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Kierkegaard, Kafka, and the Strength of “The Absurd” in Abraham’s Sacrifice of Isaac

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KIERKEGAARD, KAFKA, AND THE STRENGTH OF "THE ABSURD"
IN ABRAHAM'S SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Humanities

By

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2005
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May 27, 2005

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Robert Arnold Darrow ENTITLED Kierkegaard, Kafka, and the Strength of "The Absurd" in Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of Humanities

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ABSTRACT

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Søren Kierkegaard and Franz Kafka are admired by a wide spectrum of literary critics and philosophers for their common emphasis on subjectivity and the importance of the individual as opposed to the group. However, because the lives, attitudes, and writings of the two authors were very different, it is of interest to continue to examine their possible interrelationship. Both Kierkegaard and Kafka wrote about the biblical Abraham, and the resulting texts provide material for such an examination, organized around the idea of absurdity. "The absurd" is Kierkegaard's synonym for the religious level of existence, described in detail in Fear and Trembling, his analysis of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. There, the word refers to the incompatibility of rationality with religious belief. The religious level of existence that Abraham entered by obeying God's command to sacrifice his son while believing the absurdity that Isaac would not be lost to him, is characterized by a necessity for silence that leads to Abraham's isolation from the world. Kafka was attracted by similarities he perceived between his own life and Kierkegaard's, and greatly esteemed Kierkegaard's intellect and the quality of his prose. He never explicitly condemned Kierkegaard's use of "the absurd" to signify the religious. However, as shown in his letters and notebooks, he did not agree with Kierkegaard's views on the various levels of existence that human life could assume and the nature of the transitions between them. Often, his arguments can also be interpreted as criticisms

of Kierkegaard himself rather than of Kierkegaard's ideas. Kafka illustrated his disagreement with Kierkegaard in sketches of four alternative Abrahams, whose lives, unlike that of Kierkegaard's Abraham, remain firmly in the world. For various reasons, they are unable or unwilling to abandon rationality and enter into the religious level of existence. One of Kafka's Abrahams, an antihero totally unrecognizable as a patriarch, has a counterpart in a figure Kierkegaard drew of a "bourgeois philistine," also unrecognizable as a person of faith. Because the philistine has resigned himself to losing the world, he regains it in all its bourgeois detail on the strength of "the absurd," just as Abraham regained Isaac. In contrast, because Kafka's antihero accepts the world's judgment that he is unworthy, he finds it absurd to imagine himself as Abraham. The two sketches encapsulate Kierkegaard's personal ideal of a faith he knew could seldom be achieved and Kafka's dismissal of any such ideal by insisting that the only reality is the confrontation between the world and the individual.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is affectionately dedicated to my wife,
Ruth Mary Darrow.

I. INTRODUCTION

Søren Kierkegaard and Franz Kafka both emphasized the unique perspective of the individual and the resulting importance of subjectivity in human life. As a result, many scholars have seen them, along with Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, as predecessors of the existentialist movement of the mid-twentieth century (Hubben). In spite of this, the lives and attitudes of the two authors could scarcely have been more different.

Kierkegaard, brought up as a rigidly observant Christian, wrote as a polemicist for a sterner Christianity than was practiced in the Copenhagen of the 1840s under the established Danish church. A prolific and published author, he was independently wealthy, had access to the highest social circles of the Danish capital, and was so well-known that events of his life took on the proportions of national scandal when they ran counter to the accepted norm (Lowrie, Thompson, Hannay).

In contrast, Kafka's family was Jewish and minimally observant. Kafka lived within the German-speaking culture of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that controlled Prague until the end of World War I, but, as a Jew, was excluded from the highest circles of power and influence. He was not part of the Czech culture of the majority, although he was highly sympathetic to it. He was a peripheral member of the Jewish intellectual and literary circle in Prague, but his identification was always ethnic, never religious. His literary production was scant and remained largely unpublished until after his death. He lived most of his life in a single room in his parents' apartment, worked for an insurance company, and died virtually unknown (Brod, Hayman, Hibberd, Wagenbach).

Because Kafka and Kierkegaard are important writers, a vast critical literature is devoted to each of them individually and to their interrelationship. Still, as Martin Heidegger observed when presenting his views on Nietzsche, "in everything well known something worthy of thought still lurks" (xv). In fact, comparatively little has been written comparing Kierkegaard's and Kafka's treatment of the biblical account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Kierkegaard made it the subject of what may be his best-known book, Fear and Trembling. In it, he used his literary talents to glorify Abraham's response to the extraordinary demands of genuine religious faith, where ordinary notions of ethical behavior must sometimes be set aside in favor of the imperatives of religion. For Kierkegaard, these imperatives are never amenable to human reason. Kafka was an avid reader of Kierkegaard all his life but disagreed with Kierkegaard's representation of Abraham. His brief comments on the topic were made in his journals and notebooks, and in letters to his friends, written during and shortly after World War I. It was not a time when artists were inclined to glorify patriarchs - the carnage of the war seemed to many to have been caused by stupid decisions made by old men. Kafka wrote sketches of several alternative Abrahams that, while not wholly unsympathetic, read as mockeries of Kierkegaard's lofty portrait. He also directly criticized Kierkegaard's ideas on the nature of human existence, as laid out in Fear and Trembling.

Before examining their views on Abraham, it will be helpful to review the lives of Kierkegaard and Kafka and the ways their work has been perceived over time. The biographies add an important perspective to the writing, because both Kierkegaard and Kafka were highly self-referential in all of their literary production. In some sense, Fear and Trembling is Kierkegaard's commentary on and justification for a broken engagement, and many of Kafka's comments on Kierkegaard and on Abraham come shortly after the first of his own broken engagements. Kafka was often drawn to authors - Kierkegaard was one - whose private lives seemed to mirror

his own. The biographies thus also serve to expose similarities between the two men that are often overlooked because of their better-known differences. Most importantly, the biographical material helps explain Kafka's criticism of Kierkegaard's Abraham, which is often mixed with criticism of Kierkegaard himself.

The sketches of the evolution of critical attitudes toward the writings of the two authors have two functions. One is to suggest what the intellectual climate might have been when Kafka read Kierkegaard. The second is to show how the work of both authors has continued to be appreciated, although in different ways, throughout the past century up to the present time, and by readers who bring widely varying prejudices to it.

This thesis uses their writings on Abraham to explore the views of Kierkegaard and Kafka about what constitutes absurdity, understood in the broadest sense. Commonly, "the absurd" refers to a belief held by some twentieth century writers and philosophers, in and out of the existentialist movement, that human life cannot be understood by any set of general rules. It is utterly devoid of meaning, and therefore "absurd," until it is invested with meaning for an individual by his or her own actions. For Kierkegaard's Abraham, though, "the absurd" refers to something quite different. It is a description of a special level of existence, isolated from the world, which Abraham entered when he obeyed God's command to kill his son. This level of existence, the religious, is absurd because rationality does not apply there. Abraham entered the religious level by believing the absurdity that he could both kill Isaac and keep Isaac. In contrast, Kafka's multiple Abrahams personify Kafka's rejection of Kierkegaard's postulated religious level. For Kafka, the absurdity lay in God's command itself. His Abrahams remained firmly in the world. Their actions were governed by their own aspirations and by the expectations of their society.

It is especially dangerous to speak of the "views" of either Kierkegaard or Kafka. Kierkegaard took elaborate precautions to try to conceal his own attitudes, especially in works like Fear and Trembling that were published under pseudonyms. And, as one critic has recently observed, Kafka's writing had been "recognized as being radically indeterminate in meaning well before the advent of poststructuralism" (Lodge, 8). Accordingly, the discussion that follows is necessarily one that depends as much on the present writer as on the ambiguous texts that the two authors have provided.

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Jews, Christians, and Muslims – adherents of the "Abrahamic" religions - all hold as a parable of faith, and of God's ultimate benevolence, some form of the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice a cherished son to God (Szulk). The outlines of the traditional Judeo-Christian version as told in Genesis are well-known. Abraham, in perfect obedience to God, leaves the region of his birth to embark on an extended period of wandering in search of a promised new homeland. As a reward for his obedience, Abraham prospers and becomes rich, and ultimately is given a son, Isaac, whose very birth is miraculous because both Abraham and Sarah, his wife, are too old to have children. This is the son that God condemned to be killed, at the same time the one on whom the promised abundance of Abraham's line depends.

Some biblical linguists believe that the episode of the sacrifice was first put into writing by one of four major contributors to the book of Genesis between 850 and 750 BCE. The work of these four authors undoubtedly draws on a long oral tradition that preceded it. Once written, the accounts appear to have been skillfully combined and edited four or five hundred years later to produce the traditional Hebrew text (Mitchell, xxviii-xxviii).

Not all textual scholars accept the dates given by Mitchell for the composition of the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Estimates made during recent decades

have varied widely, between 1000 and 200 BCE (Finkelstein and Silberman, 13). Even more controversial is the conclusion arrived at by some scholars from recent archeological evidence. While excavations in the near east early in the twentieth century appeared to confirm or at least be consistent with the biblical account of Abraham, numerous incongruities between Genesis and the archeological record have now led some scholars to suggest that Abraham and the other patriarchs of the Bible could not have been historical figures (Finkelstein and Silberman, 33-36).

These revisionists believe that the stories of the patriarchs are the creations of a group of mythmakers, working under King Josiah of Judah in the latter half of the seventh century BCE (about mid-way between the dates assigned by Mitchell to the primary authors and to the editors who produced the sanctioned text). According to these scholars (who also question the historical accuracy of the stories of the Exodus, the occupation of Canaan by the Israelites, and the glories of the kingdoms of David and Solomon), the ancient mythmakers, men of undoubted genius, had a political motivation: their work was an attempt to forge a national unity and to justify territorial expansion of the kingdom of Judah under Josiah (Finkelstein and Silberman, 23). This departure from the traditional view has recently been summarized in Harper's Magazine (Lazare). Not surprisingly, a storm of objections appeared in letters published in a subsequent issue of the same magazine, accusing the original authors of, among other things, oversimplification, atheistic bias, and anti-Israeli politics (Levin, et al.).

Regardless of whether the suggestions of the revisionists are correct, it is possible to view them as examples of the exercise of reason, in which belief is conditional and, at least ideally, follows after thinking about objective evidence. On the other side is the realm of religious faith, in which belief comes first and is absolute, independent of external conditions. It is subjective and not amenable to scientific proof. Whether it exists within a structure of organized religion or not, it is

fundamentally something within an individual. One who believes religiously in the historical Abraham may engage in archeology or linguistics, but these activities will always be driven by prior belief. The two attitudes illustrate well Kierkegaard's assertion in Fear and Trembling that "faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off" (82). Events in the middle-east in the early years of the twenty-first century show that Abraham still stands at the disjunction of faith and reason.

Temple Mount (called Haran al Sharif by Palestinians) is a place in Jerusalem that is sacred to Jews and Christians for its connection to Abraham, and to Muslims for its connection to the Prophet Muhammad. Orthodox Jews and Christians believe it to be the site of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac; Muslims believe it to be the site of the Prophet's ascent to heaven. The lack of objective evidence for those beliefs, indeed the improbability of ever obtaining such evidence, is irrelevant for those holding them. The place is in an area occupied by the Israelis since 1967, although the Palestinians have continued to control the holy site itself. In September of the year 2000, just as promising talks aimed at peace between the two sides were underway, a group of Israelis forced their way onto the site, setting off a wave of fatal rioting that was fueled, at least in part, by the religious significance of the site for the adversaries (Sontag). These events greatly increased the ferocity of the conflict between the two sides and prevented, for several years, any continuing rational discussion of the differences between them.

II. SØREN KIERKEGAARD: BIOGRAPHY AND CRITICAL RECEPTION.

Søren Kierkegaard, in a rare self-deprecating mood, wrote in his journal, "I was born in 1813, in the year of the crazy money, the year when so many counterfeit notes were put into circulation. I can best be compared with one of them." (qtd. in Thompson, 8). He was referring to the bankruptcy of the Danish state, declared in January of that year, when existing currency was replaced by new notes, issued by a new state bank, at one-tenth of the previous par value. Denmark had prospered greatly throughout the eighteenth century, chiefly from its profitable merchant fleet based in Copenhagen where a wealthy group of traders had established itself. Sadly for the Danes, however, Denmark became embroiled in the Napoleonic wars, which resulted in the virtual destruction of Copenhagen by the British fleet and their confiscation of most of the Danish merchant marine. Economic recovery from this disaster was slow and coincided with a transition from prosperity based on trade to one based on agriculture, dispersed from Copenhagen to the provinces and dependent on farmers newly enfranchised by the conversion of Denmark from an absolute monarchy to a democratic state in 1849 (Kirmmse, Golden Age 21-26).

The period of relative decline of Copenhagen's trade-based wealth in the first half of the nineteenth century coincided with a flowering of intellectual and artistic productivity that is now referred to as the "Golden Age" of Denmark. The gifted writers, artists, and clerics whose work constituted the Golden Age were overwhelmingly conservative in politics and religion - monarchists and defenders of the established state church. For the most part, they were drawn from the old

trading elite who also were their main audience and who continued to dictate cultural tastes at the same time their fortunes were crumbling. Kierkegaard, although by birth only one generation removed from the peasantry, was by upbringing a member of this elite. Over his lifetime, however, he increasingly took issue with them on many matters of religion and philosophy (Kirmmse, Golden Age 1-3).

The collapse of the Danish currency in 1813 left the Kierkegaard family relatively wealthy compared to others in their social class. Kierkegaard's father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, by then 56 and retired from his lucrative businesses, had put his entire fortune in government bonds whose interest was payable only in gold and therefore immune to inflation. Michael had begun life in a shepherd family, bound to land owned by the established Danish church in the parish of Sæding in West Jutland, a remote and impoverished region of Denmark (Thompson, 23). At the age of 12 he was sent to Copenhagen to work for an uncle whose business was making stockings. He was formally released from serfdom by the church at the age of 21 and twenty years later, in 1797, had amassed enough wealth to retire. An almost unbelievable sequence of business successes and good luck, including inheriting his uncle's fortune and receiving a royal patent that allowed him to deal in imported foodstuffs and in Chinese silk, had enabled him to acquire, among other things, the town house on a major square in Copenhagen where his son, Søren, would live for two-thirds of his life (Thompson, 11-12; 23-25).

