goethe's conception of Faust I miss a deeper psychological insight into doubt's secret conversations with itself. In our age, when after all everyone has experienced doubt, no poet has

34 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. If one does not want to use a doubter, one could choose a similar figure, an ironist, for example, whose sharp eye has seen through the ludicrousness of existence from the ground up, and whom a secret understanding with the forces of life assures of what the patient wishes. He knows that he has the power of laughter if he wants to use it; he is sure of his victory, indeed, what is more, of his happiness. He knows that a single voice will rise up to hold back, but he knows he is stronger; he knows that for a moment longer one can make the men look serious, but he also knows that secretly they long to laugh with him; he knows that for a moment longer one can make the woman hold her fan before her eyes when he speaks, but he knows that she is laughing behind the fan; he knows that the fan is not absolutely opaque; he knows that one can write invisible writing on it; he knows that when a woman strikes at him with her fan, it is because she has understood him; he knows unerringly how laughter creeps in and dwells hidden in a person, and, once it has taken up residence, lies in wait. Let us imagine such an Aristophanes, such a Voltaire, a little altered; for he is also a sympathetic nature, he loves existence, he loves people, and he knows that even if the verdict of laughter might perhaps raise a young generation that is saved, a great many people in the present one would go to ruin. So he keeps silent, and as far as possible forgets even to laugh himself. But dare he keep silent? Perhaps there are some who do not understand at all the difficulty I am speaking of. They probably think it would be an admirable magnanimity to keep silent. That is not at all my opinion, for I think that any such nature, if he has not had the magnanimity to keep silent, is a traitor to existence. So I demand this magnanimity of him; but when he has it, dare he keep silent? Ethics is a dangerous science, and it is quite possible that Aristophanes, determined purely ethically, decided to let laughter judge the misguided age. Aesthetic magnanimity cannot help; for on that account one does not risk such a thing. If he is to keep silent, he must enter into the paradox.—I will hint at one more sketch: that someone, for example, possesses an explanation of a hero's life that explains it in a sorry way, and yet a whole generation rests absolutely secure in this hero without suspecting anything of the kind.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. Aristophanes (c. 446–386 BC), the Athenian comic playwright; Voltaire (1694–1778), the French writer and satirist.

yet taken a single step in that direction.[35] I think, too, that I could well offer them royal bond paper to write on, to set down all the great deal they have experienced in this respect—they would hardly write more than could fit in the front margin.

Only when Faust is bent inward into himself in this way, only then can doubt appear poetic; only then does he himself really discover all its sufferings in actuality too. He knows then that it is spirit that sustains existence, but he also knows that the security and joy in which people live are not grounded in the power of spirit but are easily explained as an unreflective bliss. As a doubter, as the doubter, he is [197] higher than all this, and if anyone tries to deceive him by making him believe he has gone through doubt, he easily sees through it; for whoever has made a movement in the world of spirit, and so an infinite movement, can tell at once from the lines spoken whether it is a man who has been tried who speaks, or a Münchhausen. What a Tamerlane can do with his Huns, Faust knows he can do with his doubt—frighten people into starting up in terror, make existence sway under their feet, scatter people apart, make the cry of anguish sound everywhere. And if he does it, he is still no Tamerlane; he is in a certain sense authorized, and has the authority of thought.[36] But Faust is a sympathetic nature; he loves existence, his soul knows no envy, he sees that he cannot stop the raging he could well arouse, he craves no Herostratic fame—he keeps silent, he hides the doubt in his soul more carefully than the girl who hides the fruit of a sinful love beneath her heart; he tries as best he can to keep in step with other people, but what goes on inside him he consumes within himself, and so he brings himself as a sacrifice for the universal.[37]

One sometimes hears people complain, when some eccentric head [198] stirs up the whirlwind of doubt; they say: if only he had

35 Faust: the scholar of legend who sells his soul to the devil, most famously treated in Goethe's *Faust* (Part One, 1808). "Sympathetic" in the older sense: feeling with others.

