

“Seeing” is Believing: Narrative Visualization in Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling

Daniel W. Conway
Penn State University

1. Marc Bregman's excellent essay provides us with an example of what Johannes *de Silentio* claims to desire most of all: a way to understand Abraham. Johannes is the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling* [*Frygt og Bæven*], which was written in 1843 by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling* is widely credited with fostering a renaissance of interest in the *Aqedah*. Although largely confined to Christian traditions of philosophical and religious thought, this renaissance has also inspired scholars who situate their work well outside these traditions. Jewish thinkers as diverse as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida have acknowledged the profundity of their debts to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. As Levinas rhetorically asks, with particular reference to *Fear and Trembling*, “Can one still be a Jew without Kierkegaard?”^[i]

One explanation for the widespread influence of *Fear and Trembling*, or so I maintain, is that its critical engagement with Christianity is now believed to exceed the scope that traditionally has been accorded it. Although he was an unabashedly Christian philosopher, Kierkegaard also took issue with the dominant practices of nineteenth-century Northern European (Protestant) Christendom. It was his belief that the practice of Christianity had become dangerously estranged from the enabling passion that could (and should) inform a life dedicated to the emulation of Jesus Christ. Although his confrontation with Christendom never led him beyond the periphery of what he took to be basic Christian belief, some of his friends and enemies certainly believed otherwise. It may be the case, in fact, that his critique of Christian practice is actually more radical than he realized or intended it to be.

Kierkegaard's unquestioned placement within the Christian tradition of Western philosophy may therefore be more problematic than scholars usually allow. In addition to rousing contemporary Christians from their torpid lives of easy faith and comfortable morality, *Fear and Trembling* also challenges the very identity of Christianity as a faith-tradition sprouting from Jewish soil. Although Kierkegaard's critique of contemporary Christian practice cannot be said to emerge from a perspective that is recognizably Jewish,^[ii] *Fear and Trembling* is unusually (and perhaps unintentionally) evocative of the unfinished business that remains between Christians and Jews. The very notion that contemporary Christians would do well to revisit their thoughtless allegiances to Abraham suggests the presence of a significant blind spot or lacuna in the self-understanding of contemporary Christianity. In fact, the individual failure of Johannes *de silentio* to understand Abraham mirrors the systemic failure of Christianity to execute an honest reckoning of its debts to Judaism. In both cases, moreover, the lapse in question devolves from a willed ignorance of the Jewish influences at work within Christianity. The cultivated faithlessness of Johannes *de silentio* thus corresponds to the bad faith of contemporary Christians with respect to their Jewish heritage.

In what follows, I make use of Bregman's essay to forward a heterodox reading of *Fear and Trembling*. Central to this reading is my contention that Kierkegaard depicts the spiritual crisis of contemporary Christendom through his psychological sketch of Johannes *de silentio*. In particular, I wish to maintain, Kierkegaard portrays Johannes as a type of Christian who has been touched by faith, but who now lives in retreat from this unsettling encounter. As depicted by Kierkegaard, Johannes strikes a defensive posture of skepticism and recoil, by means of which he hopes to sequester himself (and others)

from any further encounters with faith. So although he promises to take seriously the terrifying faith of Abraham, Johannes actually arrives at a very familiar conclusion: We moderns cannot understand Abraham. As we shall see later on in greater detail, Johannes intends this ostensibly Kierkegaardian conclusion to discourage, rather than to enable, a leap into faith on the part of his readers.

Fear and Trembling thus essays a psychological profile of a modern Christian living in recoil from the supervening intensity of faith. In his recoil, Johannes is far more troubled, and far more interesting, than someone who has never been touched by faith. He thus appears in *Fear and Trembling* as a borderline psychological type. He is neither faithful nor faithless, neither ethical nor religious, neither dialectical nor lyrical. Had he not been touched by faith, he would presumably join his untroubled contemporaries in simply ignoring the paradox embodied by Abraham. Had he never stumbled into the gravitational pull of faith, he would not need now to deflect the force of its attraction. But Johannes cannot ignore Abraham. Although he retreats from the irresistible intensity of faith, he cannot withdraw completely. His recoil from faith removes him from the center of its intensity, but it does not return him to an original state of innocence or ignorance. The complexity of his meditation on Abraham thus arises in large part from his eccentric need to place himself somewhere in the vicinity of faith, so that he may derive from it the diminished intensity that he has determined is safe for him to experience.

Johannes's recoil thus accounts for the most surprising psychological aspect of *Fear and Trembling*. Despite urging his readers to aspire to the faith of Abraham, Johannes neither intends nor wishes nor hopes nor expects that they actually will do so. His exhortation to "go further" is not the means to the end of faith, as is commonly believed, but an end unto itself. The psychological economy of Johannes's meditation on Abraham is therefore startlingly conservative. He audaciously raises the idea of a precipitous leap into faith, by means of which one might perform a "teleological suspension of the ethical" and thereby distinguish oneself as a "knight of faith." But he does so only to pique the curiosity, quicken the pulse, and race the passions of his readers. The mere thought or mention of an absurd leap into faith is sufficiently titillating and enlivening for his purposes. The leap itself is more than anyone needs, and certainly more than he can endure.