Far from being a source of comfort to him, Michael Kierkegaard's series of successes only deepened his conviction that they were part of a divine plan to punish him for his sins. Michael was a man of deep religious convictions and had an extremely somber habit of mind. As a child-shepherd, hungry, cold, and lonely, he had once cursed God for permitting his suffering. Further, he had impregnated his housekeeper, his dead wife's former maid, out-of-wedlock. These two transgressions weighed on Michael throughout his life, and with his morbid religiosity he transferred

the burden of guilt to the seven children his second wife bore him. The loss of his first wife and the premature death of five of his seven children convinced him that, as part of his punishment, he was destined to outlive his entire family (Thompson, 26-29). In his maturity, Søren came to believe that the gloomy atmosphere in which he had been raised as an impressionable child had rendered him incapable of normal family life (Thompson, 36-40).

Søren's classmates during his nine years at school tended to remember him as a solitary figure, rarely interacting in the normal give-and-take of childhood. He was forced to wear clothing of an obsolete, formal style that, combined with his physical weakness and ungainly appearance (later a source of public mortification as an adult), led Frederik Welding, Søren's contemporary, to recall that "his most striking characteristic was his oddness, his peculiarity." (qtd. in Krimmse, Encounters, 8). Surprisingly, considering his later accomplishments, he failed to impress his classmates with his wit or intellectual gifts, and was more often remembered for his skill at reading from a concealed textbook while pretending to recite from memory. The only occasions on which Søren emerged from his solitude seem to have been when he saw an opportunity to deride a fellow student, to sense and exploit his weak points, an activity he was unable to resist even though it often earned him a thrashing (Welding in Krimmse, Encounters 6-9).

Søren Kierkegaard entered Copenhagen University in 1830 at the age of 17, immediately following his school years. Like his brother Peter, eight years his senior and his only surviving sibling, he studied primarily under the theology faculty. However, unlike Peter, a brilliant if conventional student who completed his theological studies in three-and-a-half years, with a doctorate from Göttingen on the side, Søren's pursuit of knowledge was at his own pace and manifestly eclectic. Meanwhile, his eccentric schoolboy costume had been replaced by the fashionable clothes of a gentleman, as he ran up bills with the tailors, the tobacconists, and the

proprietors of the cafés and tea shops of Copenhagen (Thompson, 44-47). His father footed the bills, and even underwrote a two-month meditative vacation in the country for his son, beginning in June of 1835. A famous passage from Søren's diary at the time shows his indecision about his education and his future, the commitment to theology notwithstanding: "What I really lack is to be clear about what I am to do, not what I am to know, except insofar as some understanding must go before every action." (qtd. in Thompson, 51).

Although he may have lacked inner conviction, Søren enjoyed taking a vigorous stand during debates, solely for the sake of besting an opponent by seizing on his weak points. Alastair Hannay begins his scholarly biography of Kierkegaard by describing in detail a speech by Kierkegaard, given at the Student Union of the University shortly after his return from the country, in response to an earlier presentation by one Johannes Ostermann against government censorship. Ostermann had been a friend of Kierkegaard and was aware of his gift for oral polemic and sarcasm. He decided not to face off with him in debate and instead provided a written copy of his own previous remarks. He later recalled that Kierkegaard was "as little interested in politics then as he would be later," and that, whatever the topic, he used his erudition and humor "without bothering himself much about the reality of the matter." Ostermann felt that the public sympathy he had received had driven Kierkegaard to join "the opposite camp, where he allied himself more or less as a matter of indifference." (qtd. in Kirmmse, Encounters, 21). Kierkegaard's speech was well applauded and, together with some highly regarded newspaper articles, made him welcome in the salons of the conservative artistic and clerical elite of Denmark's "Golden Age," some of the same people he would later publicly condemn (Hannay, 1-29).

Kierkegaard's father died in 1838, leaving his younger son with a comfortable fortune and, it appears, an added resolve to complete his education. He finished his

theological degree in 1840 and, possibly with an eye to an academic post, completed his M.A. in 1841 with a treatise on Socratic irony, a device he would later adopt in his own writings. He even took practical training for a career in the ministry and preached a public sermon. All this activity seemed a preparation for a conventional married life as a cleric or a professor, with Regine Olsen, the daughter of a prominent Copenhagen burgher, whose beauty had captivated him when he was twenty-four and she only fourteen. After a decorous courtship he pressed his case and the pair became formally engaged in September of 1840. As he was later to recount in his diary, within 24 hours he regretted it, convinced that if they married, within "half a year, in less time than that, she would have torn herself apart. [. . .] no one can put up with me who has to see me day by day and thus have a real relation with me." (qtd. in Thompson, 113). The two nevertheless conformed for nearly a year to the public rituals demanded of engaged couples by Copenhagen society. When he finally returned her ring, she was unable to acknowledge that their relationship was over. In order to achieve the final break in October of 1841, Kierkegaard felt forced to "repel her with all my powers" by a show of callous indifference (qtd. in Thompson, 115). Two weeks later he fled Copenhagen for Berlin, leaving a near hysterical Regine and a society consumed with gossip about his behavior (Thompson, 91-116).

The phenomenal burst of literary activity that followed showed beyond any doubt that Kierkegaard had given up the idea of a clerical or academic career in favor of that of a writer. During the four and a half months he spent in Berlin, he completed a good portion of the lengthy Either/Or and of Fear and Trembling, his study of Abraham. These were the first of a series of books that constitute what Kierkegaard called his "ethical" or "aesthetic" literary production (Lowrie, 144). However, he also used these terms for two of the three levels of existence which, he postulated, are possible for human life. To avoid confusion, in the present discussion

the books will be referred to as the "pseudonymous" works, in that they were all presented as the work of pseudonymous authors.

Everyone knew who had written the books. Kierkegaard used the pseudonyms not to deny that he had written the books but as a way of distancing himself and his own ideas from those expressed in print. In spite of this, most critics agree that all of them, from Either/Or, published in 1843, to Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments, published in 1846, are inspired by and filled with material bearing on events in his life. Perhaps the most important of these was his broken engagement to Regine Olsen, which persisted in his imagination as an ideal, even when she became engaged to another man less than two years later. When Kierkegaard died he left her all he had, because, as he wrote, "to me an engagement was and is just as binding as a marriage, and that therefore my estate is her due exactly as if I had been married to her" (qtd. in Hannay, 419). The bequest was refused by Regine's husband to avoid scandal (Thompson 101-116; 138-42).

During the production of the pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard withdrew more and more from Copenhagen society, partly because of the time and energy consumed by the writing and partly because his broken engagement had made him unwelcome in some quarters. He continued to put in a daily appearance on the streets of Copenhagen, where he was a familiar figure as he engaged acquaintances in animated discussions, willy-nilly, while they made their way around the capital. Always the questioner and decider, never really sharing conversation on an equal basis, he relished and was nurtured by these outings. They ended when Kierkegaard became an object of public ridicule as a result of a quarrel that he initiated and pursued with a popular but disreputable Copenhagen weekly, The Corsair (Thompson, 129-37, 188).

P. L. Møller was an aspirant to a university professorship who, in 1845, made the mistake of attacking Kierkegaard's most recent book in an essay included in a

volume of literary criticism. Kierkegaard knew that Møller secretly wrote articles for The Corsair and even served as its editor on occasion. He retaliated for the attack by revealing Møller's association in a newspaper article, essentially destroying Møller's career, so unsavory was The Corsair to the university authorities. Kierkegaard continued to snipe at The Corsair itself, whose editor struck back with increasing severity, finally including drawings that caricatured Kierkegaard's odd physical appearance. The alleged difference in length of his trousers particularly caught the public's fancy, such that "small children would run up to him to stare at his pants, and once he sat down in church only to find two young men studying his legs and mocking him" (Thompson, 190). The effect of this feud was that Kierkegaard was deprived of the public life on the streets of Copenhagen he so enjoyed. He began to think of himself more and more as a solitary crusader surrounded by a corrupt society whose most important aspect was a corrupt established church (Thompson, 188-192).

All of Kierkegaard's subsequent writing bore his own name (though sometimes only as editor). It addressed more directly than before what he saw as the demands of the Christian ideal as opposed to the false comfort offered by the Danish church. The natural state of a human is "despair." The only escape is Christian faith, but that has its own brand of horror because "the believer [. . .] cannot withhold his eyes from gazing into that abyss of (humanly speaking) senseless lunacy – God in human form." In the end, "Because Christianity requires absolute respect, it must and will display itself as madness or terror" (qtd. in Thompson, 201). After 1851, Kierkegaard's literary productivity waned as his isolation grew more complete. He had aged in appearance enough to shock former friends, and he was beginning to run out of money. Then, in 1854, Bishop Mynster died, an event that aroused Kierkegaard to a final torrent of writing. Mynster was the Primate of the Danish church and also had been a kind of chaplain to the Kierkegaard

family. A friend of Kierkegaard's father, he had personally presided at young Søren's confirmation at the age of fifteen. Kierkegaard continued to call at Mynster's residence into the early 1850's, but by the time of Mynster's death he had come to believe that the bishop was the embodiment of all that was wrong with the established church (Thompson, 199-218).

The eulogy at Mynster's sumptuous funeral was given by Hans Lassen Martensen, Kierkegaard's former tutor in theology and Mynster's eventual successor as Primate. Martensen had characterized Mynster as a "witness to the truth," using a compound word (Sandhedsvidne) that was an original coinage of Kierkegaard's, a word that had appeared in six of his books to characterize those who by their suffering demonstrated the truth of genuine Christianity (Thompson, 219). Kierkegaard was furious at the use of his word to describe a man whose life now seemed to him as far removed from suffering as could be imagined. He drafted replies but held his fire for almost a year (Thompson, 222). The initial salvos, attacks on Martensen and calls to boycott the established church, took the form of twenty-one newspaper articles, only a few of which were answered by Martensen. These were followed by nine issues of a broadside, "The Instant," that Kierkegaard published with his own funds. The final polemic elicited some interest among intellectuals, but for the man in the street it was either incomprehensible or offensive. The established church all but ignored it (Thompson, 219-30).

Kierkegaard died of a respiratory infection on November 11, 1855, just after completing the final issue of The Instant. During the final hospital stay he continued to scandalize conservative Copenhagen society, first by refusing to see his brother Peter, who had traveled some distance to his bedside, and then by refusing holy communion because it had to be administered by a pastor of the Danish church, a lackey of the state (Hannay, 416). The funeral was held in the cathedral. The service was crowded with people but boycotted by the clergy, who were represented only by

the Dean of the Cathedral and Peter. In his sermon, Peter implied that his brother had attacked the church because he had gone mad. There was a great commotion at the graveside when a nephew of Kierkegaard spoke to accuse the Danish church of rape, for taking the body by force and applying its rites against the explicit desire of the deceased (Thompson, 229-38).

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Kierkegaard published his books at his own expense, receiving royalties from the bookseller in proportion to the sales. Although most were remaindered, they were widely enough read to bring him a modest profit. Events of the latter part of his life, however, – social scandal, public ridicule, and his attack on the Danish church – seem to have dampened the interest of ordinary Danes in his work. Walter Lowrie even suggests in his biography of Kierkegaard that these events are related to the sudden disfavor of Søren as a given name in Denmark in the years after Kierkegaard's death. Now, of course, his writings are studied in school for their exemplary prose style (Lowrie, 23).

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard continued to receive attention from Danish intellectuals - philosophers and theologians - but the overall judgment that was rendered tended to be qualified. Even Georg Brandes, a Danish philosopher who wrote the first monograph on Kierkegaard in 1877 and ten years later recommended Kierkegaard's work to Friedrich Nietzsche, had reservations, saying that he "wrote about Kierkegaard to free the Danes from his influence." (qtd. in Poole, 49-50).

To begin with, appreciation of Kierkegaard's thought in other countries was limited by the lack of translations from the Danish. As translations became available in the early twentieth century, his influence began to be felt. It is characteristic of Kierkegaard that his writing has had an impact on readers of very different orientations – atheists and believers, Marxists and political conservatives - and

elicited very different responses from those readers. This phenomenon stems partly from the subject matter itself and also from Kierkegaard's deliberate attempt to force his readers to grapple with the material he presents, to make them think like an author themselves rather than to be passive recipients of information. The use of pseudonyms was only one of a complex set of devices designed to accomplish that end, referred to by Kierkegaard and now commonly known as "indirect communication" (Poole, 59). Kierkegaard had a strong conviction that "the most important ethical and religious truths cannot be communicated directly" but rather require a "creative endeavor by the author and a corresponding effort by the reader" (Green, Developing 257).

Among those who wrote and thought in German, Kierkegaard's influence (acknowledged to varying degrees) has been detected in the works of philosophers Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, and of Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose resistance to the Nazi state and its acquiescent Lutheran clergyman echoed Kierkegaard's war on the established Danish Church. Franz Kafka is paramount among writers of German fiction whose work has been associated with Kierkegaard. It should be noted, however, that while some have estimated Kierkegaard's influence on Kafka's creative work to be pervasive, others consider it nonexistent. The topic "has been a minor battleground for Kafka-critics" (Sheppard, 277, Poole, 49-54). Franz Kafka's private reaction to Kierkegaard's portrait of Abraham is, of course, the central focus of this thesis.

For French writers, Kierkegaard's thought is most strongly associated with the Existentialism that flourished under Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Wahl, and others, in the mid-twentieth century. The common thread with Kierkegaard was his emphasis on the overriding importance of choice during the life of an individual. Sartre himself was a resolute atheist and Marxist and tended to discount the link others saw between his Existentialism and the severe Christianity

that drove Kierkegaard's work. Many believe that Kierkegaard formulated his category of "the absurd" in order to allow himself to accept the incarnation as the central doctrine of Christianity, in spite of its being logically unthinkable. The French existentialists appropriated the term for their idea that the world has no function such as might be required by a creator and is therefore "unnecessary"; it simply exists with no meaning accessible to thought and is therefore absurd. Albert Camus, in The Myth of Sisyphus, answers Kierkegaard's plea that man must possess an eternal spirit; otherwise "what would life be if not despair?" by affirming that man must distinguish between "that which is true" and "that which would be desirable", and that "rather than resign itself to a lie, the Absurd prefers to adopt Kierkegaard's answer: "despair"." (qtd. in Poole, 54). Interest in Kierkegaard surged as intellectuals embraced French existentialism, but it correspondingly declined somewhat at the end of the twentieth century with the ascendancy of post-modernism and its doubts about the significance or even the possibility of individual choice. The editors of a recent collection of essays entitled Kierkegaard in Post/Modernism acknowledge in their introduction that "existentialism is not the hottest ticket in town these days" (Westphal and Matušić, vii). It is characteristic of the breadth of Kierkegaard's appeal, however, that collections of this sort continue to appear. One of these includes a piece on Jaques Derrida's appreciation of Fear and Trembling (Caputo; Poole, 69-72).