36 Baron Münchhausen, the teller of tall tales in Raspe's and Bürger's books; Tamerlane (Timur, 1336–1405), the Central Asian conqueror.

kept silent. Faust realizes this idea. Whoever has any notion of what it means for a human being to live by spirit also knows what the hunger of doubt means, and that the doubter hungers just as much for the daily bread of life as for the nourishment of spirit. Although all the pain Faust suffers might be a fairly good argument that it is not pride that has possessed him, I shall nevertheless use a little precaution, which I easily invent; for just as Gregory of Rimini was called tortor infantium [torturer of infants] because he held that little children were damned, so I could be tempted to call myself tortor heroum [torturer of heroes]; for I am very inventive when it comes to tormenting heroes. Faust sees Margarete, not after he has chosen pleasure; for my Faust does not choose pleasure at all. He sees Margarete not in Mephistopheles's concave mirror but in all her lovable innocence, and since his soul has kept its love for people, he can also very well fall in love with her.[38] But he is a doubter; his doubt has annihilated actuality for him; for my Faust is so ideal that he does not belong among those scholarly doubters who doubt for one hour each semester from the lectern, but can otherwise do everything else—just as they do that, too, without the aid of spirit or by virtue of spirit. He is a doubter, and the doubter hungers just as much for the daily bread of joy as for the food of spirit. Yet he stays true to his resolve and keeps silent, and speaks to no one of his doubt, nor to Margarete of his love.

It goes without saying that Faust is too ideal a figure to be content with the chatter that if he spoke he would set off a general discussion, or the whole thing would pass off without consequences, or perhaps, or perhaps. (Here, as any poet will easily see, lies the comic potential of the sketch, dormant: bringing Faust into an ironic relation to those low-comic buffoons who in our age run after doubt and produce an external argument that

37 Herostratus burned the temple of Artemis at Ephesus in 356 BC purely to make his name famous.

38 Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358), scholastic theologian who taught that unbaptized infants are damned. Margarete (Gretchen) is the girl Faust seduces in Goethe's play, where he first glimpses a woman's image in a magic mirror in the witch's kitchen.

they really have doubted, for example a doctor's certificate, or swear that they have doubted everything, or prove it by the fact that on their travels they met a doubter—those couriers and sprinters in the world of spirit who in the greatest haste pick up a little whiff of doubt from one person, of faith from another, and then wirtschaften [run the shop] as best they can, according to whether the congregation wants fine sand or coarse sand.) Faust is too ideal a figure to go about in slippers. Whoever does not have an infinite passion [199] is not ideal, and whoever has an infinite passion has long since saved his soul from such rubbish. He keeps silent in order to sacrifice himself—or he speaks in the awareness that he will throw everything into confusion.[39]

If he keeps silent, ethics condemns him; for it says: "You shall acknowledge the universal, and you acknowledge it precisely by speaking, and you may not have pity on the universal." One should not forget this consideration when one sometimes judges a doubter harshly for speaking. I am not inclined to judge such conduct leniently; but here as everywhere, what matters is that the movements are made properly. If it must go wrong, a doubter—even if by speaking he brought every possible misfortune on the world—is still far preferable to those miserable sweet-tooths who taste everything, who want to cure doubt without knowing it, and who are therefore generally the immediate occasion for doubt breaking out wild and uncontrollable.—If he speaks, he throws everything into confusion; for whether that does not happen he learns only afterward, and the outcome cannot help a person, either in the moment of action or with respect to responsibility.

If he keeps silent on his own responsibility, he may indeed act magnanimously, but to his other pain he will add a little spiritual trial; for the universal will constantly torment him and say: "You should have spoken—where will you find the certainty that

39 "Doubted everything": a jab at the Danish Hegelians' slogan *de omnibus dubitandum est*, "everything must be doubted." Sand, fine or coarse, was bought for strewing and scouring floors.

it was not, after all, a hidden pride that governed your decision?"

If, on the other hand, the doubter can become the single individual who as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute, then he can obtain an authorization for his silence. In that case he must make his doubt into guilt. In that case he is in the paradox; but in that case his doubt is healed, even though he may get another doubt.