2. Marc Bregman invites us to enter the spirit of the midrash and to revisit the *Aqedah* through the eyes of Abraham. On the face of it, this is an invitation that Johannes *de silentio* should be grateful both to receive and to accept, for he too wishes to appreciate first-hand the experience of Abraham. Johannes is furthermore no stranger to the general strategy of narrative visualization that Bregman recommends. Owing to the patronage of Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* is rife with allegorical and figural allusions to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Throughout the text of *Fear and Trembling*, in fact, Johannes indefatigably stalks the figure of Abraham, attempting to visualize the enigmatic patriarch from every possible angle and perspective. His coverage of Abraham is so comprehensive that many readers are tempted to accept his conclusion that we moderns simply cannot "see" Mt. Moriah through the eyes of Abraham.

In the famous "Attunement" section of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes introduces his readers to an aging, unnamed man (widely believed to be Johannes himself), who is preoccupied with the same verse of Scripture that Bregman takes as his point of departure (Gen. 22:4). Johannes says of the unnamed man that

His soul had but one wish, actually to see Abraham, and one longing, to have been witness to those events...He wanted to be there at that moment when Abraham raised his eyes and saw in the distance the mountain in Moriah, the moment he left the asses behind^[iii] and went on up the mountain alone with Isaac.^[iv]

The unnamed man has made a propitious choice of scriptural passages, and not only because he has selected the precise verse that Bregman recommends for our consideration. This scriptural passage also marks a dramatic threshold in the narrative of Abraham and Isaac. At this juncture in the narrative, as Abraham and Isaac begin their ascent of Mt. Moriah, readers of Scripture can continue to follow them only by means of narrative visualization. The stranding of the "unseeing" servants signifies the limit of all interpretations that favor the external perspective of the spectator, pilgrim, or voyeur.

Johannes not only identifies the unnamed man as a practitioner of narrative visualization, but also attests to the transformative power of this practice. He thus describes the man's virtual "journey[s] to the mountain in Moriah" as producing very real effects. These journeys inflict upon the man a "weariness" that causes him to "collapse" (48). If *anyone* could see through the eyes of Abraham, we are led to conclude, it would be the virtual traveler whom Johannes here describes. According to Johannes, however, even this unnamed man is unable to arrive at an adequate understanding of the patriarch. Although palpably realistic, his visualizations fail to yield the desired access to the interiority of Abraham. As Johannes explains (48), "Every time [the man] came home from a journey to the mountain in Moriah, he...clasped his hands, and said 'Yet no one was as great as Abraham; who is able to understand him?'"

This extract from the "Attunement" section of *Fear and Trembling* is undeniably complex. It nevertheless foreshadows the deflationary conclusion of Johannes's meditation on Abraham. Taking the unnamed traveler's experiences as representative of all human beings, Johannes pronounces Abraham unknowable by us. Although clearly impressed by the unnamed man's capacity for narrative visualization, Johannes also endeavors to illuminate the limitations of this practice. Narrative visualization can transport us to the foot of the mountain in the land of Moriah, into the vicinity of Abraham and Isaac, but it can take us no further. Try as we might, we simply cannot gain imaginative access to the interiority of Abraham. Despite his enthusiasm for the practice of narrative visualization, then, Johannes politely declines the invitation extended by Bregman. Whatever insights and epiphanies we stand to gain from the practice of narrative visualization, we will never "see" Mt. Moriah through the eyes of the patriarch.

3. Johannes has correctly identified Genesis 22:4-6 as marking a dramatic threshold in the biblical narrative. Abraham and Isaac continue their journey, while leaving behind their servants and ass. Bregman helps us to see that this dramatic threshold also marks a *spiritual* threshold in the evolving relationship between Abraham and Isaac. Whereas Johannes treats this threshold as closed barrier, impermeable to all but Abraham, Bregman presents it as an open portal, through which the faithful may realistically hope to pass by means of narrative visualization.

The midrash found in [Pirge de-Rabbi Eliezer](#) alludes to a "visual" bond between father and son that Christian commentators (including Johannes) are typically inclined to deny. As they approach Mt. Moriah, Abraham and Isaac "see" what their servants cannot. As [Bregman](#) explains, the servants see "nothing special," for their "vision is devoid of spiritual perception." They are consequently left behind as Abraham and Isaac continue their journey. The fact that the servants were held back on the basis of their relatively impoverished "vision" suggests that Isaac, too, might not have been allowed to proceed had he not shared his father's spiritual perception of what lay ahead. That Abraham and Isaac "went both of them together" may consequently advert to a spiritual (as well as a physical) "togetherness" (Gen. 22:8). Subsequent to crossing this spiritual threshold, moreover, Abraham and Isaac largely disappear from our sight. From this point forward, their experiences unfold in a new, more exclusive context, to which we are not allowed immediate access. To be sure, the biblical narrative allows us to continue to chart their journey. But it cannot grant us entry into the spiritual bond that now envelops them.

