

# “The Peak on Which Abraham Stands”: The Pregnant Moment of Søren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*

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When Søren Kierkegaard in the 1840s began his one-man crusade against the predominant philosophy of his time and place—the right Hegelianism that was en vogue among his contemporaries in Copenhagen—he chose his weapons with great circumspection. The indirect form of communication, which he later advocated in more direct terms in his “Point of View,”<sup>1</sup> was not only a maieutic means that helped the reader conceive of the latent and strictly private messages of the texts; it was also a strategy for Kierkegaard’s undercover assaults on the Hegelian turn of the *Geistesleben* around him. By interweaving many of the Hegelian platitudes and self-confident pronouncements that circulated in the intellectual life of the day into the pseudonymous writings, Kierkegaard contested them with parody rather than argumentation. This is the local background against which these texts are structured and to which they are addressed in multiple and very subtle ways. That also goes for that of the pseudonymous writings which has become the best known but which may also be regarded as the most private and most secretive of them all, *Fear and Trembling*, published pseudonymously in 1843.

Secrecy, silence, and unspeakable messages are abundantly thematized in *Fear and Trembling*, as one could expect from the name of the narrator, Johannes de *Silentio*. *Silentio* is a prominent member of the choir of pseudonymous figures Kierkegaard invented to communicate indirectly with his audience and in

<sup>1</sup> Where nothing else is indicated, translations are my own. See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View on my Work as an Author*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, 1998).

the name of which he published his most celebrated works. The silence that Silentio speaks of is that of Abraham of the Old Testament, who was commanded by God to sacrifice his only son on Mount Moriah. Although Genesis 22 includes fragments of the dialogue between Abraham and Isaac on their way to the mountain, Silentio insists that Abraham remained silent on the essential issue: the command he acts upon. The unmediated message Abraham had received from God could not be conveyed, and he was therefore barred from communication and bereft of his community as he journeyed to the Mountain. Yet Silentio's discourse upon this silence in *Fear and Trembling* has given impetus to innumerable pages of commentary. The questions and answers he poses in his reflections upon Abraham's ordeal have called for critical attention and controversy since the time of its publication. His obsession with the biblical narrative certainly seems to have been passed on to many readers of *Fear and Trembling*, which, a recent commentator has remarked, "continues to haunt us like no other of [Kierkegaard's] writings."<sup>2</sup> So far, it would seem, then, that Kierkegaard was right when he predicted, in an undated journal entry, that "*Fear and Trembling* will be enough to immortalise my name." It has indeed been "read and translated into foreign languages," as he foresaw it would.<sup>3</sup>

Even so, what has passed unnoticed in its long history of reception is the significance of the titles that the manuscript text bore before it came to be called *Fear and Trembling*. On the title page the definitive appellation is placed together with two alternatives with less suggestion of pathos: "Movements and Postures" (*Bevægelser og Stillinger*) and "Between-each-other" (*Mellemhverandre*).<sup>4</sup> Not much can be discerned from these unpeculiar phrases in isolation. However, tracing their history and significance through Kierkegaard's writings and beyond, will make it clear that *Fear and Trembling* was also dispatched to the narrow Hegelian community in Copenhagen for the purpose of questioning their literary and visual aesthetics and philosophy of history. Into the guerrilla warfare against them *Fear and Trembling* introduces a weapon of such sophistication that it has remained undetected so far: the power of the "pregnant moment." My aim here will be to demonstrate the way in which *Fear and Trembling* appropriates a principle of selection intended for the visual arts by the German aesthetician Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, that of the pregnant moment, in order to call the Hegelians to account. That is the design which the discarded titles will help us disclose.

<sup>2</sup> Donald M. Green, " 'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge, 1998), 257.

<sup>3</sup> *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, tr. Alexander Dru (London, 1938), 331-32. In fact, it is "the most studied of Kierkegaard's works in the undergraduate curriculum" according to Robert Perkins's "Introduction" to *Fear and Trembling and Repetition, International Kierkegaard Commentary* (Macon, Georgia, 1993), 3.

<sup>4</sup> See the commentary to *Frygt og Bæven*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn *et al.* (Copenhagen, 1997), 79.

## The Limits of Painting and Poetry

“Mellemhverandre,” spelled in one word, is a neologism in Danish, one that is apparently formed from the German word “Nebeneinander.”<sup>5</sup> It seems to have come into Kierkegaard’s vocabulary via the playwright and aesthetician Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who is referred to and praised on many occasions in the pseudonymous writings.<sup>6</sup> Lessing used the word “Nebeneinander” in his influential treatise on the limits of poetry and the visual arts, *Laocoön* (1766), to designate the object field best suited for painting and sculpture. Lessing famously argued that, as “painting uses completely different means or signs than does poetry, namely figures and colors in space rather than articulated sounds in time, and if these signs must indisputably bear a suitable relation to the thing signified, then signs existing in space can express only objects whose wholes or parts coexist, while signs that follow one another can express only objects whose wholes or parts are consecutive.”<sup>7</sup>

The contention that this is, in fact, the theoretical import of the discarded title suggestion “Mellemhverandre” is supported by the loyal recapitulation of Lessing’s central distinctions made by the Aesthete in the first part of *Either/Or*. In “Silhouettes” he declares that since “the time when Lessing defined the boundaries between poetry and art in his celebrated treatise *Laocoön*, it no doubt may be regarded as a conclusion unanimously recognized by all estheticians that the distinction between them is that art is in the category of space, poetry in the category of time, that art depicts repose, poetry motion.”<sup>8</sup> These categories of content, it may be observed, match perfectly with the first title suggestion for *Fear and Trembling*: “Movements and Postures.” So, the two alternative titles apparently point to the same theoretical source, to Lessing’s attempt to distinguish more clearly between the performance of art and poetry.