Even the New Testament would acknowledge such a silence. There are even passages in the New Testament that commend irony, provided only that it is used to conceal the better. This movement, however, belongs as much to irony as to anything else that has its ground in subjectivity's being higher than actuality. Our age wants to know nothing of this; in general it wants to know no more about irony than what Hegel said—Hegel, who oddly enough did not understand much about it and bore it a grudge, which our age has good reasons not to give up, for it had better simply beware of irony.[40] It says in the Sermon on the Mount: "When you [200] fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that people may not see that you are fasting." This passage bears direct witness that subjectivity is incommensurable with actuality—indeed, that it has leave to deceive. If only the people who in our age go flapping about with loose talk of the idea of the congregation would read the New Testament, they might perhaps think differently.[41]

ABRAHAM'S SILENCE

Abraham speaks to no one, since what he must say cannot be understood.

But now Abraham—how did he act? For I have not forgotten, and the reader will now perhaps kindly recall, that it was in order to

40 Hegel attacked the Romantic irony of Schlegel and others; Kierkegaard's dissertation *The Concept of Irony* (1841) had taken issue with him.

41 Matthew 6:17–18. The "idea of the congregation" was a watchword of N. F. S. Grundtvig and his followers.

run up against this point that I entered into the whole preceding investigation—not as if Abraham would thereby become more understandable, but so that the incomprehensibility might become more desultory. For, as I said, Abraham I cannot understand; him I can only admire. It was also pointed out that none of the stages described contained an analogy to Abraham; they were developed only so that, while being shown within their own sphere, they might at the moment of the compass's deviation, as it were, point to the border of the unknown land.[42] Insofar as there could be any question of an analogy, it would have to be the paradox of sin; but that again lies in another sphere, cannot explain Abraham, and is itself far easier to explain than Abraham.

So Abraham did not speak. He did not speak to Sarah, not to Eliezer, not to Isaac; he passed over the three ethical authorities, for for Abraham the ethical had no higher expression than family life.

Aesthetics permitted, indeed required, silence of the single individual when by keeping silent he could save another. This alone shows sufficiently that Abraham does not lie within the scope of aesthetics. His silence is by no means meant to save Isaac; indeed, his whole task—to sacrifice Isaac for his own sake and for God's—is an offense to aesthetics, for aesthetics can well understand that I sacrifice myself, but not that I sacrifice another for my own sake. The aesthetic hero was silent. Ethics, however, judged him, because he was silent by virtue of his accidental particularity. It was his human foreknowledge that determined him to keep silent. This ethics cannot forgive; any such human knowledge is only an illusion. Ethics demands an infinite movement; it demands disclosure. So the aesthetic hero can speak, but will not.

201 The tragic hero proper sacrifices himself and all that is his for the universal; his deed, every stirring in him, belongs to the

42 "Desultory" keeps the Danish *desultorisk*, from the Latin *desultor*, a rider who leaps from horse to horse: the incomprehensibility shows up by leaps and contrasts.

universal; he is disclosed, and in this disclosure he is the beloved son of ethics. This does not fit Abraham: he does nothing for the universal, and he is hidden.

So now we stand at the paradox. Either the single individual as the single individual can stand in an absolute relation to the absolute, and then the ethical is not the highest; or Abraham is lost—he is neither a tragic hero nor an aesthetic hero.

In this respect it may again seem here that the paradox is the easiest and simplest thing of all. But I must repeat that whoever holds himself convinced of this is no knight of faith; for distress and anguish are the only justification conceivable, even if it cannot be conceived in general, for then the paradox is canceled.

Abraham keeps silent—but he *cannot* speak; therein lies the distress and the anguish. For if, when I speak, I cannot make myself understood, then I am not speaking, even if I talked without stopping night and day. This is Abraham's case. He can say everything; but one thing he cannot say, and yet when he cannot say it—that is, say it in such a way that another understands it—then he is not speaking. What brings relief in speech is that it translates me into the universal. Now Abraham can say the most beautiful things any language can muster about how he loves Isaac. But that is not what weighs on his mind; it is the deeper thing, that he means to sacrifice him because it is a trial. This last no one can understand, and so everyone can only misunderstand the first. This distress the tragic hero does not know. He has, first of all, the comfort that every counterargument has been given its due, that he has been able to give Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, Achilles, the chorus, every living being, every voice from the heart of humanity, every shrewd, every anxious, every accusing, every compassionate thought the opportunity to rise up against him. He can be sure that everything that could be said against him has been said, unsparingly, mercilessly—and to struggle against the whole world is a comfort, to struggle with oneself is terrible—; he need not fear having overlooked any-

thing, so that one day afterward he might perhaps cry out like King Edward IV on hearing the news of Clarence's murder:[43]

202 Wer bat für ihn? Wer kniet' in meinem Grimm
Zu Füßen mir und bat mich überlegen?
Wer sprach von Bruderpflicht? Wer sprach von Liebe[44].
[Who pleaded for him? Who, in my wrath, knelt
at my feet and bade me think again?
Who spoke of brotherly duty? Who spoke of love?]