This threshold distinction thus implies the existence of two separate and unequal groups: those who have spiritual "vision" and those who only see. But inasmuch as these two groups occupy polar extremes on the continuum of faith, they are largely alien to the experiences of most readers of Scripture. Indeed, most of us properly belong neither with Abraham and Isaac nor with the servants and the ass. Most of us are neither transfigured by faith nor untouched by its supervening intensity. Most of us, that is, possess a capacity for spiritual perception that remains largely undeveloped. We cannot be party to the spiritual bond that unites Abraham and Isaac as they continue their journey on foot, but perhaps we can cross the spiritual threshold and follow them as closely as our capacity for spiritual perception will allow. Ironically, Johannes's stirring ultimatum—that we must either embrace the paradox of Abraham or disown our claim upon his legacy—misjudges its most likely recipients. Most of us are as yet unable to elect either of these options.

This distinction between types of perception is therefore important not only for identifying the polar extremes of faithfulness and faithlessness, but also for illuminating the middle ground that lies between them. It is with this middle ground, in fact, that both Kierkegaard and Bregman primarily concern themselves. Their common focus on the power of narrative visualization attests to their common interest in those readers who may yet come to possess the "sight" required to cross the spiritual threshold marked at Genesis 22:4-6. As we shall see, (at least) two audiences occupy this middle ground: the community of those who are open to a further encounter with faith and the community of those who are not. As we shall also see, these two communities do not necessarily coexist peaceably. In fact, this middle ground comprises a contested space.

Bregman targets the former audience. His invitation to engage in narrative visualization both addresses and constitutes a community that is bound together by a common capacity (or at least an openness) to "see" in the *Aqedah* what others do not. Members of this community do not boast a capacity for spiritual perception equal to that of Abraham and Isaac, but they are also not as spiritually obtuse as the servants who cannot "see" Mt. Moriah. Indeed, this community is characterized by the receptivity to faith that is presupposed by Bregman's invitation to engage in the practice of narrative visualization. By virtue of their receptivity, the members of this community share the common goals of "seeing" Mt. Moriah through the eyes of Abraham, crossing the spiritual threshold marked at Genesis 22: 4-6, and entering imperfectly into the spiritual bond that unites Abraham and Isaac. Those who accept Bregman's invitation may not come to a full understanding of the faith of Abraham, but they may reasonably expect to gain greater insight into the complex spiritual life of the patriarch. So although Abraham may in the end defy our best efforts to understand him, we need not resign ourselves to the vast spiritual distance that Johannes claims must separate us from the patriarch.

Bregman's invitation thus suggests an important criticism of the ethical universalism that plays such a prominent role in *Fear and Trembling*. "The ethical is the universal," Johannes repeatedly intones,^[v] thereby furnishing the theoretical basis for the claim that Abraham's closed-circuit relationship with his God countenances a transgression of the ethical law. As the midrash found in *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* suggests, however, what is universal (i.e., seen by all) establishes only a lowest common denominator of human experience. The ethical universal encompasses only what is literally seen, and it therefore misses (and so discounts) what is figuratively and imaginatively "seen." The ethical universal, Johannes explains, demands full disclosure and denounces those truths that only a select few can apprehend (109). The universal can therefore never serve as an effective medium for the full expression of the highest human aspirations, including the aspiration to a life of faith. To allow oneself to repose in the universal, enmeshed in its web of publicity, transparency, and communicability, is therefore to sacrifice what is potentially highest within human experience. It is to strand oneself at the threshold of spiritual development.

Whereas Bregman emphasizes the opportunities afforded us by narrative visualization, Kierkegaard emphasizes the difficulties we may experience in accepting—even in acknowledging—this invitation. As Kierkegaard well knows, some of us will be too fearful or skeptical to join Bregman and accept his invitation. Like the unnamed traveler in *Fear and Trembling*, others of us will misplace our own limitations behind the stipulated inscrutability of Abraham. Still others of us, Kierkegaard knows, will recoil so violently that we will need to treat the invitation as either misaddressed or illusory or even diabolical. One such person is Johannes *de silentio*. Johannes claims to wish to take seriously the faith of Abraham, but in fact he wants nothing more than to seal himself off from the monstrous intensity of this faith. He wishes to live in the vicinity of faith, and so to derive a diluted intensity from the overflow of its dispensation to others, but he wishes not to surrender himself to its thrall.

Johannes, too, occupies this contested middle ground. While it goes without saying that he does not belong among the faithful, it perhaps bears noting that he also does not belong among the faithless. Were he simply afflicted with spiritual “blindness,” he would presumably hold no stake in the contemporary relevance of faith. Like the stranded servants, he would be perfectly content to wait. He would not “see” the spiritual threshold at which he stands, and he would therefore feel no compulsion to depict it as an impermeable barrier. He would join his contemporaries in thoughtlessly proclaiming the greatness of Abraham. He would ignore without a second thought the virtual travels of the unnamed pilgrim. He might concern himself with commercial ventures, petty gossip, the grandeur of the almighty “system,” or the latest fashions imported from Paris, but he would not fear and tremble before the figure of Abraham.

Johannes has been touched by faith, but he has subsequently recoiled from this encounter. He resides among the faithless, but, as he repeatedly observes, he is not one of them. [\[vi\]](#) His faithlessness is a cultivated, willed response to his terrifying brush with faith. It is only because he knows and fears the intensity of faith that he declares the faith of Abraham impossible to comprehend. That is, he does not arrive at this conclusion as a result of a sincere (but failed) campaign to understand the patriarch; nor does he pronounce Abraham ineffable because he wishes to clear sufficient room to hazard a leap into faith. Rather, he nudges Abraham beyond the orbit of human understanding because he needs to protect himself (and perhaps others) from the possible effects of a sincere attempt to understand the patriarch. He consequently deems Abraham a monstrosity, unavailable to us for emulation and imitation.