The Aesthete’s repetition of Lessing’s limits between poetry and painting was not an isolated occurrence on the contemporary scene of aesthetic theory in Denmark. When he claims in “Silhouettes” that Lessing’s limits are a “result”

<sup>5</sup> Isak Winkel Holm, *Tanken i billedet. Søren Kierkegaards poetik* (Copenhagen, 1998), 135.

<sup>6</sup> In a footnote in *Fear and Trembling* Lessing is spoken of as “one of the most comprehensive minds Germany has had.” On the same occasion Silentio declares that he is “always very happy when I can find an opportunity to include Lessing” (*Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton, 1983], 88; references to this work are included in the text). The most extensive consideration of Lessing’s philosophical position takes place in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton, 1992], I, part 2, 59-125), which includes a chapter devoted to Johannes Climacus’s “Expression of Gratitude to Lessing.”

<sup>7</sup> *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, tr. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore, 1984), 78 (references to this work are given in the text).

<sup>8</sup> *Either/Or, Part I*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, 1987), 169.

which is “recognised by all estheticians,” this group almost certainly includes the most prominent aesthete of the time and place, Johan Ludvig Heiberg, who had five years earlier made a similar statement.<sup>9</sup> A devoted Hegelian and a very powerful playwright and critic, Heiberg provided the main target for Kierkegaard’s parodic assaults. In 1838 Heiberg had contributed to *Perseus*—a journal for “the speculative idea,” the subtitle declared, and an influential organ for the right Hegelian circles of Copenhagen<sup>10</sup>—with an extensive review, almost a hundred pages long, that included a reconsideration of *Laocoön*. In the review Heiberg blamed the artists and critics of his day for being ignorant about *Laocoön*, which could save them from many misjudgments and failed paintings. For their sake he returned to Lessing and laid out the main argument of *Laocoön*, while also correcting it on the question of the temporality of pictorial representation.

#### The Pregnant Moment of *Medea*

Heiberg’s correction concerned Lessing’s banning of “the transitory” from the object field of the visual arts. Lessing had proscribed the representation of phenomena that are “essentially sudden in their beginning and end and which can be what they are only for a brief moment.” Such events should be represented in neither painting nor sculpture, as they “fill us with disgust or horror” (20) when beheld repeatedly or at length. One of the reasons why the sculpture of *Laocoön* did not appear to scream, according to Lessing’s interpretation, was the prohibition against the transitory, which did not allow for a screaming expression that could only have lasted for a very short while. This observation formed the basis for *Laocoön*’s famous advocacy of the “pregnant moment.” As painting and sculpture were materially confined to the representation of bodies existing *between each other* in space, whereas poetry could, and should, depict actions unfolding in time, it was necessary for the visual arts to select for its object a given moment of a course of action that “gives free rein to the imagination” (19) by suggesting both what came before and what will come after the moment. As David Welberry has explained, “From the sensuous presence of the single painted moment the imagination moves backward and forward, unfolding as it does so an unwritten narrative.”<sup>11</sup> As it imposes too narrow limits on the imagination, the climax of a course of action, as for instance *Laocoön*’s scream, could not make a suitable object for artistic representation. If, however, *Laocoön*

<sup>9</sup> See Henning Fenger and Frederick Marker, *The Heibergs* (New York, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> The list of subscribers only counted 133, but among them were the most influential intellectuals of the time. The name of “S. Kierkegaard” also figures on the list (*Perseus*, 2 [1838], vii).

<sup>11</sup> David E. Welberry, *Lessing’s Laocoon: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, 1984), 169.

sighs, as he apparently does in the classical sculpture, “the imagination can hear him cry out” (20).

In his 1838 review of *Laocoön* Heiberg found himself in agreement with the idea that too transient phenomena were no suitable matter for the visual arts, but he could not fully accept Lessing's theoretical explanation why this should be so. Lessing's observation that painting and sculpture could only represent one moment in time implied to Heiberg that they could represent nothing else than what is transitory. Accordingly, there is a discrepancy, Heiberg contended, between the single, essentially transitory moment of time represented in the artwork and the continuous time from which the moment is abstracted and in which the contemplation proceeds. Realizing that all artistic motives were transitory by nature, Heiberg had to change the focus of selection from the moment itself to its effect on the beholder in order to maintain Lessing's rejection of motives considered too fleeting. As he put it,

one has to say that that which cannot be painted is such moments that prevent the beholder from resting in his contemplation, such moments in which the visible immutability of that which is essentially transitory becomes disagreeable [*stødende*] to the feeling, as this, just like in a narrative, desires to move forward and cannot but ask, when the narrative is discontinued: “What next?”<sup>12</sup>

Through this statement Heiberg made explicit the narrative expectations of the beholder, and he established that they could not be met by representations of transitory phenomena that were too short and too sudden to form part of a narrative scheme. As he inclined to believe that Lessing had actually shared this opinion—that the narrative desire of the beholder was the actual reason why the transitory had no place in art—he returned to one of Lessing's weightiest examples in the *Laocoön*: a painting of Medea by the Byzantine painter Timomachos, which Lessing had thoroughly praised for its strict fidelity to all the prescriptions advanced in the treatise.