The perception of Kierkegaard among those who must rely on English translations has been strongly influenced by the attitudes of two early translators, David Swenson, a professor of theology to whom Kierkegaard's writing came as a kind of Christian epiphany, and Walter Lowrie, an ordained minister who began his translations only after retirement (Poole, 59). Both brought a firm Christian conviction to their task, and in many ways they were masters of their subject. Lowrie's two-volume study, Kierkegaard, remains a definitive work, and the

translations, in spite of linguistic errors, are “often excellent (and still unsurpassed) in reproducing Kierkegaard’s supple style” (Rée and Chamberlain, 7, Note 1). Many authors, such as Louis Mackey, whose critical views are often strongly at odds with those of Swenson or Lowrie, nevertheless prefer to cite their translations, appropriately corrected (Mackey, Points of View, 40, Note 1).

Those who, like Roger Poole, approach Kierkegaard from the perspective of literary criticism, fault Swenson and Lowrie for ignoring or discounting Kierkegaard’s assertion that the pseudonymous works did not represent his own beliefs. Instead, Poole claims, they translate him “to a very great extent as an orthodox [if eloquent] Christian believer” (Poole, 59). For example, we read in Lowrie’s preface to The Concept of Dread by the pseudonymous Vigilius Haufniensis, “This was his [Kierkegaard’s] first completely serious book, and everything we find in it may safely be regarded as his own way of thinking.” (qtd. in Poole, 60). For Poole, The Concept of Dread is “probably the most ironic and certainly the most parodic of the aesthetic works” (60). One of Kierkegaard’s own statements about his authorial separation from the pseudonyms occurs in Concluding Unscientific Postscript (which, it may be relevant to note, is also a pseudonymous work): “in the pseudonymous works there is not a single word that is mine, I have no opinion about these works except as a third person, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader” (qtd. in Taylor, 15-16).

The use of pseudonyms is the most obvious feature of Kierkegaard’s indirect communication, but Poole identifies several others (59). Kierkegaard’s incessant use of irony has the effect of leaving the reader always in some degree of doubt as to his intent. He added to the doubt by issuing, under his own name, a series of Edifying Discourses, timed to coincide with the appearance of his pseudonymous works. The Edifying Discourses are relatively straightforward sermon-like discussions of theological issues whose style is in strong contrast to that of the pseudonymous

works. Finally, there is Kierkegaard's deliberate cultivation of a genial and somewhat sybaritic public personality. Such a perception of him was designed to "subvert the expectations about him personally that had been set up by his works, both edifying and esthetic" (Poole, 59).

One of the many unpublished manuscripts found among Kierkegaard's effects after his death bore the title, The Point of View for My Work as an Author. Some critics, such as Ronald M. Green, seem to take its contents at face value, accepting Kierkegaard's affirmation that he had been trying with each work to provide his readers with a path to authentic Christianity (257). Others question this assumption. For example, Bruce Kirmmse, no doubter of Kierkegaard's religious sincerity, considers The Point of View to be "one of several highly tendentious essays in self-interpretation," to which he offers his own Encounters With Kierkegaard as a corrective (xi). Arguments from both perspectives are presented in a recent volume of Kierkegaard criticism, whose editors regard their book as a collective exploration of the extent to which Green's assumption is valid. There is a strong suspicion among some that Kierkegaard had not put his irony aside, even as he 'explained' his writing, in The Point of View (Rée and Chamberlain, 5).

Through Kierkegaard, W.H. Auden found his way back to a Christian belief he had earlier abandoned. He edited an anthology of Kierkegaard's writings in 1955 in which he styled him as "neither a poet, nor a philosopher, but a preacher, an expounder and defender of Christian doctrine and Christian conduct" (Qtd. in Rée and Chamberlain, 3). At the opposite extreme is John Updike, who admired the literary brilliance combined with the elusiveness of meaning in the pseudonymous works. He wrote a very negative review for The New Yorker of a book of translations from Kierkegaard's later journals, because for him the selections represented a Kierkegaard whose mind "had narrowed to a very hard point" of religiosity, who had been reduced to a state of "pathological vehemence" (Updike, The Fork, 166).

Kierkegaard had been nicknamed Fork as a child because of his greedy table manners, to which he is said to have replied, "I am a fork, and I will stick you" (Qtd. in Updike, *The Fork*, 166). Updike titled his review "The Fork," in appreciation of "this two-tined Fork [. . .] this man in love with duplicity and irony and all double-edged things" who is "nowhere quite free of sophism and vanity" (182).

It is probably best to assume, as Roger Poole does, that there is no single correct way to read Kierkegaard and that it is futile to look for a key of any kind that will definitively reveal Kierkegaard's hidden intention. Poole categorically dismisses the readings of philosophers or theologians who try to force-fit Kierkegaard's meaning into a single canon. For Poole, "Kierkegaard's text does not offer itself to be the object of the question 'What does it mean?' It offers itself as the proponent of the question 'What do you think?'" (62). Such was Franz Kafka's reaction to Fear and Trembling. While rejecting the picture of Abraham that Kierkegaard appeared to be painting, he was moved to think of other Abrahams who better fit the world as he perceived it.

III. FRANZ KAFKA: BIOGRAPHY AND CRITICAL RECEPTION.

Franz Kafka's life was tied to his home city of Prague much as Kierkegaard's had been to Copenhagen, but where Kierkegaard embraced the connection, Kafka tended to complain about it. At the age of nineteen, Kafka wrote to Oskar Pollak, a friend from secondary school, "Prague doesn't let go. This old crone has claws. One has to yield, or else. We would have to set fire to it on two sides [. . .] only then would it be possible for us to get away." (Qtd in Ripellino, 5). Kafka never escaped, though he dreamed of the possibilities that his first job, with a private international insurance company, might sometime offer him of "sitting in chairs in faraway countries, looking out of office windows at fields of sugar cane or Mohammedan cemeteries" (qtd. in Wagenbach, 58).

Kafka's Prague was cosmopolitan where Kierkegaard's Copenhagen was provincial. As a capital, on and off, of the Holy Roman Empire since the 14th century, and as an administrative center of the Habsburg dynasty of Austria, Prague, with its ancient university, was a cultural magnet over the years, attracting gifted people from France, Italy, Germany, and Austria. Kafka himself spoke French and Italian, in addition to his native German and Czech, and his acquired Yiddish. In spite of never straying very far, for very long, from his native city, he has been cited as "the most cosmopolitan of all German-language writers" (Preece, 1).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Prague had over 400,000 ethnic Czechs, more than ten times the number of those whose native language was German. Because of Prague's ties to the Habsburg Empire, however, the German-speaking

minority had privileged access to jobs and to educational, cultural, and recreational facilities, all of which tended to be segregated according to language (Ripellino, 19-20). Over two-thirds of the German-speaking citizens were of Jewish extraction. Although institutionalized anti-Semitism existed, the barriers that were erected against Jews could often be overcome, as they were for Kafka's employment in 1908 in a state-affiliated agency (Hayman, 69). Some degree of flexibility was an advantage in administering a multi-ethnic empire, but with the rapid collapse of the Habsburg regime and the establishment of the Czech Republic in 1918, Kafka's Prague underwent a transformation even more far-reaching than Kierkegaard's Copenhagen did with the establishment of democratic government in Denmark in 1849 (Kirmmse, Golden Age 21-26). The long-mounting force of Czech nationalism expressed itself in events that were both anti-German and anti-Semitic (Wagengach, 11). Rioting in Prague during the autumn of 1920 led Kafka to observe, with a note of self-hatred, that "To stay on here regardless would be no more heroic than cockroaches are when they can't be driven out from the bathroom." (qtd. in Hayman, 260).

Like Kierkegaard's father, Kafka's father was born into extreme poverty, the son of a butcher in a Jewish community in rural Bohemia. At the age of ten, wearing the same clothes winter and summer, Hermann Kafka pushed a cart loaded with his father's meat on a weekly circuit of the nearby towns, only returning home for Sabbath. He left home at fifteen, lived as an itinerant peddler, and finally established himself in Prague as a wholesaler of women's clothing and luxury items. Possessed of enormous energy and physically imposing, he never spared himself, and he expected his family to be equally committed to working in the businesses whose success provided them with their comfortable bourgeois life. He totally dominated his son Franz along with everyone else, including his wife and daughters. His wife's family,

the Löwys, were not so exclusively practical but also included dreamers and intellectuals. Franz seems to have taken after the Löwys (Wagenbach, 7-10).

Hermann Kafka considered himself a Jew, of course, but looked down on Eastern Jews and Yiddish culture. He did not attend services except on the high holy days, which he expected his family to observe. At the same time, he was a loyal subject of the Austrian Kaiser, Franz Josef, in whose army he was proud to have served and whose name he bestowed on his first-born son in 1883. He believed that attaining high social status was the principal goal in life, and for the rural Jew whose native language was Czech, this could only be achieved by amassing wealth and mingling with the German-speaking elite of Prague, of which the Löwys were already members. The family usually spoke German among themselves but conducted business in Czech and had Czech servants and employees, whom they treated with the utmost condescension. Hermann Kafka considered them "paid enemies" (qtd. in Hayman, 13). He sent all his children, Franz and his three sisters, to German schools (Wagenbach, 11-13).

Beginning at the age of six, Franz attended an expensive German elementary school for boys, escorted there by the sadistic family cook (Czech, of course) who repeatedly terrorized the sensitive boy by threatening to tell the school authorities how naughty he had been. While there, also, he was sometimes caught up in brawls between the German students and those from the neighboring Czech school. At the end of his fourth year, the standard time for advancing to the Gymnasium, his teacher advised the Kafkas to keep him at the school for an additional year because of his physical frailty. He nevertheless took the entrance examination, expected with his usual pessimism to fail, but passed instead, and started at the Gymnasium in the autumn of 1893, at the age of ten (Hayman, 14-20).

The particular Gymnasium that Hermann Kafka had chosen, with an eye for his son's future career, traditionally supplied the Empire with its administrators

(Wagenbach, 21). It was the strictest in Prague, both in enforcing formalities of behavior (such as bowing to teachers) and in its high academic standards. Learning by rote dominated the curriculum. Later Kafka wrote of his poor performance at the Gymnasium, but records show that he excelled in all his subjects except for mathematics. (Hayman, 21-33; Wagenbach, 21-24).

Like Kierkegaard, Kafka struck his fellow-students as isolated and difficult to approach. One said, "Something like a glass wall constantly surrounded him. With his quiet, kindly smile he opened the world up for himself, but he locked himself up in front of it." (qtd. in Hayman, 21). Unlike Kierkegaard, he never baited his classmates, tattled, or acted the kill-joy. He would take part if asked but never began anything, and this passive behavior persisted through his life. (Hayman, 21-22). He had two or three close friends during his school years. Maybe the most important of these was Oskar Pollak, the one to whom he had complained about Prague's laws. The extroverted Pollak had a strong influence on Kafka, who sought his approval for his early attempts at writing. Kafka's style was influenced, for a time, by Pollak's admiration of a literary movement that celebrated nature and folklore by using "pseudo-archaic and folksy" words. The artificial diction that resulted was far removed from that of Kafka's mature years (Wagenbach, 36-38, 41-42).

Prague's ancient university was actually two universities in 1901, sharing facilities but partitioned physically as well as psychologically and linguistically into German and Czech parts. Kafka began a course of study in chemistry in the German university that year, but after only two weeks switched to law, mainly to please his father who knew a law degree could open the door to many different kinds of jobs. He loathed the study of law. In the undelivered "Letter to my Father," one hundred pages of accusation mixed with self-analysis, Kafka later described his feelings: "That meant that in the few months before the examinations, while wearing out my

nerves at a great rate, intellectually I fed myself exclusively on sawdust – sawdust, too, which had already been chewed by thousands of jaws before me.” (qtd. in Brod, 41). In June of 1906 Kafka was awarded the Doctorate in Law (Hayman, 34-55).

At the university, Kafka met Max Brod, a fellow-student who was to become both a life-long confidant and the most significant single influence on his literary career. Brod encouraged Kafka’s writing and later helped it into print through his connections with the publishing world. Their first encounter was at a session of the student literary society, where Brod read a paper praising Schopenhauer and vilifying Nietzsche. Kafka, a devotee of Nietzsche, was so upset he overcame his usual reserve and walked home with Brod, protesting the extreme position he had taken. They went on to compare their literary tastes for other authors, which often were very different. Brod, forceful and gregarious, was attracted by Kafka’s quiet conviction and moderation. He introduced Kafka to the bars and coffee houses that were haunts of the Prague literati. He was a gifted pianist and composer and had literary ambitions himself. Like Kafka, Brod studied the law in order to earn a living at government jobs in postal and financial institutions while establishing himself as a novelist and critic. (Brod, 39-47; Hayman, 38-39; Wagenbach, 60-62).

In 1908, after the short stint with a private insurance company (which proved to be more harrowing than he had expected), Kafka joined the “Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia, in Prague,” a quasi-governmental office. His qualification in law had enabled him to find the “single shift” job he wanted, one with continuous hours from early morning until two or three in the afternoon (Brod, 79). This arrangement, he felt, would leave him a generous block of time each day for his writing, which he believed would suffer artistically if it were not kept utterly separate from the business of earning a living. He remained with the Institute until 1922, when deteriorating health forced him into early retirement. (Brod, 78-80; Wagenbach, 58-64).

Kafka complained endlessly to his friends and in his journals and diaries about the stultifying effect of working within this bureaucratic establishment. In his fiction he often described, with unforgettable horror, the struggle of an individual against such an impersonal and often irrational organization. Yet the facts of his employment seem to belie these attitudes. He was regularly promoted throughout his tenure from his original position as a 'temporary civil servant' to his final status of 'Senior Secretary.' He was extremely well-liked by his supporting staff, largely Czech. He visited factories to monitor working conditions and was effective at drafting technical reports and recommendations, aimed at a reluctant business community, for improving the safety of workers. He showed his sympathy with these workers in a letter to Brod: "How modest these men are. They come to us and beg. Instead of storming the institute and smashing it to little pieces, they come and beg." (qtd. in Brod, 82; Wagenbach, 54-71).