Johannes thus addresses himself to the latter community—to those who fear a first or further encounter with faith. His gift to them is his magisterial account of the paradox of Abraham, which reinforces their own personal mythologies of limitation and stasis. On the one hand, he demonstrates to them that the paradox of Abraham merits further scrutiny. On the other hand, he assures them that this scrutiny will not lead them beyond the comfortable environs of the ethical sphere. Like the unnamed traveler, they are free to visualize Abraham's journey from a distance, and they are encouraged to blame Abraham (rather than themselves) for their failure to “go further.” They will be nothing more than tourists to Mt. Moriah, voyeurs of faith, but they will cherish the memories of their journey, secure in their assurance from Johannes that they could have done no more. Johannes may complain about the easy, dispassionate existence of his faithless contemporaries, but he wishes in the end only to unsettle them a bit. In no event does he mean for them to undertake a serious quest for the faith of Abraham.

4. Bregman's emphasis on spiritual perception thus helps us to divine the ulterior motives at work in Johannes's meditation on Abraham. If faith can be understood in terms of an enhanced capacity for spiritual perception, then any credible attempt to “see” Mt. Moriah through Abraham's eyes would itself presuppose a baseline endowment of faith. In order to advance in his avowed quest to understand Abraham, that is, Johannes would first need to possess or acquire the requisite faith to “go further.” That he does not

press forward in his quest thus indicates that he lacks the faith needed to proceed. Like the spiritually impoverished servants stranded by Abraham and Isaac, Johannes has been left behind in the quest for Mt. Moriah. He is a casualty of his own faithlessness. Unlike the stranded servants, however, Johannes is left behind of his own volition. *His* faithlessness is willed, cultivated, and self-imposed. Above all else, he wishes *not* to receive the faith that would enable him to “see” through the eyes of Abraham.

In order to validate his recoil from a disquieting encounter with faith, Johannes presents Abraham as incomprehensible to us. He does so, however, by means of a unique strategy, which deviates dramatically from the more familiar critical interpretations of Abraham. Instead of denouncing the patriarch and/or his faith, Johannes extols the “greatness” of Abraham and composes a “dialectical lyric” in his honor. He “attunes” himself to Abraham by recounting a series of alternative endings to the story of the *Aqedah*, by means of which he registers his sympathy for any “knight of faith” who must remain unknown to those whom he loves. Later on, he charitably associates Abraham with gentler knights of faith (e.g., the serene tax collector, the humble shopman), who, oddly enough, are never called upon to perform anything resembling a “teleological suspension of the ethical.” In short, Johannes depicts Abraham as a misunderstood and surprisingly sympathetic figure, who is tragically estranged from his loved ones by virtue of his unique religious obligation.

But Johannes's praise of Abraham is distinctly double-edged. While claiming to give Abraham his due, Johannes also removes the patriarch to the outermost horizon of human experience. Abraham is human, to be sure, but barely so, and barely recognizably so. He is all-but-radically other. As we have seen, Johannes sympathetically invests the patriarch with an interiority textured by feelings of loneliness, misunderstanding, and loss.^[vii] But he leaves utterly opaque the feelings of joy, triumph, affirmation, and wonder that presumably accompanied Abraham's suffusion of faith. So although Johannes has succeeded, as promised, in shedding a new, more human light on the patriarch, he has done so in such a way that actually reinforces the standard reception of the faith of Abraham. Aside from the vulnerabilities arising from his unique relationship with God, Abraham remains virtually unintelligible to us.

As revealed by Johannes, Abraham's humanity resides on or very near the surface of his interiority. The depth of his being, including the faith that makes him “great,” is simply not available to us.^[viii] As such, the figure of Abraham marks the natural limit of the practice of narrative visualization, permanently fixed at the boundary of our sphere of sympathetic identification. The consequences of this interpretive presumption are enormous. If Abraham remains mysterious and unapproachable, then he cannot serve as a viable figure for imitation and emulation. Through no particular fault of our own, Johannes concludes, we cannot “see” Mt. Moriah through Abraham's eyes. This complex portrait of Abraham thus serves to confirm the *singularity* of his faith, which in turn frees Johannes and his readers from any obligation to aspire to its terrifying intensity. In this light, the choice to emulate Abraham appears as not really ours to elect or decline. He is an anomaly, a mythic favorite chosen by an inscrutable deity. We cannot reasonably strive to be like him.

Johannes thus renders what appears to be a sympathetic portrait of Abraham, while effectively removing him from serious, sustained consideration. Like all knights of faith, Abraham is portrayed as tragically isolated from all other human beings, and especially from those with whom he most fervently desires connection. He cannot communicate to anyone else the content (or “teleological” justification) of his “absolute relation to the Absolute.” He is therefore not entirely unlike those anomic readers whom Johannes is most likely to reach. But our sympathies can be stretched only so far. Abraham is estranged from his loved ones, after all, because he endeavored to execute a “teleological suspension of the ethical.” As depicted by Johannes, in fact, Abraham has no

more valid claim on our moral sympathies than any other misguided, blindly obedient killer.