The felicity of the *Medea* was due to the fact that Timomachos had abstained from painting the climax of Euripides's tragedy, when the heroine sacrifices her own children to take revenge upon their father: “Timomachos did not represent Medea at the moment when she was actually murdering her children, but a few moments before, when a mother's love was still struggling with her vengefulness” (21), Lessing commented. In the play we do not see the murder staged either; we only hear the children cry and call out for help behind the scene where the murder takes place. “Death is here!” we hear her one son say to the

<sup>12</sup> Johan Ludvig Heiberg, “Om Malerkunsten i dens Forhold til andre skjønnere Kunster,” *Prosaiske Skrifter* (11 vols.; Copenhagen, 1861-62), II, 272-73.

other, but death is not represented on the stage.<sup>13</sup> Horace, in *The Art of Poetry*, mentions Medea's killing of her children as the kind of scene which is unfit for representation on the stage: "you will not bring upon the stage what should be performed behind the scenes, and you will keep much from our eyes, which an actor's ready tongue will narrate anon in our presence; so that Medea is not to butcher her boys before the people."<sup>14</sup> Timomachos had obeyed this rule in his painting that represents a state of hesitation a few moments before—a state that is not to be found in the play, in which Medea proclaims her resolution and takes action immediately after.

By inventing such a moment, it seemed to Lessing that Timomachos had combined "that point or moment which the beholder not so much sees as adds in his imagination, and that appearance which does not seem so transitory as to become displeasing through its perpetuation in art" (20-21). Lessing had never gazed at Timomachos's painting, and never could he have had the chance to do so, for it has only survived in a description by Pliny the elder. Still, the absence of the visual representation was clearly not an obstacle to his empathic response to the painting that he only knew from Pliny's rendering of it:

We can foresee the outcome of this struggle; we tremble in anticipation of seeing Medea as simply cruel, and our imagination takes us far beyond what the painter could have shown us in this terrible moment. But for this very reason we are not offended at Medea's perpetual indecision, as it is represented in art, but wish it could have remained that way in reality. We wish that the duel of passions had never been decided, or at least had continued long enough for time and reflection to overcome rage and secure the victory for maternal feelings. (21)

In this case, the motionlessness of the moment does not impose a blockade on the impatient beholder who wishes to move beyond the moment. This is perfectly possible but undesirable. All narrative desire is counteracted by this pre-climactic moment, which invites us instead to take pleasure in the pictorial arrest of the catastrophic course that proceeds in Euripides' tragedy. The desire to see or imagine "what's next" is replaced here by a general wish, pronounced by Lessing in the first person plural, that the represented moment would remain unchanging, as it does indeed. For this reason Heiberg agreed to the ideality of Timomachos's painting, on which he also based his own argument against "such moments that prevent the beholder from resting in his contemplation."

<sup>13</sup> *Medea*, tr. Arthur S. Way (London, 1966), 383.

<sup>14</sup> *Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, tr. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), 465-67.

## Romeo and Juliet and the End of Narrative Desire

It is noticeable that only five years after Heiberg had pronounced it a “scandal” that all practitioners and theoreticians were hopelessly ignorant about Lessing’s treatise, one of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous voices proclaimed it to be “recognized by all aestheticians.” Furthermore, Heiberg’s review seems familiar to even such a non-aesthetic character as Kierkegaard’s *moraliste*, the ethical judge Vilhelm, whose voice is heard all through the second part of *Either/Or*: he concedes that “if I behold a work of art ... it is really in me that movement takes place, not in the work of art.”<sup>15</sup> We may recognize this notion from the subjective turn that Heiberg had proposed in his review, about which Vilhelm never drops a single word, although it is unmistakably alluded to in his excursion into aesthetic theory. Nevertheless, Heiberg’s review and Lessing’s treatise are echoed not only in discursive statements, as indirect as they may be, but also in some of the images that are represented in the pseudonymous writings.

It may be illustrated by “a picture” presented by the Married Man in the “Reflections on Marriage in Answer to Objections” in *Stages on Life’s Way*. It is deployed as an illustration of the differences between married and unmarried couples, but it may also be read as an implied and perceptive intervention into the renewed considerations of Lessing’s aesthetics, which is, to be sure, not mentioned at all in the context:

There is a picture that portrays Romeo and Juliet—an eternal picture. Whether it is an exceptional work of art, I leave undecided, or whether the forms are beautiful, I do not judge—I lack both the aptitude and the competence for that. The eternal element in the picture is that it portrays a pair of lovers and portrays them in an essential expression. No commentary is necessary; one understands it at once, and on the other hand no commentary provides this repose in the beautiful situation of love. Juliet has sunk in admiration at her lover’s feet, but from this adoring position her devotion raises her up in a gaze filled with heavenly bliss, but Romeo stops her look and with a kiss all the longing of erotic love is set at rest forever, for the reflection of eternity surrounds the moment with a halo, and no more than Romeo and Juliet does anyone who looks at the picture think that there will be a next moment, even if it were only to repeat the sacred seal of the kiss. Do not ask the lovers, for they do not hear your voice, but out in the world ask what century this happened, in what country, at what time of the day, at what hour it was—no one replies, for it is an eternal picture.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Either/Or; Part II*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, 1987), 274.

<sup>16</sup> *Stages on Life’s Way*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, 1988), 167-68.

It has been suggested that the Married Man's ekphrastic description refers to a picture by the German lithographer Ferdinand Piloty, which represents the moment before the farewell kiss in the third act of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>17</sup> But attempts to trace this picture, made by the editors of the recent scholarly edition of the text, have proved futile, and no other visual source for the description has been located.<sup>18</sup> In this respect the case seems identical to Lessing's approval of Timomachos's painting of Medea, which was not based on any visual impression either, inasmuch as the painting was only known to him from Pliny's description. In fact if placed under scrutiny, it does not seem that the description given by the Married Man adheres very strictly to any pictorial representation, for the motionless image of Romeo and Juliet actually *moves* in his commentary. It enumerates a series of events: first, Juliet is sunken, then devotion raises her until she is stopped by Romeo, who meets her with a kiss. What is related here surely goes beyond the moment; it takes time.