The tragic hero does not know the terrible responsibility of solitude. Next, he has the comfort that he can weep and lament with Clytemnestra and Iphigenia—and tears and cries bring relief, but unutterable sighs torment. Agamemnon can quickly gather his soul in the certainty that he will act, and then he still has time to comfort and encourage. This Abraham cannot do.[45] When his heart is moved, when his words would hold a blessed comfort for the whole world, he dares not comfort; for would not Sarah, would not Eliezer, would not Isaac say to him: "Why do you want to do it, then? After all, you can refrain." And if in his distress he wanted to give vent to his feelings, to embrace everything dear to him before he proceeded to the final act, he might perhaps bring about the terrible result that Sarah, that Eliezer, that Isaac took offense at him and believed he was a hypocrite. Speak he cannot; he speaks no human language. Even if he himself understood all the tongues of the earth, even if his loved ones understood them too, still he cannot speak—he speaks in a divine tongue, he speaks in tongues.[46]

This distress I can well understand; I can admire Abraham; I have no fear that anyone will be tempted by this story to want, lightheartedly, to be the single individual. But I also confess that I do not have the courage for it, and that I would gladly renounce every prospect of getting further, if only it were pos-

43 Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Act 2, Scene 1, quoted in the German of the Schlegel–Tieck translation.
44 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. Cf. Act 2, Scene 1.
45 "Unutterable sighs" echoes Romans 8:26.
46 Speaking in tongues: Acts 2:4; 1 Corinthians 14.

sible that I should ever, however late, get that far. At any moment Abraham can break off; he can repent the whole thing as a spiritual trial; then he can speak, then everyone can understand him—but then he is no longer Abraham.

Abraham *cannot* speak, for the thing that explains everything he cannot say (i.e., so that it is understandable): that it is a trial—mind you, one in which the ethical is the temptation. Whoever is placed like this is an emigrant from the sphere of the universal. But the next thing he can say even [203] less. For Abraham, as was sufficiently developed earlier, makes two movements. He makes the infinite movement of resignation and gives up Isaac; this no one can understand, because it is a private undertaking. But next, at every moment, he makes the movement of faith. This is his comfort. For he says: Still, it will not happen—or if it does, then the Lord will give me a new Isaac, by virtue, that is, of the absurd. The tragic hero, at any rate, gets to the end of the story. Iphigenia bows to her father's decision; she herself makes the infinite movement of resignation, and now they understand each other. She can understand Agamemnon because his undertaking expresses the universal. If, on the other hand, Agamemnon were to say to her: "Although the god demands you as a sacrifice, it is still possible that he does not demand it—by virtue, that is, of the absurd," he would at that very moment become incomprehensible to Iphigenia. If he could say it by virtue of human calculation, then Iphigenia would surely understand him; but then it would follow that Agamemnon had not made the infinite movement of resignation, and then he is no hero, then the seer's pronouncement is a sailor's yarn and the whole event a vaudeville.[47]

ABRAHAM'S LAST WORD

Abraham's answer to Isaac says nothing untrue and yet says nothing.

So Abraham did not speak. Only one word of his is preserved, his only reply to Isaac, which also proves sufficiently that he had

not spoken before. Isaac asks Abraham where the lamb for the burnt offering is. "And Abraham said: God will see to the lamb for the burnt offering himself, my son!"[48]

This last word of Abraham's I shall consider here a little more closely. If this word were not there, the whole event would lack something; if it were different, everything might perhaps dissolve in confusion.

It has often been a subject of my reflection whether a tragic hero, whether he culminates in a suffering or in an action, ought to have a last line. As far as I can see, it depends on which sphere of life he belongs to, whether his life has intellectual significance, whether his suffering or action stands in relation to spirit.