With few exceptions, Kafka drew the female characters in his fiction unflatteringly. They were unfaithful, manipulative, unreliable, often gross and domineering. In life, Kafka's relationships with women were troubled. It is clear, however, that many women found Kafka attractive. Beginning at age twenty and continuing until his death at forty, Kafka had numerous affairs, two of which led to strong emotional involvements on his part. One of these, with a married woman he met when she approached him for permission to translate his writing into Czech, ended because she could not bring herself to leave her husband, as Kafka wished. The other was with a young woman of orthodox background, half his age, whose father denied Kafka permission to marry because of his unorthodoxy. She nevertheless stayed with him for the last six months of his life.

He became formally engaged three times, twice to the same woman, but never married in spite of declaring, throughout his life, that he longed to establish a family. Like Kierkegaard, Kafka thought that his personality and his devotion to

literature had made him unfit for marriage. He warned his first fiancée, Felice Bauer, that he would be willing "to renounce the greatest human happiness [i.e., family life] for the sake of writing." He admired other writers who had remained unmarried to pursue their art, such as Franz Grillparzer, Heinrich von Kleist, and Gustave Flaubert, and observed bitterly that Kleist, a suicide, was "perhaps the only one to find the right solution" (Qtd. in Hayman, 167). When he wrote to Felice's father for permission to marry, he assured him that he would make a poor son-in-law because he was temperamentally unsuited for domesticity (Diaries 1910-1913, 298-300). Felice's father nevertheless gave his permission. Kafka's father also approved, and Kafka and Felice became formally engaged in April of 1914. He thereupon pursued an affair with one of Felice's closest friends, Grete Bloch, essentially forcing Felice to break the engagement in August of the same year (Hayman, 174-80).

Even so, Kafka maintained contact by letter with Felice (who lived and worked in Berlin), sometimes with Grete acting as intermediary. After a joint vacation at Marienbad they again became engaged, in July of 1917. As with the earlier engagement, part of Kafka hoped for the stability that a commitment might give his life, but at the same time he continued to have misgivings about compromising his writing. In August of that year, Kafka experienced his first tubercular hemorrhage, giving him a reason to break the engagement for good in December, apparently with a sense of relief (Hayman, 222-33).

From his days at the Gymnasium, the desire to write something significant never left Kafka, but he was so self-critical that he submitted little for publication. He had a total of seven items accepted in his lifetime: three were collections of stories and prose fragments, and four were longish stories published on their own. All but one had fewer than 100 pages. His three novels, all incomplete, were never submitted. If it were not for Max Brod, it is quite possible that Kafka would now be an unknown author. Brod continually reassured him that his work was good. He

introduced him to Kurt Wolff, the Leipzig publisher who accepted all but one of his books. Most importantly, when Kafka gave Brod the bulk of his unpublished work, with the strict injunction to destroy it after his death, Brod did no such thing. In fact, he compiled and revised it and did his best to put it before the public. It is hard to imagine that if Kafka really wanted his work destroyed he would have given it to the one person he must have known would not do so.

On September 22, 1912, in a single sitting of eight hours, Kafka wrote the twenty manuscript pages of "The Judgment" (Das Urteil), the story that marked the beginning of his mature work. He was physically exhausted but elated by the experience, which came as a revelation to him even after fourteen years of trying to write. He described it shortly afterward in his diary (Hayman, 1; Wagenbach, 78-79):

The fearful strain and joy, how the story developed before me, as if I were advancing over water. [. . .] How everything can be said, how for everything, for the strangest fancies, there waits a great fire in which they perish and rise up again. [. . .] Only in this way can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening out of the body and the soul.

(Kafka, Diaries 1910-13, 276)

From then on Kafka tried to duplicate the conditions that had so stimulated his creative powers: absolute silence during an extended period of intense concentration, with no interruptions from the outside world. When he wrote "The Judgment" he was still living in a room in his parents' apartment where the only way he could escape the noise of the household was to write through the night after everybody else had gone to bed.

The demands he felt the outside world was making of him - to earn a respectable living at the Insurance Institute, to be a dutiful son for his father, to marry and have a family - were always seen by Kafka as pernicious to his writing,

even though they were really a stimulus to it and, as Wagenbach pointed out, provided the raw material for it (127-28). For example, just before he wrote "The Judgment" Kafka had begun to court Felice Bauer. The euphoria Kafka felt at the beginning of this relationship, which ultimately he could not bear to pursue to its conclusion, led to a period of productive writing that includes not only "The Judgment," but most of his novel "Amerika" and perhaps his best known story, "The Metamorphosis," also known as "The Transformation" (Wagenbach, 78). In 1977, Corngold cited the "distinctive power to compel interpretation" of "The Judgment," noting that it had already inspired around one hundred separate attempts to do so (39). The bare outline of the story (which Kafka dedicated to Bauer) illustrates Wagenbach's thesis without any need for additional comment.

The protagonist of the story has successfully taken over his father's business. He has become engaged, is happily awaiting marriage, and is pondering whether to invite an unmarried friend to the celebration. He asks his father for advice. He is living alone with this half-demented and domineering man. The question provokes an abusive outburst from the father, who crudely criticizes the fiancée, savagely attacks the son's character, and, finally, sitting in judgment, condemns him to death by drowning. The son obediently jumps into the river, saying "Dear parents, I have always loved you."

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There were not quite seven years between Kafka's first tubercular hemorrhage in 1917 and his death from the disease in 1924. Despite his tuberculosis, Kafka by no means felt his death was imminent. He believed that his disease came largely from some correctable imbalance within himself, physical or psychological. He was skeptical of conventional medical practice and resisted following mainstream medical advice. Instead, he looked to naturopathy in its various forms: diet (he often practiced vegetarianism), fresh air, heat, cold, exercise.

Even before his illness showed itself he sought "cures" at spas, popular vacation sites at that time for both the sick and the well. When given sick-leave, he combined it with vacation leave to stay at these establishments. The length of the sick-leaves gradually increased until finally, with no prospect of recovery for several years, Kafka was permanently retired on July 1, 1922.

He continued to write throughout his illness. His observations on Kierkegaard's Abraham began in 1917, while he was recuperating from his first hemorrhage; they resumed in 1921, in letters to Doctor Robert Klopstock, who had been a fellow-patient during an 8-month stay at a "chest clinic" in the mountains of Slovakia (Hayman, 262). He finished nine chapters of his last novel, "The Castle" (Das Schloss), in 1922. He wrote his final story only three months before his death and was correcting proofs less than one month before he died.

The last year of Kafka's life was brightened by Dora Diamant, an idealistic rebel half his age from an orthodox Jewish-Polish family, who had fled to Germany to work for various Jewish charities there. By September of 1923 the two were living together in Berlin. It was a happy time for them in spite of Kafka's continuing physical deterioration and the enormous inflation that made it hard to obtain even the necessities of life. Max Brod visited the couple while he was in Berlin on business in March of 1924. Alarmed by Kafka's weakness, he persuaded him to return to his parents' apartment in Prague. Persistent throat pain and inability to speak eventually convinced him to enter a sanatorium.

Accompanied by Dora, he traveled to an institution near Vienna where his fears that the infection had spread to his larynx were confirmed. Treatment was begun at a Viennese clinic that combined the finest medical staff with the most appalling conditions for the patients, who were continually surrounded by the dying because there were no private rooms. Dora was joined there by Robert Klopstock. Against the advice of the staff in Vienna, Dora and Klopstock moved Kafka to more

cheerful surroundings in a private hospital where they both cared for him. By now nothing could be done medically except to try to ease the pain in his throat which prevented him from swallowing. Kafka died from starvation and dehydration on June 3, 1924. His body was buried in the family grave in the Jewish cemetery in Prague.

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Only three of the seven books that Kafka himself prepared for publication had sales that warranted a second printing (Wagenbach, 92-94). A handful of intellectuals admired them, but Kafka had not reached the audience that Max Brod believed he deserved. When Kafka died, Brod devoted himself to seeing into print all of Kafka's unpublished works that were in his hands: stories, diaries, and letters, as well as the three unfinished novels. Of these last, The Trial (Der Prozess) was published in 1925, one year after Kafka's death, The Castle (Das Schloss) in 1926, and The Man Who Disappeared (Der Verschollene, renamed Amerika by Brod) in 1927. None sold well (Samuelson, viii).

Brod then convinced a group of distinguished writers, including Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse, to release an open letter urging that Kafka's collected works constituted such an important contribution to German letters they deserved to be published as a series, regardless of sales. A publisher was found (Brod's original publishers had gone bankrupt in Germany's economic chaos), but the project had to be cancelled when the Nazis came to power in 1933 (Samuelson, viii).

At the same time that increasingly severe restrictions on Jewish activity of all kinds were put in place in the years leading up to the outbreak of war, a single firm, Schocken Verlag, was permitted to continue publishing the work of Jewish authors. Brod gave Schocken, whose books could not legally be sold to non-Jews, exclusive international rights to all of Kafka's works under his control. The books began to appear in 1934. When war began in 1939, Schocken relocated briefly in Prague, then in Palestine, and finally in New York City, where the German editions of Brod as well

as existing translations continued to be produced, and new translations from the German were commissioned (Samuelson, viii-x).

Among Kafka scholars, Brod "combines the reputation of a 'Judas' with that of an 'Evangelist'" (Durrani, 207). All praise him for encouraging Kafka to write and publish while he was alive, for gathering his manuscripts after his death, keeping them together during his own flight from Prague to Palestine in 1939, and finally for sending them to a vault in Switzerland for safekeeping in 1956 upon the threat of war in the Middle East. (Durrani, 207-8).

On the other hand, Brod's editorial work has been criticized for being heavy-handed, especially in his early attempts when he tried to make Kafka accessible to as large an audience as possible. For example, he deleted nearly one-fifth of the text of The Castle (Pasley, 318). To attract a wider audience, he changed the title of Kafka's first novel, The Man Who Disappeared, to America. He also removed significant blocks of text, made literally thousands of smaller changes, and contrived an inappropriately optimistic ending (Hofmann, viii-ix). Perhaps inevitably, he superimposed his own ideas onto the texts he edited, and these ideas were reflected in the early translations from the German. Brod's editions were the only texts available because he consistently denied access to the manuscripts under his control. Unaccountably, he bequeathed the manuscript of The Trial, a personal gift to him from Kafka, to his secretary, who sold it off page-by-page to collectors on Brod's death in 1968. (Durrani, 208-214).

The manuscripts stored in the Swiss vault were moved to the Bodleian Library at Oxford in 1961 when the English scholar, Malcolm Pasley, persuaded Kafka's heirs to facilitate access to them. Thanks to an international group of scholars, they have become the principal source of the standard 'academic' edition, of which Pasley is a co-editor, of all of Kafka's works. The project was begun in the 1970s by S. Fischer Verlag with financial support from the German government. The first volume of

seventeen planned, The Castle, appeared in 1982, and the series was still incomplete in 2002 (Samuelson, xi-xii; Preece, xiv-xv). Yet a third approach is now underway, featuring 15 planned volumes of facsimiles of the handwritten manuscripts. The publisher's aim is to "liberate Kafka's texts from the Kafkaologists" by allowing each reader to decide how to decipher the texts (Durrani, 213).

Despite the enthusiasm for Kafka expressed by German writers in the 1930s, the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazi government ensured that the works of one of their most important authors would not be widely read by the German public until after the collapse of the Third Reich. The situation was quickly reversed, and now Kafka studies abound in academic circles. For example, well over two-thirds of the references in a review entitled, "The Historical Kafka," written in English in 1992, are to articles written in German. Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin are two of the many critics who wrote definitively about Kafka in the German language.

Appreciation of Kafka by the French was stimulated by Albert Camus in "The Myth of Sisyphus," his long essay on the need for effort and persistence in the face of absurdity. Camus appended an appreciation of Kafka to this essay, in which he cited Kafka's novel, The Castle, as an illustration of how persistence toward a meaningless goal can lead to a kind of fulfillment. Writing in 1980, Claude David, the Kafka critic who edited and annotated the definitive French translations of the Kafka manuscripts, took sharp exception to the views of Camus: "Thirty years ago Kafka was dubbed the poet of the absurd by Albert Camus. We must finally free ourselves from this empty and misleading formula." According to David, Kafka strove most of all for meaning in his work, however fantastic his imagery, and felt repelled by Kierkegaard's idea, expressed in Fear and Trembling (136-44), that any meaning that can be conveyed by language is absent from the religious level of existence (David, 83). A second French critic and historian of Existentialism, Jean Wahl, also explored the relationship between Kafka and Kierkegaard as shown by Kafka's

reaction to Fear and Trembling. The views of both David and Wahl will be considered in more detail elsewhere in this thesis.

In the English-speaking world, there was a surge of interest in Kafka's work immediately following World War II. College students with any pretensions to literary sophistication were familiar with his most popular stories, such as "The Metamorphosis" and "In the Penal Colony" (Samuelson, x). Like Kierkegaard's, Kafka's audience has probably diminished at the start of the twenty-first century compared to that of the 1950s. His influence remains pervasive, however. It can be seen, explicitly and implicitly throughout Elizabeth Costello, a recent novel of J.M. Coetzee, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003 (Lodge).

Kafka readers of the 1950s knew him through the English translations of Edwin and Willa Muir, taken from Brod's German editions. In addition to Kafka, the Muirs translated the work of other modernist Austrian authors into English, and Edwin Muir was a critic and poet in his own right. They have been criticized by more recent translators for a tendency to soften Kafka's German in their English renditions, and they have also been accused of abetting Brod's religious/allegorical interpretations of Kafka's work. In their defense, Brod's texts were the only ones available, and they had to turn to him when there were problems (Durrani, 214-15; Harman, xiii-xiv). An example of Brod's allegorical interpretation that is directly related to this thesis comes in his "Afterword" to the first edition of Kafka's posthumous novel, The Castle, published in 1926. Brod noted that Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling was "a work that Kafka loved much, read often, and profoundly commented on in many letters." In one of the episodes of The Castle, an authority figure demands the performance of an immoral act. For Brod, this was "literally a parallel to Kierkegaard's book, which starts from the fact that God required of Abraham what was really a crime, the sacrifice of his child." Kafka has used Kierkegaard's structure to illustrate "the incommensurability of earthly and religious

aims" (qtd. and trans. in Burke, 32). The allegorical approach to Kafka's work was dominant in literary analysis for some time but now has largely been abandoned (Harman, xiii-xiv).