What is achieved in this commentary, the transformation of a static motif into a motion picture and of a single moment into a temporal sequence, was exactly what the pregnant moment should facilitate. From the representation of the single moment the beholder should be able to imagine what went before and what came after the represented moment, culminating, of course, with a given climax. In this way the imagination may proceed from Laocoön's sigh to his scream and from Juliet's devoted look at Romeo to their kiss. These situations are destined to reach a climax that is not shown but is easily imagined. If we may speak of a "represented" situation of the imaginary picture of Romeo and Juliet beheld by the Married Man, it would in fact seem identical to that of the lovers on Keats's imaginary Grecian urn, whose movement toward each others' lips remains permanently suspended in the realm of pictorial representation: "Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss / Though winning near the goal."<sup>19</sup> The Married Man, however, is kind enough to redeem the teleological promise of the arrested situation in the picture, letting Juliet reach her goal and unite with Romeo in a kiss.

<sup>17</sup> According to Hong and Hong (*Stages on Life's Way*, 703, n. 129), who probably have this notion from Emanuel Hirsch's note to the passage in his German edition of *Stages* in which he assumes that "Kierkegaard meint eine Zeichnung Ferdinand Pilotys (gest. 1844), welche die Sekunde vor dem Abschiedskuß (Romeo und Julia III. Akt. 5. Szene) darstellt und als Stich illustrierten Shakespeare-Ausgaben beigegeben ist" (*Stadien auf des Lebens Weg* [Düsseldorf, 1958], 545, n. 194).

<sup>18</sup> There is a note to the picture saying that it "has not been identified" in the commentary to *Stadier paa Livets Vei*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, et al. (Copenhagen, 1999), 202. The editor of the text, Dr. Johnny Kondrup, has confirmed to me that the lithograph by Piloty has been carefully sought for and that no evidence that such a picture actually exists has been produced.

<sup>19</sup> John Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 282.

Nothing proceeds after this joyous climax in the Married Man's commentary: "all longing of erotic love" has been "set at rest forever," and "no more than Romeo and Juliet does anyone who looks at the picture think that there will be a next moment." What Romeo and Juliet sought has been reached, their desire has been fulfilled, and so has the narrative desire of everybody who looks at, or rather imagines, the picture. As was the case when Lessing described his encounter with Timomachos's painting, the Married Man is careful to include everybody, by way of indefinite pronouns ("one," "anyone"), in his contemplation and pronouncement of the effect of the "picture." The pictorial stasis is regarded not as an irritation but as a gratification, for the climax of the imaginary continuation engenders absolutely no wish to move beyond the moment. In this respect its achievement is similar to that of Timomachos's portrait of Medea, which also left everybody happy with the lack of motion, at least according to Lessing's imaginary contemplation of it.

To judge by the effect that the Married Man ascribes to the "picture," it is, then, exactly of the kind that Heiberg idealized: it does not "prevent the beholder from resting in his contemplation" because of any wish to know "what next." The pregnancy of the moment is impeccable, and yet its handling of the beholder's narrative desire is even more efficacious than the imaginary painting of Medea. Whereas Timomachos's painting generated a wish that the Euripidean narrative had never gone any further, the beholder enthralled by the image of Romeo and Juliet has slipped into total oblivion of the fatal events that follow. For in spite of the Married Man's conviction that nobody looks beyond the moment of Romeo and Juliet's kiss, it is well known that the narrative of Shakespeare's play does not end in such a blissful tableau. We all know that there is more to come after their kiss in the third act, that both Romeo and Juliet die in the course of the dramatic narrative after each has experienced the death of the other. But just as Timomachos's painting of Medea had suspended the fatal course of Euripides's tragedy, the picture deployed by the Married Man is able to arrest the progress of Shakespeare's play, maintaining the romance at its peak before it definitively turns into tragedy. It is thus shown how the "picture of romance," to borrow Wendy Steiner's term, may erase from our minds all memory of the tragedy into which the moment is eventually subsumed.<sup>20</sup>

The "picture" of Romeo and Juliet can be taken as yet another indirect intervention into the discussion over the limits between poetry and painting that Heiberg had resumed in his 1838 review. The conversion of the pictorial moment into a temporal and narrative sequence confirms Lessing's theory of the "pregnant moment," while even refining it, as this pregnant moment, the kneeling Juliet who aspires to a kiss, actually implies two climaxes: first their kiss and later

<sup>20</sup> See Wendy Steiner, *Pictures of Romance: Form Against Context in Painting and Literature* (Chicago, 1988).

their deaths. A situation is evoked in which the beholder is gratified by the pictorial repose and released from all narrative desire to go any further. In this way Kierkegaard drew from Lessing's *Laocoön*, which contains the most influential argument for separating poetry and painting, the principle of selection known as the pregnant moment and appropriated it in his writings.

The "picture" presented in *Stages on Life's Way* was not the first occasion, though. As Silentio had faced the same problem in *Fear and Trembling*, the desire to go further, he had also seized upon a similar solution; for the "misappropriation" of Lessing's theory is also a key to the text which has come to be known as *Fear and Trembling*.