It goes without saying that the tragic hero at his moment of culmination, like any other person who has not been deprived of speech, can say a few words, perhaps a few fitting words; but the question is whether it is fitting for him to say them. If the significance of his life lies in an [204] outward deed, then he has nothing to say; then everything he says is essentially chatter, by which he only weakens the impression he makes, whereas tragic ceremonial requires that he accomplish his task in silence, whether it consists in an action or in a suffering. So as not to go too far afield, I shall take only what lies closest at hand. If Agamemnon himself, and not Calchas, had had to draw the knife against Iphigenia, he would only have demeaned himself by wanting to say a few words at the last moment; for the significance of his deed was plain to all, the procedure of piety, compassion, feeling and tears was complete, and besides, his life had no relation to spirit, i.e., he was not a teacher or a witness of the spirit. If, on the other hand, the significance of a hero's life lies in the direction of spirit, then the lack of a last line would weaken the impression he makes. What he then has to say is not a few fitting words, a little piece of declamation; rather, the sig-

47 The seer is Calchas. Vaudeville, light comedy with songs, was the popular stage genre of 1840s Copenhagen.
48 Genesis 22:7–8.

nificance of his line is that he carries himself through to the end at the decisive moment. Such an intellectual tragic hero ought to have, and ought to keep, the last word. One demands of him the same transfigured bearing that befits every tragic hero, but then one demands one word more. So if such an intellectual tragic hero culminates in a suffering (in death), then in this last word he becomes immortal before he dies, whereas the ordinary tragic hero becomes immortal only after his death.

Socrates can serve as an example. He was an intellectual tragic hero. His death sentence is announced to him. At that moment he dies—for whoever does not understand that the whole power of the spirit is required in order to die, and that the hero always dies before he dies, will not get very far in his view of life. As a hero, Socrates is now required to rest calmly in himself; but as an intellectual tragic hero he is required to have, in this last moment, strength of spirit enough to carry himself through to the end. He cannot, then, like the ordinary tragic hero, concentrate on holding firm in the face of death; he must make this movement so quickly that at the same moment he is consciously beyond this struggle and asserts himself. Had Socrates, then, fallen silent in the crisis of death, he would have weakened the effect of his life and roused the suspicion that the elasticity of irony in him was not a world-power but a game, whose springiness at the decisive [205] moment had to be used on an inverted scale to hold him up with pathos[49].

What is briefly suggested here cannot, of course, be applied to Abraham insofar as one supposes that by some analogy one could work out a fitting word for Abraham to end with; but it

49 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. Which of Socrates' lines must be regarded as the decisive one is a matter on which opinions may differ, since Plato has in so many ways poetically volatilized Socrates. I propose the following: the death sentence is announced to him; in that same moment he dies; in that same moment he overcomes death and carries himself through to the end in the famous reply: that he was surprised to have been condemned by a majority of three votes. No idle, loose talk in the marketplace, no foolish remark from a fool could he have joked about more ironically than about the death sentence that condemns him out of life.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. Plato, *Apology* 36a; most modern editions of the Greek read thirty votes rather than three.

does apply insofar as one sees the necessity that Abraham at the last moment must carry himself through to the end—must not draw the knife in silence but have a word to say, since as the father of faith he has absolute significance in the direction of spirit. What he is to say I can form no idea of in advance; after he has said it I can indeed understand it, and in a certain sense understand Abraham in what is said, without thereby having come any closer to him than I have been in the preceding. Had no last line of Socrates' existed, I could have thought my way into him and formed one; had I not been able to do that, a poet could have managed it. But no poet reaches Abraham.

Before I go on to consider Abraham's last word more closely, I must first draw attention to the difficulty of Abraham's being able to say anything at all. The distress and anguish in the paradox lay, as developed above, precisely in the silence: Abraham cannot speak[50]. To that extent it is a self-contradiction to demand that he should speak, unless one wants him out of the paradox again, so that he [206] suspends it at the decisive moment, whereby he ceases to be Abraham and annuls all that went before. If, then, at the decisive moment Abraham were to say to Isaac: "It is you who are meant"—that would be only a weakness. For if he could speak at all, he would have had to speak long ago, and the weakness would then lie in his not having had the maturity and concentration of spirit to think through the whole pain in advance, but having pushed some of it away, so that the actual pain was something more than the pain he had thought. Besides, with such a speech he would fall out of the paradox; and if he really wanted to speak with Isaac, he would have to transform his situation into a spiritual trial, for otherwise he could say nothing at all; and if he does that, he is not even a tragic hero.