The case against allegory was stated with conviction by Erich Heller: "The Castle is as much religious allegory as a photographic likeness of the devil in person could be said to be an allegory of Evil." What Kafka gives us and what the protagonist of the novel (Kafka himself, as many think) perceives is no literary concoction; it is "a castle that is a castle and 'symbolizes' what all castles symbolize: power and authority" (102-103). Heller himself, who read Kafka deeply and edited recent editions of his work, sees the philosophy of Schopenhauer as a valuable key to understanding all of Kafka's protagonists as they act out what Heller calls their "drama of individuation" (23).

In their guide to Kafka's novels, Speirs and Sandberg marshal evidence against Heller's views as well as against other philosophical interpretations of Kafka. They also point to flaws in the allegorical/religious, the psychological, and, in principle, any other critical stance that depends on the perspective of some external "system." For them, "it will probably never be possible to arrive at a single, demonstrably correct or exhaustive reading of his stories or novels." They believe that this is so primarily because of the "eidetic" nature of Kafka's imagination, by which they mean the overwhelming importance of precise visualization as the driving-force of his fiction (17-28). His work begins with mental images, which he pursues emotionally rather than according to any predetermined structure, resulting in what Heller has called "the most obscure lucidity in the history of literature" (ix).

Speirs and Sandberg acknowledge that critics, in contrast to writers of fiction, are forced to use rational means to advance whatever reading of Kafka they favor, but in the process they must be careful to avoid reducing Kafka's "disruptive strangeness into more familiar and less unsettling terms" (19). In the current

discussion an effort has been made to avoid reading Kafka's text according to any particular "system," but rather to attempt the highly personal engagement of the reader with the author that his work demands.

IV. KIERKEGAARD'S ABRAHAM AND THE ABSURD AS A PROPERTY OF THE RELIGIOUS STATE

Kierkegaard was too good a psychologist not to recognize that all his artistic production had its origin in the experiences of his life. In Two Ages, an extensive literary review published three years after his account of Abraham in Fear and Trembling, he elaborated on why he thought it was nevertheless important for him to hide his own way of thinking (and feeling). He believed that through indirect communication he could transform his own experiences in their "primitive" state into an "ideality" by means of his imagination. He thought that any attempt to communicate experience directly is not a legitimate artistic activity but rather only "a kind of private talkativeness," diverting the reader's attention from the author's ideas onto the author himself. According to Kierkegaard's theory, "ideality" ought to contain both the original inspiration to creativity and its opposite, both happiness and unhappiness for example, for "ideality is the equilibrium of opposites." For any author, "silence, the brackets he puts around his own personality, is precisely the condition for gaining ideality (qtd. in Hong and Hong, ix-x). The exact meaning of Kierkegaard's theory and the extent to which he has applied it successfully in Fear and Trembling is arguable. No matter how much critics may disagree in other ways about this book, however, they are nearly unanimous that the specific biographical influences found throughout the pseudonymous work are especially prominent in it.

The pseudonymous author of Fear and Trembling is Johannes de Silentio (John of Silence). The pseudonym is thought to have been borrowed from one of the Grimms' fairytales that involves the sacrifice of sons and their restoration to life

(Hannay, 10, footnote)). Like Kierkegaard, Johannes has been raised a Christian. He stands in awe of Abraham's astonishing demonstration of faith in God. But he confesses repeatedly that, try as he may, he cannot "understand" Abraham. Clearly, Johannes's difficulty illustrates Kierkegaard's major tenet of the incompatibility of faith (or religion) and reason. There are other times when the views or attributes of Kierkegaard coincide with those of the pseudonym. Kierkegaard considered himself a poet. Johannes says he is a poet (and not a philosopher) (43). In another place, Johannes contradicts himself and says he is no poet but a dialectician (116). In spite of the importance Kierkegaard attached to indirect communication, the following discussion will nevertheless refer to him, not Johannes de Silentio, as the author of Fear and Trembling. This is partly for the sake of brevity, but also because it is hard to believe that the distinction between himself and his pseudonym in the final product is as complete as Kierkegaard might have wished it to be.

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In the epigraph for Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard warns the reader that the following portrait of Abraham has a cryptic quality, with significance beyond the literal sense of the text (39). It is a quotation from Johann Georg Hamann, a German thinker known for his belief in the superiority of faith over reason (Hong and Hong, Notes 3391). It describes a semi-mythical incident in which a king of ancient Rome sent his son a message consisting entirely of a symbolic gesture, knowing that his son would understand his meaning but that it would be completely hidden from the messenger.

The subtitle of Fear and Trembling is "Dialectical Lyric." Alastair Hannay sees the book as divided, more or less, into a lyrical first half and a dialectical second (13-15), but signs of both the poet and the philosopher are scattered throughout the work. As a lyrical work it can be considered an ode, traditionally a long and complex poem of praise, celebrating some abstract virtue. Kierkegaard praises the biblical

Abraham in the act of sacrificing Isaac in order to celebrate faith. True to the form of an ode, Fear and Trembling is a complex celebration. It is written in eight sections of contrasting tone and content. The whole work is bracketed by a Preface and an Epilogue, both of which use metaphors of commerce to present Kierkegaard's perception of the corrupt and comfortable state of Christianity that prevails in Denmark in 1843, where faith has become too easy (41-43; 145-47).

After the Preface, the lyrical first half of the book begins with an introductory section that Kierkegaard has titled "Exordium," the title of the opening statement of a classical oration (Hong and Hong, 245). Hannay has used "Attunement" in his translation, to convey the idea of bringing the reader to the proper state of mind for what is to follow (13, 45). It is a fable about a man like Kierkegaard who, though steeped since childhood in the story of Abraham, is driven to re-imagine Abraham's sacrificial journey to Moriah in the hope of understanding the quality of Abraham's faith. He tells four versions of the story, each conveying a different perspective of Abraham's anguish at the prospect of losing Isaac. Ultimately, the exhausted narrator is forced to conclude that he has failed (44-48). He has made Abraham "intelligible," but he has failed to grasp the quality of Abraham's faith because thought and reason (and words, the tools of thought) are inadequate in that realm (Hannay, 13). In his critical biography of Kierkegaard, Josiah Thompson observes about this section, "In all of Kierkegaard's writings there is nothing so powerful or so characteristic" (168).

Another introductory section follows, the "Speech in Praise of Abraham." This time, Kierkegaard's poetry is in the style of a formal oration, reflecting again on the ultimate inadequacy of any words to praise Abraham's greatness. It reminds the reader that Abraham's faith in his identity as the chosen of God began early in his life and persisted during the long wanderings and the delayed, miraculous paternity that preceded the culminating event on Mount Moriah. Finally, it underscores its

ultimate test and reward: that Abraham's faith in God enables him to keep Isaac at the same time that he gives him up for sacrifice (49-56).

The analytical second half of Fear and Trembling is organized into three "Problemata," questions designed to explore three essential aspects of Abraham's behavior. Before addressing these questions, however, Kierkegaard inserts yet another introduction, much longer than the other two (57-82). Hannay translates Kierkegaard's Danish title (literally "Preliminary Unbosoming") as "Preamble from the Heart" (14). As suggested by the title, Kierkegaard's tone here is personal rather than rhetorical. He begins by attacking the superficiality of the Danish church and the Danish clergy by describing a hypothetical preacher who can speak about Abraham's faith from the pulpit without a trace of emotional engagement. Confronted with the real thing, however, when he learns that one of the parishioners who heard his sermon took it literally and is thinking of proving his faith by killing his own son, he feels the passion he should have felt for Abraham (58-60).

In the next section Kierkegaard presents the idea he will explore throughout the remainder of the book, namely that to understand the nature of religious faith, it is necessary to realize that it must be attained in two separate stages. The first stage requires what Kierkegaard calls the movement of "infinite resignation" (67), the willingness to give up that which is dearest on earth, as judged by the universal values of the community. For Abraham, this is Isaac, and Abraham's immense love for Isaac is a necessary precondition for his attaining the "movement of faith," (64), the second stage, which consists in belief "on the strength of the absurd" (65). Abraham's faith was based "on the strength of the absurd, for there could be no question of human calculation, and it was indeed absurd that God who demanded this of him should in the next instant withdraw the demand" (65). But the absurdity of Abraham's belief goes even further. "His faith was not that he should be happy somewhere in the hereafter, but that he should find happiness here in the world. God

could give him a new Isaac, bring the sacrificial offering back to life. He believed on the strength of the absurd, for all human calculation had long since been suspended” (65).

Those who make the movements are knights - knights of infinite resignation who have made only the first movement, and knights of faith who have made both movements. Kierkegaard says that “the knights of infinite resignation are readily recognizable, their gait is gliding, bold.” The knights of faith may be harder to identify. Although Abraham himself is the prototypic knight of faith, others may resemble “what infinite resignation itself as much as faith scorns, namely the bourgeois philistine” (67).

While Kierkegaard confesses he has never knowingly seen one, he imagines in some detail such a knight of faith. The ironic and amusing picture he paints is that of a “tax-gatherer,” a man who “belongs entirely to the world, no petit bourgeois belongs to it more.” He is completely engaged in the here and now. He enjoys throwing himself full-force into everything – his business, his church-going, his recreation. In telling this story Kierkegaard is making first the obvious point that a knight of faith cannot be identified from the outside or from the position he or she occupies, “whether a professor of philosophy or a poor serving-maid” (67). The second and more important point is that the “tax-gatherer” is unrecognizable as a knight because he gains finitude by making the movement of faith while “at every moment making the movement of infinity.” He suffers the pain of infinite resignation, but, miraculously, he has taken “everything back on the strength of the absurd” (69-70). He has faith that, after his Sunday stroll, his wife will greet him with “some special little warm dish for his return, for example roast head of lamb with vegetables” even though, “as it happens, he hasn’t a penny” (69). Roast lamb or Isaac alive, the principle is the same.

But because “this marvel [the tax-gatherer] can so easily deceive”, Kierkegaard ends his introduction with another example, a fable from real life in which both knights play a part (70). They are rival suitors seeking the hand of the same princess, and neither of them has the slightest hope of succeeding. The knight of resignation, living in the ethical (or universal) level of existence, where reason applies, gains “peace and repose and consolation in the pain” (74), but the knight of faith gets the girl by believing in the impossible (75-78). In this parable Kierkegaard allows the event that was a major driving force for the book, his broken engagement to Regine Olsen, to come very close to the surface. (Kierkegaard wrote in his journal entry of May 17, 1843, when he had escaped from Copenhagen society and was in Berlin writing Fear and Trembling, “If I had had faith I would have stayed with Regine” (qtd. in Hong and Hong, xix).)

In the problemata themselves, questions about the relationship between ethics and religion are stated in formal language that might be expected to require closely-reasoned, objective answers. But even as he tells us he intends to “extract from the story of Abraham its dialectical elements, in the form of problemata” Kierkegaard insists that Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac embodies “a paradox [. . .] that no thought can grasp because faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off.” (82). Kierkegaard the poet must be called in to complement Kierkegaard the dialectician, to make the reader feel as well as think. In Mooney’s words, the problemata “inscribe personal ordeals of love, reason, and affiliation, of speech and hope [. . .] they recreate, as nearly as telling can, the trial that Abraham must undergo, the ordeal of faith” (15).

Before describing the problemata, a brief recapitulation of all of Kierkegaard’s categories of existence may be useful for understanding Fear and Trembling and Kafka’s reaction to it. Kierkegaard believed that life could be lived at three levels: the esthetic, the ethical (also called the universal or the general), and the religious. His

identification of the religious level with "the absurd" is the focus of the comparison with Kafka in this thesis. Kierkegaard explored the esthetic and ethical levels in Either/Or, a book he was writing at the same time as Fear and Trembling that was also published in the same year, 1843. Most of Fear and Trembling is concerned with the ethical and the religious levels and the transitions between them.

The esthetic is the 'lowest' level of existence. What Kierkegaard means by "esthetic" is related to the usual sense of the appreciation of beauty, but broadened to include both extreme attraction and repulsion, together with all the conditions in between. Events experienced during an esthetic existence are exclusively related to the time and setting in which they occur (Hannay, 8-9). They are not "universal" because, according to Kierkegaard, they are restricted to the desires or aversions of a single human being. They are always concealed. The individual's "ethical task is to unwrap himself from this concealment and become disclosed in the universal." Kierkegaard's harsh judgment is that when an individual chooses to continue in such a state of concealment, "he sins and is in a state of temptation, from which he can emerge only by disclosing himself" (Fear and Trembling, 109).

The ethical (or the universal) is the 'intermediate' level of existence. Events experienced during an ethical existence are not bound to a particular time and setting. The ethical "applies to everyone, which can be put from another point of view by saying that it applies at every moment." (Fear and Trembling, 83). Moreover, the ethical is the universal in the sense that it relates to a code of behavior that can and must be communicated: everyone in a community must understand it in its disclosure, and can agree to it, if not follow it. The text of each of the problemata in Fear and Trembling begins with the same statement, "The ethical as such is the universal," and proceeds to explore the ramifications of this statement to the particular question at hand (83, 96, 109).

The religious is the 'highest' level of existence. It is the level of "the absurd" because it is not governed by reason. Being synonymous with faith in a universal God, it is universal, but in a manner different from the universality of the ethical (Fear and Trembling, 96). It is also strictly individual like the esthetic, because faith is not a group activity. Kierkegaard devotes considerable space to explaining the paradox that, at the religious level, the individual is higher than the ethical universal. Like the esthetic, the religious level of existence is characterized by concealment. It cannot be communicated. As described in more detail below, Abraham must be silent in his act of faith because by speaking he would descend from the religious to the ethical (Fear and Trembling, 109).

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Problema I, "Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?" (83-95), presents the famous question that has been softened and explained away by some Kierkegaard adherents and has prompted others to reject Kierkegaard's philosophy altogether (Gill). A 'yes' answer seems to say that where a religious (read Christian) end is concerned, any means is acceptable, however repugnant to the ethics of the community at large. To clarify his position, Kierkegaard dwells on the distinction between Abraham and Agamemnon, a pagan hero whose deed, also the sacrifice of a beloved child, conforms to the ethics of the community. Iphigenia had to be killed because "the soothsayer performs his sad task and proclaims that the deity demands a young girl as a sacrifice" (86). The sacrifice is to be performed for the community's benefit, to advance the Greek cause against the Trojans. The need for the sacrifice is comprehensible to them, and therefore can be judged and approved by them. For Kierkegaard, pagan heroes existed entirely in the realm of the ethical because their actions could be measured by ethical standards that were universally accepted. But Abraham's action on Moriah, consistent with the nature of Christian faith, is exquisitely individual. It would be incomprehensible if it were revealed to the

community, because, in Abraham's community there could be "no higher expression of the ethical [, ,] than that the father shall love the son" (88). It is not even possible that it be revealed because by its nature it is incommunicable. It is characterized by the necessity of silence because, Kierkegaard reasons, to break silence would be to leave the religious level of Christian faith. Only Christianity allows access to this level of faith (however ironic it might seem to a non-Christian that the prototypical Knight of Faith is an Old Testament patriarch).