Like Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, Johannes thus dispenses a kind of noble lie, which is meant to protect his readers from further disruption and disappointment. In the case of Johannes, the lie in question involves his depiction of the spiritual threshold as an impermeable (and therefore prophylactic) barrier. It was presented as a spiritual threshold *only* to Abraham, who, Johannes assures us, was an anomaly among humans. For the rest of us, it marks a spiritual limit, beyond which we cannot venture. Under Johannes's guidance, consequently, we may approach this barrier without fear of being called, like Abraham, to faith. We are thereby enlivened to a degree that enables us to challenge—but not transgress—the limits of the ethical sphere of existence. Our passions are excited, but they do not overwhelm us. We go just a little bit further, and Johannes assures us that we have gone far enough.

Like the Grand Inquisitor, moreover, Johannes hides his own need for self-protection behind his apparent wish to protect others. Whatever his actual relation to his readers may be, he needs above all else to defer any further encounter with faith. Toward this end, he busies himself with the noble task of enticing his contemporaries to a life of greater passion. This task places him nearby, but not within, the center of faith. It may even be the case, in fact, that Johannes, like the Grand Inquisitor, denies the power of faith *in order* to summon the reclusive divinity. In some twisted way, that is, he may actually be daring the God of Abraham to prove to him that the faith of Abraham is not irrelevant.

5. This distinction between the two communities that occupy the middle ground suggests a distinction between two corresponding approaches to the practice of narrative visualization. The approach favored by the spiritually open may be called *midrashic visualization*, whereas the approach taken by the spiritually closed may be called *satanic visualization*. Practitioners of the former approach believe that it can escort us across the spiritual threshold marked at *Genesis* 22: 4-6; practitioners of the latter approach believe that it must acknowledge (and respect) this "threshold" as a spiritual limit or barrier. Although Bregman neither draws this distinction nor employs its terminology, I believe that his essay supports the use of both.

As Bregman reminds us, Satan is popularly depicted as proficient in a similar practice of narrative visualization. In particular, Satan is well known as an expert manipulator of visual forms and data—pictures, representations, semblances, appearances, disguises, aspects, persona, and so on. He is alleged to be able to fashion illusions that prey upon the distinctive weaknesses and vulnerabilities of particular human beings. He often tells the literal truth, but only after first assuming a guise through which the dissemination of this truth becomes uniquely destructive to its hearer. (For example, it is not what Satan says that kills Sarah, but his credible impersonation of Isaac. That her son appeared to deliver this particular report is what proved fatal to her.) Indeed, satanic visualization is seductive precisely insofar as it falsely presents the literal truth. This means, as we shall see, that literal truth is not sufficient to secure the full truth of a complex communication. Satan's diabolical genius thus attests to the importance of the contexts in which truths and untruths are dispensed. Just as Abraham's appeal to divine providence (*Gen.* 22:8) was true despite sounding incomplete and manipulative to us, so Satan's illusions and impersonations are false despite the literal truth of the claims they advance. The full truth pertains not only to what is said, but also to how it is said, by whom, to whom, and at what particular time and place.

Both practices of narrative visualization involve "painting with words," as Bregman puts it. As we have seen, Satan bedevils Sarah not by tempting her with a parallel world or a disjoint set of experiences, but by strategically inhabiting the familiar routines of her

family life. He slays her not with dazzling lies and false promises, but with a foreign truth artfully placed in the mouth of her only son. As this example indicates, the two practices should not be understood as mutually antagonistic or antipodal. Satanic visualization differs from, but does not oppose, midrashic visualization; the former practice, we might say, is parasitic upon the latter. As in many cases of apparent parasitism, however, it is not always clear which party is host and which is parasite. Indeed, some cases of apparent parasitism are more accurately classified as instances of symbiosis.

What, then, is the basis for the proposed distinction between the practices of satanic and midrashic visualization? As we have seen, both practices are said to take their bearings from the inspiration of Scripture. But is this entirely true? Here the case of Johannes *de silentio* is particularly apposite. Johannes's narrative visualizations of Abraham, unlike those crafted for us by Marc Bregman, are not rooted in the sacred text of Scripture. Johannes instead takes his bearings from the *story* of Abraham and Isaac, a story domesticated and diluted by thousands of years of Gentile appropriation. As a consequence, his practice of narrative visualization proceeds independent of invitation and without (adequate) precedent and context. Whereas midrashic visualization attunes itself to sacred Scripture and the commentary it has inspired, Johannes is obliged to attune his meditation on Abraham either to itself, which is paradoxical, or to the fable that the story of Abraham and Isaac has become for contemporary Christians. It should come as no surprise, then, that his "attunement" sounds out of tune, jangling the sensibilities of those who wish to take seriously his "dialectical lyric."