#### Going Further or Remaining Standing

Almost nothing could seem as remote from Silentio's painstaking panegyrics on the sublimity of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* as the pleasurable picture of Romeo and Juliet that the Married Man presents us with in *Stages on Life's Way*. Nor would the aesthetic considerations of the distinctions between the arts seem to have anything to do with Silentio's ponderings on the intricate relations between ethics and religion. Even so, we have already seen how these distinctions are actually inscribed on the title page of the manuscript of *Fear and Trembling*. Both "Movements and Postures" (*Bevægelser og Stillinger*) and "Between-each-other" (*Mellemhverandre*), the two suggestions, allude to Lessing's distinction between the appropriate object fields for poetry and the visual arts. If we look for the distinction between "Movements and Postures" in the published text of *Fear and Trembling*, we can find it in the recurrent idiomatic contrast between "remaining standing" and "going further," which is employed by Silentio, both in the preface and in the epilogue, when he laments the tendency among his contemporaries towards transcending faith: "In our age, everyone is unwilling to stop with faith but goes further" (7).

As is often the case in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings, which are indirect in so many ways, there is a specific address implied in this remark. Although Silentio does not mention his contemporaries by name, they can be identified as the Danish group of Hegelians that was led by Johan Ludvig Heiberg. Elsewhere, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, these are referred to as "a whole generation" who "although in various ways, seems to want to unite in going further *en masse*."<sup>21</sup> Already in 1833 Heiberg had declared in a rather daring phrase that "in the eyes of the educated world religion belongs to the past, to what has been traversed."<sup>22</sup> Views like this were advertised on several occa-

<sup>21</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 587.

<sup>22</sup> Johan Ludvig Heiberg, "Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid," *Prosaiske Skrifter* (11 vols.; Copenhagen, 1861-62), I, 396.

sions: "Status quo" is "impossible," Heiberg had proclaimed in an earlier issue of *Perseus*: "those who do not go further will fall back."<sup>23</sup> If Silentio's utterances are seen in this context, their implied address stands out; apparently they allude to this campaign of Heiberg's. He could even be inserted as the source of the anonymous quotation that Silentio brings in the epilogue: "One must go further, one must go further" (122). Very appropriately, the semantic emptiness of this demand to "go further" is satirized by Silentio when he deems it "rash to ask where they are going" (7).

The progressive fervor of contemporary thought is, then, both the point of departure and the point of arrival for *Fear and Trembling*, which begins and ends with Silentio's complaints over all the effort his generation makes to "move on." His indirect address to the Hegelian audience constitutes a frame around his sustained praise of Abraham. The main motivation for the praise is that Abraham never gave up, or went beyond, his faith. He preserved it during the trial that God made him go through when he was asked to sacrifice his son. The faithful attitude of Abraham's is thus the opposite of that shown by the Danish Hegelians, who, in the opinion of several of the Kierkegaardian pseudonyms, were all too eager to leave faith behind. Seen in the context of the abandoned title suggestions, these opposing attitudes are analogous to the contrast between "movements and postures." Abraham remained standing all alone, utterly isolated as he was, whereas Silentio's contemporaries (Heiberg and his fellow Hegelians) are only impatient to move on *en masse*. But Abraham's immovability could also be taken in another sense, that he remained standing on Mount Moriah, where the sacrifice was supposed to take place, without going any further.

Needless to say he did not do so in the Old Testament, according to which he came down from the mountain and travelled back to Beelsheba to become the father of Israel. That the outcome of the story is well known is a fact of which Silentio is painfully aware: "We know it all—it was only an *ordeal* [*Prøvelse*]" (22), he laments. It is not the familiarity of the story that bothers Silentio as much as the fact that people read it from the vantage point of the end—that they only focus upon the outcome, the moral: the fact that it was *only* an ordeal. By doing so, they banalize everything that precedes the edifying end: "We do not want to know anything about the anxiety, the distress, the paradox," but "when we have heard the result, we have built ourselves up" (63), Silentio observes. His observation is comparable to the one Constantin Constantius makes in *Repetition* when he notices the immense difference between progressive and retrospective readings of the biblical story of Job. From the vantage point of the end, things seem simple: "The explanation is this: the whole thing is an *ordeal* [*Prøvelse*]" (209). Still, this explanation is only available at the end of the story,

<sup>23</sup> Johan Ludvig Heiberg, "Recension over hr. Dr. Rothes Treenigheds- og Forsoningslære," *Prosaiske Skrifter* (11 vols.; Copenhagen, 1861-62), II, 45.

whereas “Any explanation is possible” when Job’s sufferings take place and therefore “the maelstrom of passion begins to spin” (209).

But the maelstrom of passion is efficiently brought to a halt, and the element of trial is surely eliminated, when the outcome is taken to be the essence of the story. Reading the story *from* the vantage point of the end means giving up upon the dreadful experience of Abraham when he was torn between his love for his son and his duty toward God. Similarly, reading the story for the sake of the end will only divert our attention from the middle of the narrative, the crisis that precedes the sense-making ending. As “we are curious about the result, just as we are curious about the way a book turns out” (63), the crisis seems completely swallowed up by narrative desire. An equivalent to these reading practices—reading the story from the point of view of, or for the sake of, the end—may be found in the Hegelian philosophy of history that was ardently championed by Heiberg. According to this, the meaning of events is determined by their finality, and if such a view is applied on the story of Abraham, all fear and trembling will disappear, obliterated by an absolute *Besserwissen*: “We know it all—it was only an *ordeal*.”