Using all of his poetic skill, Kierkegaard vividly describes the agony of any loving father, no less Agamemnon than Abraham, who is forced to sacrifice a beloved child. But the isolation of the individual from the community required by religious faith makes Abraham's ordeal incomparably greater than Agamemnon's. Kierkegaard dramatizes the necessity of the paradox by which a single individual becomes higher than the universal by virtue of the teleological suspension of the ethical by pointing out that without the paradox, Abraham "is not even a tragic hero but a murderer" (95).

Problema II asks "Is there an absolute duty to God?" In this presentation (96-108), Kierkegaard makes fewer allusions to literature or mythology and instead concentrates on interpreting a passage from the New Testament, Luke 14:26. It is a passage in which Jesus says "If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (99). This injunction is frequently softened by theologians, but Kierkegaard insists that it must be taken literally and thus the answer to Problema II must be yes. Considering Abraham's case, we are returned to the same paradox stated in the previous Problema, but the concept is explored in more detail in order to accommodate Jesus's admonition to hate one's children. At the moment of the sacrifice the ethical is suspended but not abolished. Ethically speaking, Abraham hates Isaac in his absolute duty to God, but he must love Isaac in order to

make his act a sacrifice and not a murder. Although loving God absolutely can cause a knight of faith to act unethically, it cannot cause him to stop loving (101).

Problema III is the longest and most discursive of the three (109-144). It explores various ramifications of the question, "Was it Ethically Defensible for Abraham to Conceal His Undertaking from Sarah [Isaac's mother], from Eleazar [the servant who accompanied Abraham to Moriah], and from Isaac?" Kierkegaard's answer is, of course, no. The text consists of a reiteration and an expansion of the discussion of silence in Problema I. Abraham's silence is necessitated by the teleological suspension of the ethical within the religious sphere, where the individual stands by himself in relation to the absolute. It is not ethically defensible, but ethical judgments are suspended because Abraham exists wholly within the religious sphere with respect to the sacrifice of Isaac. Not only is it entirely appropriate that Abraham does not speak, he "cannot speak. What would explain everything [. . .] is something he cannot say (i.e. in a way that can be understood)", since in becoming universally understandable he would descend from the religious to the ethical (139).

Kierkegaard calls Abraham's silence within the religious sphere "the terrible responsibility of solitude" and again presents the paradox that, contrary to the usual situation in which the ethical represents the high ground compared to the esthetic, for Abraham "the ethical is the temptation." It is an inviting path by which he could "unburden his feelings" and "convey a blessed consolation for the whole world," but in the act of speaking out "he is no longer Abraham" (138-9).

Fewer than half of the pages of Problema III are devoted to Abraham's case, however. Most of the text consists of examples of the significance of silence and disclosure, concealment and revelation, within the spheres of the esthetic and the ethical, where the question of religious faith is not involved. In a passage where problems of translation from the Danish are often cited, Kierkegaard admits that this material does not make Abraham more "intelligible" but hopes that by including it

"his unintelligibility might be seen from different points of view" (136; Hannay, note 118). It is striking that most of the examples involve thwarted love affairs, many offered as themes with variations, whose relevance to Kierkegaard's broken engagement to Regine Olsen seems more apparent than to Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. We are given an original fairytale of a girl and her young swain (112), a classical fable out of Aristotle (115-6), a Danish folktale of a marriage forbidden because of consanguinity (117-8), Elizabeth and Essex (120), another Danish folktale of Agnes and the Merman, in which the demonic is set against the religious (120-7), a story out of the apocryphal book of Tobit, admixed with Shakespeare's Richard III (127-32), even Faust, both as legend and as Goethe's poetic imaginings (132-5).

Toward the end of Problema III Kierkegaard abandons his exploration of the esthetic and ethical permutations of sexual love and returns briefly to the tragic hero, contrasting the behavior of Agamemnon and Socrates at their defining moments. As pagans, both exist in the realm of the ethical, but silence in the face of his sacrifice of Iphigenia is appropriate for Agamemnon because "Everyone knew the significance of his deed, the whole process of piety, pity, feeling and tears was done with," and, more importantly, "he was not a teacher or a witness to the spirit" (140). Socrates was a spiritual teacher, an "intellectual tragic hero," and as such, when he faces the sacrifice of his own life, some final word is appropriate, "something that will convey that he is consummating himself in the decisive moment" (140). If he had remained silent at the defining moment of his death sentence, "he would have weakened the effect of his life, aroused a suspicion that the resilience of irony was not, in him, a primitive strength but a game." (141). It has been mentioned earlier that Socratic irony was a favorite theme for Kierkegaard and the subject of his dissertation for the Master's degree. He does admit here, in a footnote to his text,

that because of Plato's poetic intervention the precise form of Socrates' defining irony must remain a matter for speculation (141).

Finally, Kierkegaard deals with the contradictory fact that Abraham's silence was not quite total. In the scriptural account, when Isaac asks his father why there is no lamb for the sacrifice, Abraham replies, "My son, God will provide himself a lamb for the burnt offering," (142). The parallel with Socrates is not exact because Abraham "as the father of faith has absolute significance in terms of spirit." It is required that Abraham, like Socrates, fulfill himself by speaking, and like that of Socrates, his speech is ironic, but while Socrates' speech is amenable to the poetic imagination of Plato, "no poet can reach Abraham" (141). Abraham cannot lie and yet he cannot say what he knows. For Kierkegaard, Abraham's cryptic reply to Isaac illustrates "the double-movement in Abraham's soul," both infinite resignation and faith by virtue of the absurd. The statement is a lie or at least a subterfuge given only the movement of resignation, but it becomes appropriate given the 'absurd' faith that with God all things are possible (142).

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In his Papirer, Søren Kierkegaard accurately if immodestly predicted that "Once I am dead, Fear and Trembling alone will be enough for an imperishable name as an author. Then it will be read, translated into foreign languages as well" (qtd. in Green, 257). There is no question but that this beautifully written but complex, ambiguous, discursive, sometimes repetitive polemic of faith has maintained an audience over the years. The range of reactions it has elicited also make it clear that in Fear and Trembling Kierkegaard has succeeded in his aim of forcing readers to take responsibility for the meaning of his texts. The responses of two scholars illustrate the point.

Ronald M. Green is one of the critics described in Chapter II of this thesis who seems to take at face value Kierkegaard's assertion in his posthumous The Point of

View for My Work as an Author that all his writing was designed to lead the reader by indirect communication to a conventional if rigorous Christian belief. By titling his essay “‘Developing’ Fear and Trembling”, he alludes to a need for something like a photographic developer to clarify the negative that Kierkegaard has left us. The particular developer that Green has used for Fear and Trembling shows him five domains of significance in the text. First, the Abraham story reveals faith as a ‘primitive’ entity, unrelated to philosophy. Second, the analysis of the movements of resignation and of faith presents a lesson in the psychology of religious transformation. Green also discovers imbedded in the text an analysis of the relationship between our duties to each other and our obligation to God, and, in addition, an underlying sermon on sin, grace, and salvation. Finally, there is the undoubted biographical relevance to Kierkegaard’s relationship both to Regine Olsen and to his father, the one aspect of Fear and Trembling that all commentators are prepared to agree on (258-76).

Green’s essay provides an interesting illustration of one man’s response to the multifaceted nature of Kierkegaard’s book. A contrasting view is that of Louis Mackey, another prominent critic who is one of those scholars who believe that it is impossible to arrive at any clearly correct meaning for the texts of an author so given to irony and so demanding of his readers (Rée and Chamberlain).

Mackey has commented on Kierkegaard over the course of many years and in Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet, published in 1971, was one of the first to apply the methods of literary criticism to his subject. In the preface to a compilation of his own essays that appeared in 1986, Mackey stressed that his years of study had not brought “a succession of refinements in my understanding of Kierkegaard” (xvi). The essay on Fear and Trembling in the collection, entitled “The View from Pisgah: A Reading of Fear and Trembling,” had been written some ten years previously. Reflecting on this essay, Mackey says of his younger self as author, “He seems to

feel that he has at last comprehended Kierkegaard, irony and all, so that the final solemnity is worse than the first" (xvi). The 'first' solemnity Mackey is referring to is the self-conscious gravity of an even earlier essay ("Lyric of Faith"). This evolution of Mackey's views from the relative confidence of the first essay in 1960, through the solemnity of 1976, to the admission in 1986 that he still isn't sure, is strong testimony to the peculiar quality in Kierkegaard's writing that makes it resist any final interpretation.

Mackey ends "The View from Pisgah" by posing an either/or question: "Is Fear and Trembling an exercise in pious self-deception or an honest and serious call to the task of believing?" (66). Recalling that Socrates is Kierkegaard's favorite ironist, Mackey suggests that both are simultaneously true, because in our world "deception and seriousness may be the same thing" since "to deceive this generation out of its self-deception is the best service an honest seriousness can render to the times" (67). Through his pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard says in The Sickness Unto Death that "what the world really needs, confused as it is by much learning, is a Socrates," not a "republic," a "new social order," or a "new religion" (qtd. in Mooney, 1). It seems likely that Kierkegaard sometimes imagined himself supplying that need.

The analogy to Socrates continues to appear in the critical writing of the last two decades whenever post-modernists, like the existentialists before them, identify Kierkegaard as a kind of spiritual ancestor. It is an attractive frame of reference because Kierkegaard's indirect communication resembles Socrates's method, in the Dialogues, of eliciting new ideas from his followers by a process that has been compared to midwifery (Hong and Hong, xii). Socrates may have sometimes pretended not to know what he was getting at when he presided at the birth of new ideas in his Dialogues, and Kierkegaard may have sometimes pretended to be

certain, but they both recognized that their methods were effective ways to make people think for themselves.

V. KAFKA'S READING OF KIERKEGAARD

Kafka's reading of Kierkegaard began in 1913 when he acquired an anthology of extracts from Kierkegaard's diaries, published as Das Buch des Richters, and continued, sporadically, until near the end of his life (Eilittä's monograph includes a compilation of Kafka's references to Kierkegaard that has been useful in writing this thesis; Eilittä, *Approaches*, 151-58). Weak from his illness, Kafka wrote in the next-to-last entry in his own diary (December 18, 1922), "All this time in bed. Yesterday Either/Or." (Kafka, Diaries 1914-24 232). In addition to Das Buch des Richters, Either/Or, and Fear and Trembling, Kafka's library included Repetition, the combined numbers of The Moment (Kierkegaard's final broadsides against the Danish church), a selection of Kierkegaard's papers, and a biography of Kierkegaard by O. P. Monrad. He eventually read almost all of Kierkegaard's work that was available in German translation, but Fear and Trembling seems to have been the book that most engaged his imagination. It appealed to Kafka at a number of levels, evoking both agreement and disagreement, sometimes simultaneously (Robertson, *Judaism*, 191).

As noted earlier, the parallels between his own life and that of other writers who also subordinated normal personal relationships to their art were important to Kafka. Reacting to Das Buch des Richters, Kafka made his first written reference to Kierkegaard in his diary for August 21, 1913: "As I suspected, his [Kierkegaard's] case, despite essential differences, is very similar to mine, at least he is on the same side of the world. He bears me out like a friend." Kafka was referring to difficulties he foresaw in his engagement to Felice Bauer, arising from his commitment to writing, which seemed to match those that led Kierkegaard to break his engagement to

Regine Olsen. The negative influence of Kierkegaard's domineering father on his son's personality, as described in Monrad's biography, provided Kafka with a second point of correspondence with Kierkegaard. Kafka's own father was no less domineering but in other ways; coarse and insensitive, overbearing, exclusively materialistic, he never understood the son who repeatedly tried, without success, to please him (Sheppard, 280).

After the diagnosis of his tuberculosis in August of 1917 and the broken engagement with Felice Bauer, Kafka took eight months of leave-of-absence from his duties at the Insurance Institute. Rather than visit a sanatorium, he lived his sister Ottla in Zürau, a small village in rural Bohemia where, as a result of the exigencies of World War I, she was managing a farm (Hayman, 225-37). In spite of his illness, it was a comfortable, reflective time for Kafka, allowing him to intensify his reading of Kierkegaard. Leena Eilittä describes an apparent dichotomy in Kafka's reaction to Kierkegaard at this stage of his life (Approaches, 156). His letters, primarily to Max Brod, tend to endorse Kierkegaard's Abraham, but the notes he wrote to himself in his diaries over the same time-period often seem to argue sarcastically with Kierkegaard; they also provide some of the sketches of Abraham that Kafka offered in opposition to Kierkegaard's.

In a letter from Zürau to his friend, the novelist Oskar Baum, Kafka confesses that he knows only Fear and Trembling from Kierkegaard's published work but that he considers Kierkegaard "a star, although he shines over territory that is almost inaccessible to me." He is pleased that Baum is also beginning to read him (Kafka, Letters, 162). Later, in a letter to Brod regarding Either/Or, he admits that it is written with "the sharpest of pens" and that he reads it "passionately," but he quarrels with Kierkegaard's attitude: "[It] can be written as well as read only if one has a trace of real superiority [. . .]" (Kafka, Letters, 190).

Brod and Kafka discussed Kierkegaard and his advocacy of Abraham as an exemplar of religious faith in an exchange of letters in March of 1918. Brod suggested that while Kierkegaard's decision not to marry reflected a resigned negativity, akin to Abraham's and characteristic of Christianity, Kafka's similar decision was a search for positive alternatives, more typical of Judaism. Kafka replied that, on the contrary, the Abraham of Fear and Trembling is an extremely positive figure, so much so that he becomes "truly monstrous." He proposes that "affirmativeness becomes objectionable when it reaches too high" as when Kierkegaard "paints this monstrous Abraham in the clouds." In the same letter Kierkegaard has again become a star, as in his letter to Baum, but here Kafka admits that his sense of identification with him has diminished: "It's as if a next-door neighbor had turned into a distant star, in respect both to my admiration and to a certain cooling of my sympathy" (Kafka, Letters, 199-200).