As Satan has demonstrated, the practice of narrative visualization can begin virtually anywhere. No starting point, whether it be found in a community or tradition of interpretation, is any better (or worse) than any other. But if narrative visualization begins *just* anywhere, then it is likely to essay a justification of the limits of the narrator in question. Satanic visualization pretends to move forward, to "go further," but it in fact culminates in the conclusion that we neither can nor should go any further. Satanic visualization thus invariably delivers an apology for the *status quo*. In the particular case of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes *de silentio* encourages his readers to project their limitations onto Abraham. We cannot understand Abraham *because* he is not to be understood. If the patriarch defies all attempts at human comprehension, then Johannes and his readers need not examine any weaknesses, hesitations, doubts, and fears of their own, which might also contribute to their failure thus far to "go further." If the faith of Abraham is simply inaccessible, then Johannes and his readers may actually congratulate themselves for attaining the passional heights expressed in their pilgrimage to Mt. Moriah. So although Johannes's provocations may appear to challenge the *status quo*, they actually succeed in reinforcing its claims upon us.

In fact, then, practitioners of satanic visualization do not accept the invitation of Scripture. They only pretend to do so, and their pretense serves to advance their campaign to discredit altogether the validity—indeed, the reality—of this invitation. In the end, Johannes teaches, there is no such invitation for us to accept or decline. To be sure, we may still engage in narrative visualization, as he does throughout *Fear and Trembling*. But we must do so only on the basis of our own needs and resources. We are effectively and permanently on our own with respect to matters of faith. Any perception of the promise of additional resources is mistaken. Practitioners of satanic visualization thus endeavor to expose the invitation of Scripture as empty or hollow. Invited or not, we must rely exclusively on ourselves and proceed by our own lights.

For his own part, Johannes recounts that the unnamed traveler "was no learned exegete, he knew no Hebrew; had he known Hebrew then perhaps it might have been easy for him to understand the story of Abraham" (44). This observation conveys a curious blend of resignation and contempt. After all, the unnamed traveler might very well have set his sights on learning Hebrew, especially if, as we are told, doing so would have furthered his understanding of Abraham. Instead, however, he spends his time and energy

reprising his failed pilgrimage to Mt. Moriah. He insists upon conducting these imaginative journeys on his own terms, despite his repeated failures and his avowed awareness of another option available to him. His sneer at the prospect of learning Hebrew thus suggests that understanding Abraham is not his goal after all, but merely a pretext. His genuine goal is simply to experience the transient surge of vitality that his imaginary journeys afford him. To understand Abraham and "see" Mt. Moriah through his eyes are more than the unnamed traveler believes he can bear.

As presented by Bregman, midrashic visualization begins in a posture of openness to faith. Its practitioners may not yet possess faith, but they have opened themselves to the possibility of an(other) encounter with the supervening intensity of faith. This cultivated vulnerability—both to the intensity of faith and to the possibility that one will not receive its summons—in turn enables an enhanced capacity for responsiveness. Alternately, satanic visualization begins in a posture of recoil from faith. It assumes from the outset that an openness to faith would be dangerous and perhaps deadly. It consequently prizes neither vulnerability nor responsiveness. One is happily on one's own, dependent only upon one's own resources. The practitioners of satanic visualization consequently address their narratives not to the innocently faithless, who have never encountered faith, but to those who, like themselves, have been touched by faith and fear the effects of a recurrence. In particular, satanic visualizations are addressed to those who have responded to a prior encounter with faith by limiting to some extent their openness to further encounters.

The effect of satanic visualization is to seal off the faithless from any further encounters with faith. Practitioners of satanic visualization achieve this effect by infecting the faithless with a fortified capacity for self-limitation. The faithless will subsequently respond to any further encounter with faith by recoiling, automatically and pre-reflectively, from its intensity. In doing so, they will characteristically rehearse their personal mythologies of self-limitation, which the purveyors of satanic visualization have craftily reinforced. That the practitioners of satanic visualization achieve this effect unwittingly, perhaps even with the best of intentions, contributes significantly to the seductive power of their narratives. *Fear and Trembling* is complex in large part because Johannes *de silentio* sincerely believes that he has treated the faith of Abraham with the utmost seriousness. He may be entirely unaware of any ulterior motives at work in the composition and performance of his "dialectical lyric."

The practice of satanic visualization is therefore discernible by virtue of its self-limiting structure. It authorizes flights of the imagination, but only on the antecedent condition that these flights fall just short of the orbit of faith. That these flights of imagination end prematurely—and, as in the case of the unnamed pilgrim, tantalizingly close to their avowed destinations—should not surprise us. Unbeknownst to himself, the unnamed pilgrim formulated his "final wish" and "final longing" only under the self-limiting condition that they would never be satisfied. What may have appeared to be a genuine attempt to understand Abraham is thus revealed to be nothing more than a staged and carefully scripted pilgrimage; the unnamed traveler was never in any danger of "seeing" Mt. Moriah through the eyes of Abraham. The daring and peril of his journeys, from which he derived an enlivening surge of passion, were largely illusory.