#### Abraham’s Tableau and the State of Indecision

Still, in spite of Silentio’s campaigns to discredit all end-focused readings of the Abraham story, he cannot escape the fact that there is an end to it. If reading the story like “a book” is considered illegitimate, as Silentio’s analogy would seem to imply, it would only be fair to ask what else there is to do for obviously; the story of Abraham *is* included in a book, in *Genesis*, which is included in the Bible. One should expect that there is an alternative in the first place. In fact, this is exactly what Silentio’s discourse upon Abraham undertakes to produce by repeatedly presenting the story as a *Mellemhverandre*, as a group of bodies standing between each other instead of as a series of actions that follow after each other. It does so by continually returning to, and interrupting the story at, the pre-climactic moment at Mount Moriah where Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac: “He split the firewood, he bound Isaac, he lit the fire, he drew the knife” (21), “even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith” (36), “This is the peak on which Abraham stands” (37). In these passages of Silentio’s discourse the narrative contracts to a single moment. The evocations seem to suspend the narrative in a mute tableau that carries a damaging effect upon any beholder who spectates it:

Who strengthened Abraham’s arm, who braced up his right arm so that it did not sink down powerless! Anyone who looks upon this scene is paralyzed. Who strengthened Abraham’s soul lest everything go black for him and he see neither Isaac nor the ram! Anyone who looks upon this scene is blinded. (22)

The mute and motionless situation that Silentio evokes here, and which he keeps referring to throughout, is very aptly described by the label of Lessing's on the title page of the *Fear and Trembling* manuscript: it is indeed a *Mellemhverandre* like the *Laocoön* group. Abraham and Isaac are placed *between each other* (*Mellemhverandre*) in a static composition, like statues or figures on a painting that can neither move nor speak.<sup>24</sup>

All movement seems suspended in this critical moment on the mountain where Isaac is bound, Abraham stands transfixed, and the beholder is paralyzed. In Silentio's discourse the unconsummated sacrifice of Isaac is rendered in a tableau, in a manner that may be regarded as antithetical to the story. The frozen moment of this tableau seems carefully chosen from Lessing's prescriptions. Mieke Bal has explained, "What art historians call 'the pregnant moment' is the pictorial equivalent of a crisis. Such paintings represent a single moment but one which can only be understood as following the past and announcing the future."<sup>25</sup> Her conceptual comparison may be confirmed by Silentio's translation of the pregnant moment from a pictorial to a linguistic register, for "the peak on which Abraham stands" is exactly such a moment of decision, a crisis. In fact, their ascent of the mountain may be read as a figuration of the etymology of *climax*, which is derived from the Greek word for "ladder."

There are several reasons why Lessing's concept matches with the stopped-action scene evoked by Silentio. If we see it in the context of *Laocoön's* reflections upon the limits of poetry and painting, it will become clear that this is yet another intervention into the contemporary discussion of these issues, as was the picture of Romeo and Juliet. For the technique employed here seems conspicuously similar to the one prescribed by Lessing when he recommended to visual artists that they select the moment before the climax, as Timomachos had done when he portrayed Medea some moments before the infanticide. If considered in juxtaposition, Timomachos's representation of Medea and Silentio's representation of Abraham and Isaac show great resemblances, technically speaking, as they are both based on the principle of selection that Lessing recommended, the arrest of the narrative at the pre-climactic stage. Earlier, we have seen how the Married Man in *Stages on Life's Way* made use of this technique when he presented us with an image of Romeo and Juliet in a position before their kiss. The initial motif of Romeo and Juliet craving a kiss can be said to be structurally

<sup>24</sup> The general appeal of the story to the painterly and sculptural imagination is attested to by the significant number of masterpieces that represent this composition: the bronze reliefs of Lorenzo Ghiberti and Filippo Brunelleschi, both entitled *The Sacrifice of Abraham* and made for the competition for the new door of the Baptistery in Florence in 1401, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* by Donatello from 1418, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* by Caravaggio from 1601-2, and Rembrandt's *The Sacrifice of Abraham* from 1635.

<sup>25</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto, 1997<sup>2</sup>), 211. It should be noted that this is a more narrow definition of the pregnant moment than Lessing's, which demands that the selected moment is pre-climactic but not necessarily critical.

similar to the motifs of Medea and Abraham: they are all pre-climactic “pregnant moments” in Lessing’s sense of the term.

Still, the motifs are markedly different as concerns the kinds of climax they are heading towards. Whereas Romeo and Juliet are destined to a kiss, Medea and Abraham are both depicted just as they are about to murder their children. This is their shared intent in the two moments. But as Abraham is saved by an angel, Medea follows her murderous project through. Instead of a climax the narrative of Abraham leads to an anticlimax. There is no climax to the situation as opposed to the painting of Medea and the picture of Romeo and Juliet, which actually implied two climaxes, as we have seen. It has been remarked by Erich Auerbach, in his famous reading of Genesis 22 in *Mimesis*, that the “whole” of the story “is permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal,” the sacrifice of Isaac.<sup>26</sup> This massive suspense is relieved when God cancels his command. But by suspending the narrative in the moment before the anti-climax Silentio’s discourse reproduces “the anxiety, the distress”—and the fear and trembling—which belonged to the undecided moment.

The indecision is yet another reminiscence of Timomachos’s portrait. As we recall, the brilliance of Timomachos’s portrait, according to Lessing’s imaginary beholding, was that it put a “duel of passions” on display, catching Medea in a moment where her rage of jealousy and her maternal feelings are still struggling against each other. This was what made the beholder desire that the narrative had either changed its course or never gone any further, wishing that, as Lessing declared, “the duel of passions [*der Streit des Leidenschaften*] had never been decided, or at least had continued long enough for time and reflection to overcome rage and secure the victory for maternal feelings.” It is striking that the same vocabulary is taken up by Silentio when he describes the “Collision” in Abraham’s situation between his paternal feelings, his love for his only son, and his faith that bids him to suspend the “ethical” in order to fulfill the wish of God.