The next letter shows that Kafka was well aware (if there were ever any doubt) of the elliptical quality of Kierkegaard's writings, asserting that for his pseudonymous books "their pseudonymous quality is almost of the essence." Kierkegaard's method is "to scream in order not to be heard and to scream falsely just in case you are heard." Kafka refers to the peculiar sensibility that inspired Kierkegaard's work as a "chaos of mind, sorrow, and faith." In a statement that must also have referred to his own relationship with Felice Bauer, Kafka supposes that, "under the softening influence of time," Regine Olsen must have breathed "a sigh of relief at having escaped that torture machine whose motor was now merely idling, or which at any rate was only occupied with her shadow" (Kafka, Letters, 202).

Nevertheless Kafka's admiration of Kierkegaard seems genuine. He admires his "conceptual innovations," his "concept of the dialectical," his "division into 'knights of infinity' and 'knights of faith'," even Kierkegaard's favorite metaphor, his "concept of 'motion'" by which a person can be transmitted directly "into the bliss of

knowing, and even a wingstroke further. [. . .] That is because so much light radiates from Kierkegaard that some of it penetrates even to the deepest abysses.” Kafka tries to interpret for Brod why Kierkegaard considers it impossible for Abraham to communicate the nature of the sacrifice without re-entering the realm of the ethical, why the religious state is meaningless: “the relationship to the divine is primarily not subject to any outside judgment [. . .] answerable [. . .] only after the end of this world. Consequently the present external image of the religious relationship has no significance.” Because the religious level of existence is not communicable to the world but nevertheless “wishes to reveal itself,” religious man has to fight the world “in order to save the divine element within himself” (Kafka, Letters, 202-03). Kafka’s letter to Brod concludes by quoting with approval from Das Buch des Richters, where Kierkegaard praises the transforming power (“a metamorphosis takes place in the whole of existence”) of any decision by an individual not to conform to “what the world regards as good” (Kafka, Letters, 203).

The entries that Kafka made in his octavo notebooks at the same time that he was writing these early letters were first published in Max Brod’s compilation, Hochzeitvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlass. They also appear, with very similar German text, in Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II edited by Jost Schillemeit, a volume in the recent scholarly edition of all of Kafka’s texts. The references to Kierkegaard’s philosophy and to Kierkegaard’s portrait of Abraham occur principally in eight paragraphs in Notebook Four (Kafka, Nachgelassene 103-05). The English translations that will be cited in this thesis are from Brod’s original edition, published under the title, The Blue Octavo Notebooks. Kafka’s writing is never totally unambiguous, but the difference in attitude toward Kierkegaard displayed in the notebook from that of the early letters is unmistakable. Wahl’s comments from 1946 and David’s from 1980 are included in what follows to illustrate their different perspectives on Kafka’s notes and to suggest something

about the general evolution of critical thought about the Kierkegaard/Kafka relationship between 1946 and 1980.

The first paragraph questions Kierkegaard's assertion that Abraham must be silent in order to remain in the religious state:

I. The incommunicability of the paradox does perhaps exist, yet it does not manifest itself as such, for Abraham himself does not understand it. Now, he does not need to understand it, or is not supposed to understand it, and hence also he is not supposed to interpret it for himself; but undoubtedly he may try to interpret it for others. In this sense even the General is not unequivocal, which manifests itself in the case of Iphigenia in the fact that the oracle is never unequivocal.
(54)

Here Kafka is proposing a different paradox to replace Kierkegaard's paradox of the individual rising above the General on the strength of the absurd, namely that Abraham's faith is so strong he is unable even to recognize that there is a paradox, yet he is and must be empowered to try to communicate it. In Wahl's words, Kafka's paradox is that "He [Abraham] explains to others that which he himself does not understand (Wahl, 279). Often in his commentary Wahl assumes that Kafka conflated Kierkegaard's Abraham with Kierkegaard himself, and believes that in fact Kierkegaard did write about himself when he wrote about Abraham, an idea that is supported by the biographical content of Fear and Trembling. Concerning this paragraph, Wahl suggests that Kafka believed that Kierkegaard wanted to "indicate the transcendental" but that anyone "who is in constant relation with the transcendental does not conceive it as such in its non-communicable and paradoxical character" (278-79). Wahl frequently champions Kierkegaard and criticizes Kafka.

David deals much more harshly with Kierkegaard. He goes beyond Kafka's suggestion that blind faith cannot see the paradox to assert that Kierkegaard sees

the paradox (and writes about it) precisely because he doesn't share Abraham's faith. Kierkegaard's positivity is actually a "pure arrogance," as "the unbeliever speaks of faith and hires out to others the fear and trembling that are properly only his." The obligation that Kafka perceived of Abraham to explain his faith arises because faith that can't be communicated is a kind of "madness, a private religion" (David, 82). (It is possible that Kierkegaard would agree with David, seeing that this is precisely the kind of language he himself used in describing Christianity (see above, p 13)).

In the final sentence of paragraph I, Kafka objects to Kierkegaard's use of Agamemnon/Iphigenia to illustrate the transparency of the ethical/general, since the pronouncements of the oracle who interpreted the will of the gods for Agamemnon were not unambiguous. This is an obvious point with which both Wahl and David agree. Wahl, in defense of Kierkegaard, says that Kafka's argument is somewhat superficial and notes that it is not at all clear to him that the ambiguity of the oracle necessarily makes ambiguity a property of the General, since no causality has been established (280). David merely spells out what he takes as Kafka's meaning, that it is simply untrue that the ethical path reveals itself without difficulty, or that the law of the community is unambiguous and sovereign (82).

In paragraph II of the notebook, Kafka continues to criticize Kierkegaard's descriptions of the properties of the general/ethical state:

II. Rest in the General? Equivocation of the General. The General once interpreted as rest, but otherwise as the "general" oscillation between Particular and General. Only rest is truly General, but also the final goal. (54)

The "rest" cited here appears in the "Preamble from the Heart" of Fear and Trembling, where Kierkegaard writes that the knight of resignation gains "peace and repose [rest] and consolation in the pain" (74; this thesis, 42), and again in

"Problema II": "The tragic hero acts [to sacrifice Iphigenia] and finds his point of rest in the universal [. . .]" (106). Kafka uses wordplay to emphasize his disagreement with Kierkegaard: "the General" refers to Kierkegaard's supposed state of existence and "the 'general' " says that, on the contrary, people generally experience not a state but an oscillation between the particular and the general; he seems to say that true repose is not Kierkegaard's "repose" but death, the final, undeniably general repose.

Wahl finds it "difficult to give an exact interpretation of this remark by Kafka and to find its relation to Kierkegaard's views on the general." He thinks that Kafka may be suggesting that the General is ambiguous because sometimes it is actually a movement back and forth to the Particular, and sometimes it is the General in a pure state. Alternatively, perhaps "the General in its absolute form [. . .] is an ideal that can never be attained. In our realm, [. . .] something individual always remains" (280).

For David, Kafka's "oscillation" refers to his own struggle to attain the universal values - marriage, love for his father, a family - while keeping his particular artistic integrity. The General entails not rest but "battle" and "anxiety." Moreover, David is sure that Kafka was convinced that although the struggle must be joined, peace only comes with death (83).

Paragraph III uses a metaphor of the theater to say the same thing: the reality is the "oscillation" on the stage, and the general is only the painted backdrop:

III. It is as though the oscillation between the General and the Particular were taking place on the real stage, and as if, on the other hand, life in general were only sketched in on the background scenery. (55)

On the surface, paragraphs IV, V, and VI in the notebook are descriptions of Abraham, although many critics, including Wahl, believe that Kafka was actually

referring to Kierkegaard. They will be considered in the next chapter, along with the other sketches of Abraham from Kafka's letter to Robert Klopstock.

In paragraph VII Kafka clearly means Kierkegaard:

VII. There is an enchantment accompanying his argument of the case. One can escape from an argument into the world of magic, from an enchantment into logic, but both simultaneously are crushing, all the more so since they constitute a third entity, a living magic or destruction of the world that is not destructive but constructive. (55)

It would be hard to imagine a more eloquent tribute to the effectiveness of the mixture of poetry and dialectic found in Fear and Trembling. In Wahl's reading of the paragraph, however, he seems to ignore the "destructive" part of Kafka's final oxymoron. Wahl paraphrases as follows: Kierkegaard's "unusual gifts as a logician and enchanter," combined with his ability to "destroy logic and enchantment," allow him to construct "in the third realm [. . .] beyond that of logic and enchantment where both are merged into one another" (280-81).

Typically, David sees the dark side: for him, Kafka believes the "magic" of Kierkegaard's style to be "dangerous," his story-telling "disturbing."

Paragraph VIII, the final comment on Kierkegaard in the notebook, continues in the same vein as VII but is more overtly critical:

VIII. He has too much mind, and by means of that mind he travels across the earth as upon a magic chariot, going even where there are no roads. And he cannot find out for himself that there are no roads there. In this way his humble plea to be followed turns into tyranny, and his honest belief that he is "on the road" into arrogance. (55-56)

The region where "there are no roads" is the transcendental, declares Wahl. He believes that here Kafka is saying that Kierkegaard's extraordinary intelligence allowed him to explore this region, but, at the same time, he was far too confident

that he had got it right. Because Kierkegaard lacks humility, "he assumes nolens volens the part of a tyrannical and presumptuous guide" (282).

Severe as usual, David says that in this passage Kafka is accusing Kierkegaard of an "intellectual shallowness that allows him to forget (through his magic spell) the sorrow of the earth" (87). David's interpretation is reinforced in a letter from Kafka to Brod cited above, written at about the same time (this thesis, 54). Referring to Kierkegaard, Kafka writes: "He doesn't see the ordinary man (with whom, on the whole, he knows how to talk remarkably well) [. . .]" (Letters, 200). David ends by observing that although "Kafka never criticized Kierkegaard more sharply than in this entry of March, 1918, where he accuses him of tyranny and presumptuousness" (87), such was the power that Kierkegaard exerted on Kafka that he returned to the myth of Abraham in June of 1921 (87-88). This revisitation is documented in the alternative Abrahams proposed in Kafka's letter to Robert Klopstock, which will be considered in the following chapter along with those from Notebook Four.

VI. KAFKA'S ALTERNATIVE ABRAHAMS: RICH, NAÏVE, AND BUSY

In his notebooks, Kafka wrote to himself. Sometimes, for example, he even wrote a formal dialogue with himself in which he answered his own questions. The notebooks are filled with what appear to be non-sequiturs. When Brod published Kafka's diaries, he decided to exclude the notebooks because of their peculiar character, being "made up almost entirely of literary ideas, fragments and aphorisms (without reference to the everyday world) [. . .]" (qtd. in Kafka, *The Blue Notebooks*, publisher's note). Not surprisingly, therefore, Kafka's sketches of alternative Abrahams from Notebook Four are harder to interpret than those he drew later in his letter to Robert Klopstock, although those also are not unambiguous. It is possible, nevertheless, to group Kafka's various Abrahams from both sources according to their most prominent characteristics. Thus, somewhat arbitrarily, one can identify a "rich" Abraham, a "naïve" Abraham, a "busy" Abraham, and, finally, an "antiheroic" Abraham. These epithets help to distinguish Kafka's Abrahams from each other, and from that of Kierkegaard. It remains difficult, as will be seen, to decide whether Kafka's Abrahams represent the biblical Abraham, Kafka's alternatives to the biblical Abraham, Kierkegaard, Kafka himself, or more than one of these at the same time.

The first sentence in paragraph IV from the notebook gives Kafka's reaction to Kierkegaard's concept of the transition from the ethical level of existence to the religious. It is followed by a sketch of a failed attempt by the "rich" Abraham to bring his worldly possessions (his "carefulness for the future") with him into eternity.

IV. There is no such thing as this evolution, which would tire me in its senselessness, for which I am only indirectly to blame. The transient

world is not adequate to Abraham's carefulness for the future, hence he decides to emigrate with it into eternity. But whether it is the gate on the way out or the gate on the way in that is too narrow, he cannot get the furniture wagon through. He puts the blame on the weakness of his voice uttering the commands. It is the agony of his life. (55)

This literal English rendition is puzzling. Perhaps a decision was made by the translators not to guess at the intent of Kafka's figurative language. The first sentence has been omitted in Wahl's (277) and in Eilittä's (156) discussions, although it is present in Brod's edition (Kafka, *Hochzeitvorbereitungen*, 125) and in the recent critical edition of Schillemeit (Kafka, *Nachgelassene*, 104). It is not clear whether Kafka is saying here that the very idea of Kierkegaard's transition [evolution] from the ethical to the religious is tiresome to him or, on the other hand, that it would be tiresome for him to live in a state devoid of meaning. In any case, he partially exonerates himself, perhaps because of his lack of religious faith.

Wahl is sure that Kafka, because he had read *Fear and Trembling* first among Kierkegaard's books, "saw Kierkegaard in the image of Abraham" and meant 'Kierkegaard' when he wrote 'Abraham' in this sketch about the furniture wagon. Wahl thinks that Kafka believed that Kierkegaard wanted his whole reality in the eternal, his spiritual life and his earthly life (his wealth and Regine Olsen), but "believed he did not long for it passionately enough [the weakness of his voice]. Kafka corrects him: there is no room in eternity for earthly things (Wahl, 282).

Wahl also observes that while writing in the notebook Kafka was sometimes thinking neither of Abraham nor Kierkegaard but of himself, citing Max Brod's note about the manuscript of paragraph V (Wahl, 282), where Kafka originally wrote "My spiritual poverty" rather than "Abraham's spiritual poverty" (Brod, in Kafka, *The Blue Notebooks*, 105). This may apply here in paragraph IV as well. In one of his dialogs with himself entered a few days before he wrote this sketch, Kafka noted that, as a

writer, he needed to fight against the "transience" ("Vergänglichkeit") of the world, using the same word he used in adjectival form (transitory: "vergängliche) in paragraph IV (Nachgelassene, 92).

David holds that here Kafka writes not about himself or Kierkegaard but about Abraham, as Kierkegaard's idealized knight of faith. To Kafka, the meaninglessness of Abraham's simple faith allows him to evade responsibility for his action in sacrificing Isaac, and Kafka is repelled by the idea. Concerning the furniture wagon, the rich Abraham may believe that the weakness of his faith keeps him from crossing over into eternity, but no faith is strong enough to permit Abraham to bring his goods with him. David cites another notebook entry as relevant: "The more horses you harness to the job, the faster the thing goes – that is to say, not tearing the block out of its base, which is impossible, but tearing the straps to shreds, and as a result the weightless merry journey" (David, 83-84; Kafka, Nachgelassene, 56, Blue Notebook, 28).