50 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. Insofar as there can be any talk of an analogy, the situation of Pythagoras at his death provides one; for the silence he had always maintained he had to carry through to his last moment, and therefore he *said*: "It is better to be killed than to speak." Cf. Diogenes, Book 8, § 39.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (3rd century AD), whose eighth book covers Pythagoras.

Nevertheless, a last word of Abraham's has been preserved, and insofar as I can understand the paradox, I can also understand Abraham's total presence in this word. First and foremost, he says nothing, and in this form he says what he has to say. His answer to Isaac has the form of irony, for it is always irony when I say something and yet do not say anything. Isaac asks Abraham on the assumption that Abraham knows. Now had Abraham answered, "I know nothing," he would have said an untruth. Say something he cannot, for what he knows he cannot say. So he answers: "God will see to the lamb for the burnt offering himself, my son!" Here one sees the double movement in Abraham's soul, as it was described in the preceding. Had Abraham merely resigned Isaac and done no more, then he has said an untruth; for he knows that God demands Isaac as a sacrifice, and he knows that he himself, at this very moment, is ready to sacrifice him. So at every moment, after making this movement, he has made the next one, the movement of faith by virtue of the absurd. To that extent he says no untruth; for by virtue of the absurd it is indeed possible that God could do something entirely different. So he says no untruth, but neither does he say anything; for he speaks in a foreign tongue. This becomes still more evident when we consider that it was Abraham himself who was to sacrifice Isaac. Had the task been different—had the Lord commanded Abraham to bring Isaac out onto Mount Moriah and then himself let his lightning strike Isaac and so take him as a sacrifice—then Abraham would in a straightforward sense have been right to speak as enigmatically as he does; for then he himself could not know what would happen. But [207] as the task is set for Abraham, he himself is to act; so at the decisive moment he must know what he himself will do, and so he must know that Isaac is to be sacrificed. If he has not known this definitely, then he has not made the infinite movement of resignation; then his word is indeed no untruth, but he is also very far from being Abraham—he is less significant than a tragic hero; indeed, he is an irresolute man who can decide on neither the one thing nor the other, and who for that reason will always

end up speaking in riddles. But such a hesitator is the very parody of the knight of faith.

Here again, then, it turns out that one can indeed understand Abraham, but only understand him in the way one understands the paradox. For my part, I can indeed understand Abraham, but I also grasp that I do not have the courage to speak like that, any more than I have the courage to act like Abraham; but I by no means say on that account that it is something slight, since on the contrary it is the one true marvel.

And what did its contemporaries judge of the tragic hero? That he was great, and they admired him. And that honorable assembly of the noble, the jury that every generation constitutes to judge the generation past, judged likewise. But Abraham there was no one who could understand. And yet what did he attain? That he remained true to his love. But whoever loves God needs no tears, no admiration; he forgets the suffering in the love—indeed, he has so completely forgotten it that afterward there would not be the slightest inkling of his pain, if God himself did not remember it; for he sees in secret, and knows the distress, and counts the tears, and forgets nothing.[51]

Either, then, there is a paradox, that the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute, or Abraham is lost.

51 "Sees in secret" echoes Matthew 6:4–6; "counts the tears," Psalm 56:8.

Epilogue

Epilog
Every generation must begin from the beginning; faith is the highest passion in a human being.

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[208] Once in Holland, when the price of spices had gone somewhat slack, the merchants had a few cargoes sunk in the sea to drive the price up. This was a pardonable, perhaps a necessary, deception. Is it something similar we need in the world of spirit? Are we so assured of having reached the highest that nothing else remains but piously to make ourselves believe we have not come that far, just so as to have something to fill the time with? Is it such a self-deception that the present generation needs? Is it to a virtuosity in this that it should be trained—or is it not rather sufficiently perfected already in the art of deceiving itself?[1] Or is what it needs not rather an honest earnestness that fearlessly and incorruptibly points to the tasks, an honest earnestness that lovingly guards the tasks, that does not frighten people into wanting to rush headlong at the highest, but keeps the tasks young and beautiful and lovely to look at and beckoning to all, and yet at the same time difficult and inspiring to the noble—for the noble nature is inspired only by the difficult? Whatever one generation learns from another, what is genuinely human no generation learns from a previous one. In this respect every generation begins primitively, has no other task than every previous generation, and gets no further—provided the previous one did not betray the task and deceive itself. This genuinely human