Although Silentio employs a Hegelian concept, “collision,” used in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* to designate the conflict in tragedies between different “ethical interests,”<sup>27</sup> he is keen to emphasize that the story of Abraham is not a tragedy and that its “collision” is not, as Hegel would have it, between ethical interests. Instead, passion is pitted against passion. According to Silentio’s rather unorthodox view, not only is Abraham’s love of his son a passion, but so also is his faith. In a programmatic statement, of which the first half is borrowed from Lessing, Silentio defines “that which unites all human life” as “passion” and

<sup>26</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), 11-12.

<sup>27</sup> See, for an example, the chapter on “The Principle of Tragedy, Comedy and Drama” in Georg Wilhelm Friederich Hegel, *Aesthetics*, tr. T. M. Knox (2 vols.; Oxford, 1975), II, 1193-1205.

adds that “faith is a passion” (67).<sup>28</sup> Arresting the narrative of Abraham in the preclimactic moment allows Silentio to maintain these mutually exclusive passions in a stage of collision, around which his reflections in the three “Problemata” revolve. As long as the narrative does not develop any further, this collision is neither solved nor dissolved, just as the “duel of passions” between a mother’s love and her rage was left undecided in Timomachos’s painting.

So, the way in which Silentio stages the collision of Abraham’s ordeal as yet another duel of passions may add to our notion that Timomachos’s portrait has served as an example to Silentio. He even makes the principle explicit, as he addresses all mediocre poets of his day, in a footnote, to let them know that only “passion against passion provides a poetic collision, not this hurly-burly of minutiae within the same passion” (92n). Apparently, this is the recipe for the “collision” of the Abraham story, and it may thus serve as further evidence that Silentio’s evocation of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah is, in fact, both a structural and thematic replica of Timomachos’s lost painting of Medea.

#### Ethics and the Question of What Could Have Happened

The replication of *Medea*—its theme, composition and *enargeia*—can be shown to be a reply. There is an intricate relation between Silentio’s manipulation of the Abraham story and that which we have earlier called the “frame” around this discourse, his lamentations, put forth in the preface and epilogue of *Fear and Trembling*, about the progressive fervor of his generation, the desire “to go further” which impelled the campaigns of Heiberg and his fellow travelers along the way to absolute knowledge. The desire to go further was exactly what Lessing had been released from, as he saw Medea’s duel of passions before his mind’s eye. Rather he obtained great satisfaction from the status quo of the arrested situation before the murderous climax. Seventy years later, in his review of *Laocoön*, Heiberg agreed to the pleasure it gave: “far from offending us [*støde os*], the prolongation which art here renders [the state of the moment] makes us wish, on the contrary, that the real Medea had remained standing at the same point instead of proceeding.”

Heiberg’s repetition of Lessing’s reaction turns, then, on the same contrast that formed the basis of his pronouncements on the place of religion in the philosophy of history, published in the preceding issue of *Perseus* and elsewhere. In both cases, the matter is a question of remaining standing or going further. In history, one had to go further, also beyond religious faith, for “those who do not move along will fall back.” But as an art critic, Heiberg was nevertheless very

<sup>28</sup> As Silentio reveals in a footnote, his statement is taken from Lessing’s comments upon Diderot’s *Entretiens sur le Fils Naturel* (1757) whose dramaturgy of feelings confirmed Lessing’s notion that “die Leidenschaften machen alle Menschen wieder gleich” (69n). To which Silentio adds his remarkable notion that “faith is a passion.”

pleased that the narrative of Medea had been suspended in Timomachos's painting. In this situation, stasis was a source of pleasure rather than impatience. The verdicts pronounced by Heiberg in both matters are then governed by the same contrast between "movements and postures," as we may label it. This is what Silentio takes advantage of by discretely establishing an ironical interplay between Heiberg's attitudes, and between his philosophical phraseology and aesthetic idiomatics. He turns Heiberg's critical claims against his philosophical program by repeating his Hegelian slogans ("One must go further, one must go further") while also presenting Abraham as a counter-example to this restlessness. What is unforgettable about the example of Abraham is that he "got no further than faith" (23). He remained standing, so to speak, not only with his faith, but also, according to Silentio's evocation, at Mount Moriah in the crisis that *Fear and Trembling* is centered upon.

Silentio's evocation is obviously a manipulation and as such it serves a certain purpose. His suspension of the biblical narrative at the pre-climactic stage may be read as a response to Heiberg's wish "to go further," confronting him with an arrested moment that is identical, in several respects, to the Medea motif that made him rest in his contemplation without giving any thought to "what's next." The same immobilizing effect is assigned by Silentio to the Abraham tableau, although it certainly has taken on a more violent meaning: "Anyone who looks upon this scene is paralyzed." It definitely sounds like a far less pleasing experience than the contemplative repose Heiberg requested from the visual arts.

So maintaining the moment where Abraham stands with the knife raised is a means to invalidate the argument of the supercilious readers that only read the story as an ordeal. Silentio's presentation of the standstill tableau on Mount Moriah may be regarded as an attempt to undo the plot, "reopen" the end, hence reconstructing the situation when things were as yet undecided—when the ordeal was yet to be established. Yet this suspension of narrative in *Fear and Trembling* reads as more than a sustained opposition to Heiberg's aesthetics and philosophy of history. There is more to it. It is not only an efficient way of forestalling the retrospective interpretation that left out all the horror of the story; it is also a condition for Silentio's reappraisal of the ethical implications of the ordeal.