Bregman's essay thus helps us to see that Johannes, despite his unquestioned talent for narrative visualization, does not deliver a midrashic commentary. He conducts his meditation on Abraham at a considerable (and safe) remove from the inspiration of Scripture. He is neither open to an encounter with faith, nor vulnerable to its touch, nor responsive to its call. More precisely, then, he takes his bearings from a book that he and his Christian contemporaries have learned to call "sacred," even though they have no first-hand, lived experience of its holiness. (Nor, as we have seen, do they sincerely wish to gain any such experience.) Having misplaced the sacred source of the story of Abraham and Isaac, Johannes and his contemporaries drift faithlessly through the

interpretive fog that has since accumulated around it. Even more disturbing than his cultivated faithlessness is his determination to present his faithlessness as an irrevocable ingredient of the human condition. Like the unnamed pilgrim whose case he takes up, Johannes does not particularize his limitations and conclude, simply, that *he* cannot understand Abraham. He instead generalizes from his failures, pronouncing the faith of Abraham unavailable to all modern mortals.

Kierkegaard, it would seem, has consigned his troubled pseudonym to the black arts of satanic visualization. His reason for doing so, or so I maintain, is to deliver a fully developed psychological profile of a type of Christian who cultivates faithlessness through the construction of a self-limiting mythology. Johannes has been touched by faith but now lives in recoil from this disquieting encounter. He consequently devotes his considerable talents to the fashioning of a defensive, self-protective narrative, which will effectively seal him off from further encounters with faith.

6. The spiritual poverty of Johannes's narrative visualizations is both disappointing and surprising. It was Johannes, after all, who urged us to return afresh to the story of Abraham and Isaac. It was Johannes who challenged us to confront the faith of Abraham as a problem for, and perhaps as an indictment of, our modern commitment to the primacy of the ethical sphere of existence. It was Johannes, in fact, who issued the provocation to consider the merit of a developmental reading of the *Aqedah*.

A great deal rests here on what it would mean to "learn how to be horrified at the monstrous paradox" embodied by Abraham. If this means, as Johannes indicates, that we must regard Abraham as a monstrosity, unknowable by modern mortals, then perhaps neither of these options is viable. Both would place the patriarch at an unacceptable distance from the living center of our religious and ethical concerns. In any event, neither of these options is optimal for those of us who wish to acknowledge Abraham's *constructive* role in the religious and ethical traditions that we have inherited. While it is easy enough to memorialize Abraham as a negative exemplar, and thereby honor the "monstrous paradox" that he embodies, it is more difficult to remember him as we in fact prefer to speak of him—as our patriarch, as the "father" of our faith.

If, however, "learn[ing] how to be horrified" involves refining our depiction of Abraham, isolating and confining the "monstrous paradox" that he embodies, then perhaps this (former) option is viable after all. Along these lines, a promising response to Johannes's provocation would be to focus our attention on the *development* of Abraham over the course of his journey to Mount Moriah. The Abraham whose "monstrous paradox" horrifies us need not be the Abraham who descends Mt. Moriah and returns home with Isaac. In particular, the Abraham who draws his lethal knife may not be the same Abraham who unbinds his son and aborts the intended sacrifice.

But Johannes does not explore the interpretive routes that his provocation opens up to us. Despite pointing us toward a developmental reading of the *Aqedah*, in which we might "see" both Abraham and Isaac grow in their enveloping bond of faith, Johannes clings instead to a static interpretation of the biblical narrative. To "see" Mt. Moriah as Bregman recommends would require Johannes to "go further," to aspire to a faith greater than his own—perhaps even to the faith of Abraham. And this he is not prepared to do. He needs to view Abraham as an unchanging, monstrous figure. Although he readily—and disarmingly—admits to his lack of courage (143),^[ix] his cowardice runs far deeper than he suspects.

Where Johannes falters, however, Bregman succeeds. His midrashic approach to narrative visualization enables us to "see" Abraham grow and mature—not only as he journeys to Mt. Moriah, but also as he reaches its sacrificial summit. This is why the Figures reproduced by Bregman ([Fig. 1](#), [Fig. 2](#), [Fig. 3](#), [Fig. 4](#)) are so important to the

elaboration of a developmental reading of the *Aqedah*. They all depict the ram as gregarious, which implies a relationship of reciprocal responsiveness between humans and animals. In fact, the ram's solicitations bespeak its ethical (or quasi-ethical) status, to which Abraham is seen to respond. These Figures also depict the earthly resources available to Abraham, including the ram, as sufficient to provide for an appropriate response to the dilemma he faces. These Figures thus confirm that Abraham was not the crazed, faith-blinded zealot that Johannes and others would have us fear. On the contrary, they depict Abraham as both attuned and responsive to other beings. As we shall see, his capacity for response is indispensable to his spiritual development.^[x]

Whether or not the ram actually *volunteered* to be sacrificed in place of Isaac, as [Bregman muses](#), remains to be seen. What *does* seem clear is that the ram's persistent tug at the hem of Abraham's garment prompted him to re-orient and re-direct his "vision." Whatever its intent, that is, the ram succeeded in diverting Abraham's attention from the heavenly realm to the earthly realm. As his gaze swept earthward, his "vision" was perfected. Rather than continue to rely exclusively on divine commands and the mixed messages they can convey, Abraham came to trust his own "vision" and the rich fund of spiritual resources it enabled him to behold.

As these Figures suggest, Abraham responded to the angel not from a sense of strict duty or blind obedience, but from an independent assessment of the justice and wisdom of the angel's admonition. In response to the ram's gregarious greeting, that is, Abraham learned to become ethical. He became able to recognize *for himself* the priority of the second of the two divine commands.^[xi] So it is not simply the case that Abraham received spiritual guidance at the sacrificial summit of Mt. Moriah. The spiritual guidance he received also contributed to the completion of his development, by means of which he gained his independence from the constraint of divine commands.