1 The Dutch East India Company was known for destroying surplus spices to keep prices high.

thing is passion, in which one generation also fully understands the other and understands itself. Thus no generation has learned from another to love; no generation begins at any other point than the beginning; no later generation has a shorter task than the preceding one; and if here one will not, like the preceding generations, [209] stop at loving but wants to go further, that is only idle and foolish talk.

But the highest passion in a human being is faith, and here no generation begins at any other point than the previous one; every generation begins from the beginning; the following generation gets no further than the previous one, provided that one was faithful to its task and did not leave it in the lurch. That this should be tiring is naturally something the generation cannot say, for the generation has the task and has nothing to do with the fact that the previous generation had the same task—unless the particular generation, or the individuals in it, presumptuously want to take the place that belongs only to the spirit that governs the world and has the patience not to grow tired. If the generation starts on anything like that, it has gone wrong, and no wonder, then, that the whole of existence seems wrong to it; for surely no one has found existence more wrong than the tailor who, according to the fairy tale, went up to heaven while still alive and viewed the world from that standpoint. As long as the generation concerns itself only with its task, which is the highest, it cannot grow tired; for the task is always enough for a human life.[2] When children on a holiday have already played through all the games before twelve o'clock and now say impatiently, "Can't anyone think up a new game?"—does this prove that these children are more developed and advanced than the children of their own or a past generation who could make the familiar games last the whole day? Or does it not rather prove that those first children lack what I would call the lovable earnestness that belongs to play?

Faith is the highest passion in a human being. There are perhaps many in every generation who do not even come to it, but

no one goes further. Whether there are also many in our age who do not discover it I do not decide; I dare appeal only to myself, who makes no secret that in his case it will be a long while, without on that account wishing to deceive himself or what is great by making it a trifle, a childhood illness one must wish to get over as soon as possible. But even for one who does not come as far as faith, life has tasks enough, and if he loves them honestly, his life will not be wasted either, even though it never becomes like the lives of those who sensed and grasped the highest. But whoever has come to faith (whether he be exceptionally gifted or [210] simple makes no difference) does not stop at faith; indeed, he would be indignant if anyone said so to him, just as the lover would be offended if one said he stopped at love; for, he would answer, I am by no means standing still, since my life is in it. Yet neither does he go further, to something else; for if he discovers that, then he has another explanation.

"One must go further; one must go further." This urge to go further is old in the world. The obscure Heraclitus, who deposited his thoughts in his writings and his writings in the temple of Diana (for his thoughts had been his armor in life, and so he hung it up in the deity's temple), the obscure Heraclitus said: "One cannot pass twice through the same river"[3]. The obscure Heraclitus had a disciple who did not stop there; he went further and added: "One cannot do it even once"[4]. Poor Heraclitus, to have such a disciple![5] By this improvement the Heraclitean pro-

2 The Grimms' tale "The Tailor in Heaven," in which a tailor, looking down from God's throne, flies into a rage at the injustice he sees on earth.

3 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. Και ποταμου ροῃ απεικαζων τα οντα λεγει ὡς δις ες τον αυτον ποταμον ουκ εμβαινης [And likening the things that are to the flow of a river, he says that you could not step twice into the same river]. Cf. Plato's Cratylus § 402. Ast, vol. 3, p. 158.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. Friedrich Ast's edition of Plato (1819–32).

4 KIERKEGAARD'S NOTE. Cf. Tennemann, Gesch. d. Philos. [History of Philosophy], vol. 1, p. 220.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann, *Geschichte der Philosophie* (1798–1819).

5 Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 500 BC), called "the Obscure"; the disciple is Cratylus, as reported by Aristotle.

position was improved into an Eleatic proposition that denies motion—and yet that disciple only wanted to be a disciple of Heraclitus who went further, not back to what Heraclitus had left behind.[6]

6 The Eleatics, Parmenides and Zeno, denied that motion is real; *Bevægelse* means both "motion" and "movement."