What permits an unreserved engagement with the ethical questions is actually this state of indecision; giving free rein to the imagination, as a well-chosen pregnant moment should, it confronts us with the choice left to Abraham when events might still have taken a different course. The reader, then, is not allowed to cling onto any sense of only one ending but must face up to all the alternatives with which the moment was also pregnant. This awareness of what could have happened is also inherent in Lessing's wish that the state of Medea's indecision "could have remained that way in reality." His empathic response attests to an

absorption in the “reality” of the narrative that is so strong that it engenders alternative endings—and non-endings—to the tragic drama of Euripides. Likewise, Silentio is so obsessed with the incomprehensible story of Abraham that he continues to make up alternatives to it in *Fear and Trembling*. In this respect Silentio’s response is similar to the reaction of the “man” he presents in the short preliminary and very enigmatic chapter, “Exordium.” This man was possessed by Genesis 22 “so much that he forgot everything else because of it” (9) and was compelled to make an infinite series of variations over it. Silentio quotes four of these variations and adds “in many similar ways did the man of whom we speak ponder this event” (14). The production of unwritten narratives in which the man has engaged may be recognized as the response that the pregnant moment is supposed to stimulate. The pregnant moment may be seen as a technique for producing such alternatives that create an open-endedness, which attracts a much more engaged response to the severe ethical question raised by the ordeal. By a suspension of the narrative *Fear and Trembling* reconstructs the crisis of Abraham to which he allegedly replied with a suspension of the ethical.

#### Fear and Pity and Trembling

The approach to *Fear and Trembling* taken here has relied on two titles that did not make it to the title page of the published text, “Movements and Postures” (*Bevægelser og Stillinger*) and “Between-each-other” (*Mellemhverandre*). Both attest to the implied dialogue in which the text is engaged: with Lessing’s aesthetics and Hegel’s philosophy of history, or, should we rather say, with the mediator of both in contemporary Copenhagen, Johan Ludvig Heiberg. Silentio’s contraction of Genesis 22 to the one critical moment is an intervention into this debate; it is crucial to the creation of doubt, which is one of the most important effects of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous writings. In order to connect the two suggestions with the phrase that came to serve as the appellation of the book we need to inspect more closely the way in which *Fear and Trembling* also contests Aristotelian poetics. Traditionally, the phrase “fear and trembling,” which is never commented upon in the text, has been regarded as an allusion to Paul’s letter to the Philippians in which he asks them to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Certainly, this allusion is undeniable and confirmed by the fact that the passage is frequently alluded to in Kierkegaard’s writings. All the same it is arguable that the title has a double reference, that it also alludes to the two categories of catharsis in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

Tragedy is a major theme in *Fear and Trembling*, especially as regards the status and properties of the tragic hero in comparison with Abraham. Recurrently the tragic hero is invoked as a contrast to Abraham, who “is at no time a tragic hero but something entirely different” (57). Consequently, *Fear and Trembling* goes through several notions of the tragic against which the biblical narra-

tive and its hero are defined negatively. Already we have seen how this procedure is at work in Silentio's appropriation of Hegel's notion of the "tragic collision," which he restaged as a collision between passions instead of ethical interests. In a similar vein the definitive title may also be read as an alternative to Aristotle's famous categories of catharsis, fear, and pity. Or at least to one of them, pity, which is scorned by Silentio for introducing a "curious dialectic" (104) between victimization and hero-worship that may ultimately reduce Abraham's heroic status. Confronted with the ultimate hero, the knight of faith, pity is an unbecoming response.

Thus pity has been substituted by "trembling" in the definitive title. It is worth noting that trembling, both as a muscular and as a paralinguistic phenomenon, is an anticipatory response, something that is provoked by fear of an event to come. Lessing perfectly demonstrated this when he imagined what everybody would do at the (imaginary) sight of Timomachos's *Medea*: "we tremble in anticipation of seeing Medea as simply cruel, and our imagination takes us far beyond what the painter could have shown us in this terrible moment" (italics added). Similarly, the pregnancy of Abraham's moment may indeed take us far beyond what is related in the compact prose of *Genesis*, forcing us to envision all the alternative endings that could have come out of the critical moment. The fear and trembling are sustained by the tableau that encapsulates the unmasterable moment of Abraham's life, preventing any resolution into narrative closure.

This is a more formal reason why Abraham is not a tragic hero at any stage. The "tragic hero, however, comes to the end of the story" (115), Silentio says near the end of *Fear and Trembling*. The word "however" determines the proposition as a counter-argument, implying that Abraham, in contrast, does not get to the end of the story: that there is no ending to it as to a tragedy. If this is so, the ordeal constitutes a severe violation of Aristotle's definition of tragedy in the *Poetics* as "the imitation of an action that is serious and ... complete in itself."<sup>29</sup> As the ordeal is represented in the shape of a *Mellemhverandre*, no action is imitated and no state of completeness is reached. Hence it falls outside the standard definition of tragedy. As Abraham remains captured in the critical moment on the mountain, there is neither closure to the story nor any cathartic relief to be gained from it.

From the defiance of Aristotle's poetics we may now forge a link between all the titles that are placed on the title page of Kierkegaard's manuscript of *Fear and Trembling*. We may conclude that the alternative *Between-each-other* describes the static configuration that is a condition for stimulating and maintaining the response described in the definitive title: fear and trembling. Anxiety is aroused and prolonged by Silentio's transformation of the "Nacheinander" of

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, 1984), 2320, (1449b).

the biblical narrative into a “Nebeneinander” that deprives us of the sense and security of an ending. *Fear and Trembling* is, then, a bold attempt to block the narrative road to cathartic relief, to absolute knowledge and certainty, by way of one single pregnant moment that keeps us forever in the middle of the narrative, under the spell of indecision, at the point where, to quote from Constantius, “the maelstrom of passion begins to spin.” And it is still spinning after all these years.

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