[Figure 2](#) is especially helpful in establishing Abraham's newly emergent independence from the unconditional authority of divine commands. This Figure represents the angel by means of a floating, disembodied hand, which points to, but does not touch, Abraham's outstretched hand. [Figure 2](#) thus presents a visual depiction of the angel's voice, but it does not place the angel in the earthly realm. The space separating the two outstretched hands thus preserves the distance that separates the heavenly and earthly realms. This distance in turn signifies the freedom of Abraham to heed or ignore the angel's message. (By way of contrast, Rembrandt's famous painting, "Sacrifice of Isaac," depicts the angel as unmistakably emplaced in the earthly realm and as forcibly wresting the knife from Abraham's hand.) [Figure 2](#) thus depicts Abraham as influenced by, but ultimately independent from, the angel's admonition. The decision to abort the sacrifice of Isaac is Abraham's to make. He is neither the plaything of a divine puppeteer nor the blindly obedient executor of divine commands.

Abraham's spiritual maturation neither negates nor diminishes the commands that issue from his God. Rather, Abraham's spiritual development furnishes the context in which these commands become distinguishable from the non-negotiable demands of a jealous, controlling deity. Only as a spiritually evolved being does Abraham grow into the freedom that his covenant with his God both delivers and presupposes. In this light, Mt. Moriah appears as the place where Abraham finally overcame his lingering dependence on divine commands and learned to trust his own capacity for spiritual perception.^[xii]

^[i] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 6.

[ii] Bruce H. Kirmmse ("Kierkegaard, Jews, and Judaism," *Kierkegaardiana* 17 [1994], 83-97) has hypothesized that "Kierkegaard was intrigued with the theme of the Wandering Jew, fearing that he himself embodied this figure" (84). Kirmmse also reveals the extent of Kierkegaard's reliance on "the antisemitic rhetoric of medieval Christendom" in his attack on "the comfortable Christendom of his own time" (93).

[iii] Like many interpreters, Johannes deviates from the text of Scripture by alluding to a single servant (Eliezer) and a plurality of asses. The scriptural passage mentions two servants and only one ass (Genesis 22:3).

[iv] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. A. Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 44, emphasis added. Unless otherwise noted, my practice throughout this essay is to cite from the text of the Hannay translation; future citations will appear in the body of the essay.

[v] All three Problemata in *Fear and Trembling* begin with the assertion that "the ethical is the universal." Each of the Problemata offers an (apparently) minor qualification of this assertion before proceeding to address the question posed at its head.

[vi] The Preface to *Fear and Trembling* is designed primarily to establish the (spiritual) distance that ostensibly separates Johannes from the rest of his lamentable "age" and "generation." Johannes politely (and unconvincingly) dismisses his own credentials as an author, while gently ridiculing those Danes for whom he simultaneously does and does not write. Johannes insists that he is "no philosopher" (42), but simply "a freelancer who neither writes the system nor makes any promises about it" (43). He consequently "writes because for him doing so is a luxury, the more agreeable and conspicuous the fewer who buy and read what he writes" (43).

[vii] The four variations included in the "Attunement" portray Abraham as mercifully self-sacrificial; as broken and aged by his ordeal; as returning to Mt. Moriah to beg God's forgiveness for having been willing to sacrifice Isaac; and as visibly anguished before drawing the knife.

[viii] Hence the importance of Johannes's decision to focus on the *Aqedah*, and to ignore, for the most part, the larger history of Abraham. The interpretation of Abraham as minimally human, as all-but-radically other, can be maintained only if one fails to attend to the story of Abraham's life.

[ix] I am persuaded by Derrida that Johannes's confession of his cowardice is further complicated (and perhaps compromised) by the concluding paragraph of Problema III, in which Johannes "reinscrib[es] the secret of Abraham within a space that seems, in its literality at least, to be evangelical." See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 80-81.

[x] My Levinasian account of the spiritual development (and moral awakening) of Abraham is heavily indebted to Claire Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebekah* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

[xi] Taking issue with Kierkegaard on this point, Levinas ("A Propos of 'Kierkegaard vivant'," in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996], 75-79) thus remarks:

In his evocation of Abraham, [Kierkegaard] describes the encounter with God at the point where subjectivity rises to the level of the religious, that is to say, above ethics. But one could think the opposite: Abraham's attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point in the

drama. That he obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice—that is the essential [point] (77).

Levinas's insight here is crucial to my articulation of a developmental reading of the *Aqedah*. What he calls the "opposite" interpretation, moreover, strikes me as the interpretation that *Fear and Trembling* actually supports. The interpretation that Levinas here wishes to oppose belongs not to Kierkegaard himself, but to Johannes *de silentio*. For an intriguing development of Levinas's interpretation, see Katz, *op. cit.*

[xii] I would like to thank Claire Katz, Martin Kavka, and Steve Kepnes for their instructive comments on an earlier draft of this essay. I am also grateful to John Lippitt and Ed Mooney, both of whom have contributed enormously to my understanding of *Fear and Trembling*.