Paragraph V shows Kafka's naïve Abraham:

V. Abraham's spiritual poverty and the comparative immobility of this poverty is an advantage, making concentration easier for him; or rather, it is in itself concentration, as a result of which, of course, he loses the advantage that lies in the application of the power to concentrate. (55)

Again, there are problems in finding the right English word. In this paragraph, the translators' "spiritual" stands for the German "geistige," which can also mean "intellectual" in English. Both Wahl and David presume that the correct meaning is "intellectual," which certainly makes more sense when referring to Abraham, the paragon of faith. Wahl, however, still sure that Kafka really means Kierkegaard when he writes Abraham, is puzzled that Kafka can accuse Kierkegaard of "excessive richness of intellect" in paragraphs VII and VIII and intellectual poverty in paragraph

V (281). It is easiest to suppose, as David does, that Kafka meant Kierkegaard himself in the former and an alternative to Kierkegaard's Abraham in the latter.

David suggests that because Kierkegaard compared Abraham to Socrates, the model of a public intellectual, he seems to have contradicted himself when he said that the Knights of Faith move to the religious sphere quickly and without intellectual preparation. He also proposes that Kafka's use of "concentration" in paragraph V comes from Fear and Trembling, where Kierkegaard says that a knight of faith must "concentrate the whole of the ethical that he violates in one single thing" (105). To David, Kafka makes Abraham a country bumpkin whose lack of intellectual capacity allows him to concentrate on the sacrifice without being distracted by thinking too much (because of his intellectual "immobility") about the many ramifications of his act (David, 84-85).

The third and fifth sentences of Paragraph VI are bracketed because they appear only in Brod's edition of the notebooks (Kafka, *Hochzeitvorbereitungen*, 125), which is the edition used by David and that from which the translation cited below was taken. They do not appear in any of the other sources consulted for this thesis, including the recent critical edition (Kafka, *Nachgelassene*, 104). The paragraph seems to continue Kafka's sketch of the naïve Abraham, although both Wahl and David believe that in this case it is Kierkegaard who is being described:

VI. Abraham is laboring under the following delusion: he cannot endure the monotony of this world. Now the fact is that this world is notoriously and uncommonly manifold, which can be put to the test at any moment if one just takes up a handful of World and looks at it a little more closely. [Naturally, Abraham knows this too.] And so his complaint about the monotony of the world is actually a complaint about an insufficiently profound mingling with the manifold nature of the world. [And so it is actually a springboard into the world.] (55)

David reasons that even though Kierkegaard portrays both the knight of reason and the knight of faith as concentrating on a single issue to avoid being distracted by the "manifold nature of the world" (Fear and Trembling, 105-106), nowhere does he suggest that they "cannot endure the monotony of this world." Thus, David concludes, Kafka here refers to Kierkegaard, who, though well aware of the infinite variety that the world has to offer, lacks the capacity to experience it because of his obsession with religion. The leap of faith, which Kierkegaard never quite managed to perform himself, reflects the need of a dissatisfied man to escape what he cannot endure, but the "springboard" only serves to propel him back "into the world" (85).

In a similar vein, Wahl writes that Kafka is suggesting here that Kierkegaard's lack of worldly experience made him, in Wahl's phrase, "a mere amateur of reality," and that the "transient world" of paragraph IV would not have seemed so monotonous to him if he had managed to immerse himself in it (281).

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The letter to Robert Klopstock that continues Kafka's reflections on Abraham was written over the course of two days in June of 1921, three years after the entries in the notebook (Kafka, Letters, 284-86; Kafka, Briefe, 332-35). Kafka was living in a sanatorium, again trying to regain some of the strength that his illness was continually draining from him. The letter begins with a description of his symptoms and ends with a reference to a job with a publisher that Kafka was trying to arrange for Klopstock. The material on Abraham constitutes most of the letter. It starts abruptly, suggesting that the topic was familiar. First, the "busy" Abraham:

I can imagine another Abraham, who, to be sure, would not make it all the way to patriarch, not even to old-clothes dealer – who would be as ready to carry out the order for the sacrifice as a waiter would be ready to carry out his orders, but who would still never manage to

perform the sacrifice because he cannot get away from home, he is indispensable, the farm needs him, there is always something that must be attended to, the house isn't finished. But until the house is finished, until he has this security behind him, he cannot get away. The Bible perceives this too, for it says: "He put his house in order." (285)

Kafka's letter to Klopstock was not discussed by Wahl. In this sketch of the "busy" Abraham, David sees evidence of Kafka's sympathy with ordinary men and the ordinary problems of real life, sympathy Kafka felt Kierkegaard lacked, as documented in the letter to Brod referred to above (this thesis, 54; David, 88-89). Kafka's sympathy, however, did not prevent him from showing us a comic figure, so distracted by the demands of his household he is incapable of getting organized enough to become an "old-clothes dealer." This Abraham is also somewhat shallow and unreflective, as shown by Kafka's slapstick image of the waiter. Perhaps this is appropriate, given the enormity of the sacrifice he is asked to perform, and is certainly in keeping with the Abraham of Paragraph V.

Possibly thinking about the unfinished house, Kafka is reminded that, according to the Bible, God had actually already shown great favor to the "rich" Abraham, the real Abraham. He returns to him by adding the following to the above text, and continues with the real Abraham the next day:

And Abraham actually had everything in abundance long before: had he not had his house, where would he have reared his son, into what beam would he have stuck the sacrificial knife?

Next day: Have been meditating a good deal about this Abraham, but these are old stories, no longer worth discussing; especially not the real Abraham; he had everything long before, was brought up for it from childhood, I cannot see the break [leap]. If he already had

everything and yet was to be led even higher, then something must have been taken from him, that is logical and no break [leap]. (285)

Here the translators have used "break" rather than "leap," the dictionary definition of Kafka's German, "Sprung." Almost certainly "leap" is correct because Kafka is referring to Kierkegaard's leap of faith from the ethical to the religious. Kafka says he cannot see the leap. His reasoning is surprising when he concludes that it is logical for Abraham to lose something [Isaac] in exchange for being elevated to the status of the first knight of faith. It is as if God and Abraham were playing some sort of zero-sum game, where the total favor available from God is constant. Another possibility is that Kafka cannot see the leap because Abraham's attachment to material things, as described in paragraph IV of the notebook, would prevent him from making it. Like paragraph IV, this sketch can also be imagined to fit Kierkegaard, who certainly did not lack material goods and, perhaps more than Abraham about whose youth we know little, was "brought up for it from childhood."

David reasons that Kafka cannot see the leap because it is in conflict with the spirit of the Old Testament, which Kafka studied and knew well, although he was not himself a believer. Within that spirit "no one doubts and no one vacillates." Everything is complete within the Law. Men live in God, and God's Law is fulfilled through men. Only someone who has forgotten the Law could see the sacrifice as a leap into the absurd (88).

Kafka returns to the first-mentioned "busy" Abraham, who has now become many Abrahams, perhaps to indicate that Abraham's shortcomings are common to all humans. He now proposes a new explanation for their behavior:

It was different with the above-mentioned Abrahams: they stand on their building sites and suddenly are supposed to go to Mount Moriah. Possibly they do not even have a son and are called upon to sacrifice him. These are impossibilities and Sarah is right to laugh. All we can

do is suspect that these men are deliberately not finishing their houses, and – to name a very great example – are hiding their faces in magical trilogies so as not to have to lift their eyes and see the mountain that stands in the distance. (285)

The busy Abrahams, childless, with their unfinished houses, must drop everything and offer up their non-existent son. Their response to God's ridiculous demand is to pretend to be so interested in their book they cannot recognize their duty. But when Sarah, hiding behind the tent-flap, laughed at the idea that she could produce a son in her old age, God overheard and was angry to hear her express her doubt (Genesis, 33). The Abrahams' subterfuge to avoid God's anger was to become engrossed in "magical trilogies."

What are the "magical trilogies"? Max Brod thought Kafka was referring to a literary feud of the day between rivals Franz Werfel and Karl Kraus (Kafka, Letters, 476-77, notes 68 and 72). Rather than attending to things that are truly necessary, like building a house, they evade the summons by immersing themselves in trivialities. But it is hard to imagine that Kafka would invoke this literary feud as part of a "very great example." David's suggestion seems more appropriate. The reference is to the Oresteia of Aeschylus, a trilogy that is rooted in the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra, motivated in part by her desire for revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia. David's interpretation is that the "magic trilogies" stand for art as a whole, whose useful function, by hiding the mountain, is to allow the Abrahams to turn aside from the most important business at hand (90, note 19). It's seems also possible that the reference is more specific: Kafka is accusing Kierkegaard of building a specious theoretical distinction between ethics and religion with Agamemnon and Abraham, while neglecting his own obvious duty.

VII. KAFKA'S (AND KIERKEGAARD'S) ANTIHEROIC ABRAHAM

The final Abraham in Kafka's letter to Klopstock deserves special attention: of all Kafka's Abrahams, he is the most antiheroic, the most absurdly unlike an idealized knight of faith. Goebel has argued that there is a continuity between all the alternative Abrahams that Kafka sketched in private and the better-known antiheroes of Kafka's fiction, who also "fall victim to the – apparently – arbitrary, largely punitive, impositions of an inscrutable authority [. . .] whose overwhelming demands they are forever unable to fulfill" (79). This last Abraham fits Goebel's description particularly well:

But another Abraham. One who certainly wants to carry out the sacrifice properly and in general correctly senses what the whole thing is about but cannot imagine that he is the one meant, the repulsive old man and his dirty boy. He does not lack the true faith, for he has this faith; he wants to sacrifice in the proper manner, if he could only believe he was the one meant. He is afraid that he will, to be sure, ride out as Abraham and his son, but on the way will turn into Don Quixote. The whole world would have been horrified, back then, had it been looking on, but this Abraham is afraid that the world will laugh itself sick over him. But it is not the ridiculousness in itself that he fears – though he also fears that, above all his joining in the laughter – but chiefly he fears that this ridiculousness will make him still older and more repulsive, his son dirtier, more unworthy to be really summoned. (285-86)

To David, this Abraham is "a quite ordinary man, who looks tremendously like the author, a pitiful man nobody can take seriously" (29). David's remark is consistent with Goebel's contention that Kafka's Abrahams continue in the mold of his fictional heroes, who, most agree, were modeled on Kafka himself. Both David and Goebel say that here Kafka shows us a contemporary Abraham for whom the world has changed from that of Kierkegaard's first knight of faith. Then, Abraham's silence was necessary to avoid descending back into the ethical, from whose perspective "the whole world would have been horrified." In David's words, "What was necessary earlier, in biblical times, and in Kierkegaard's time at least something possible to long for, would appear today as simply the behavior of a lunatic," in other words, a "Don Quixote" (David, 89; Goebel, 77).

This Abraham is very pious. He "does not lack the true faith"; he "wants to carry out the sacrifice properly and in general correctly senses what the whole thing is about [. . .] ". More than anything, he wants to serve God, and thus his greatest fear is not the ordeal of ridicule itself and his complicity in it, painful though that might be, but that the ridicule will make him "more unworthy to be really summoned." The central question Kafka is raising here is: how can anyone be certain of the authenticity of a summons from God? It is a question that is at the core of Kierkegaard's and/or Johannes de Silentio's professed amazement at the biblical Abraham. As will be touched on later, it is also a question that Kierkegaard felt forced to revisit three years after he had published Fear and Trembling, when events in the Danish Church challenged his assertion that religious experience is confined to the relationship of a single individual with God.

At the beginning of the same letter to Klopstock, Kafka describes his own experience with religion: "[. . .] in this respect I was never disbelieving, but surprised, fearful, my head as full of questions as this meadow is full of gnats"

(Letters, 285). He ends the sketch of Abraham with a metaphor for the consequences of religious uncertainty:

An Abraham who comes unsummoned! It is as if the best student were solemnly to receive a prize at the end of the year and in the expectant silence, the worst student, because he has misheard, comes forward from his dirty back bench and the whole class falls apart. And it is perhaps not that he has heard wrong, for his name was actually spoken, because it is the teacher's intention that the reward of the best is to be accompanied by the punishment of the worst.

Terrible things – enough. (286)

With this final twist, very characteristic of Kafka, we are shown an authority figure who can compete with the God of Kierkegaard's Abraham in cruelty and unreason. When Goebel writes that Abraham's resolve "to fulfill God's terrifying command turns into a mere misunderstanding," he underestimates the very real terror in Kafka's sketch (78). It is not situated in the "misunderstanding," but in the possibility of a vindictive God whose weapon is laughter. The "expectant silence" of the classroom parodies Kierkegaard's silence of the religious state, but the silence is broken by the laughter that this Abraham feared as Don Quixote.

David sees no ambiguity of reference in this sketch: he writes, "This time we are very far from Kierkegaard." In other words, unlike in some of the other sketches, there is no possibility here that Kafka is thinking of Kierkegaard (89). It could be argued, however, that even here Kierkegaard is in the picture. Kierkegaard's sense of unworthiness was well-developed, fed by his belief that his own life had been tainted by his father's sins, including the sin of his own conception. And the laughter of the mob that Kafka's Abraham dreads has a strong parallel in the public ridicule Kierkegaard suffered as a result of his combat with the Corsair (this thesis, 12-13). Kierkegaard referred to the public humiliation he suffered from being lampooned in

the Corsair as "that slow death, being trampled to death by a flock of geese." Later, he wrote in his journal that, should the Messiah return to earth in the modern age, "he would perhaps not be put to death, but would be ridiculed. This is martyrdom in the age of reason." (qtd. in Updike, "Incommensurability," 75).

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It is worth remembering that, in Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard has constructed a cousin to this antihero of Kafka's. The family trait that the two share is their anonymity, the fact that no one would recognize them as heroes, but otherwise they are poles apart. Kierkegaard's antihero is, of course, the "bourgeois philistine" (67-70; this thesis, 41-42). The situation of both characters involves absurdity in the sense of being outside the domain of reason, but also in the sense of absurdity as the ridiculous, the laughable. The laughter is an instrument of punishment for Kafka's antihero, but for the "bourgeois philistine" it is gentle, and most of it comes from Kierkegaard, who refers to his knight of faith, ironically and fondly, as "this marvel" (70). If Kafka's knight is in danger of becoming Don Quixote, Kierkegaard's already is Dr. Pangloss. What is marvelous about him is the absolute conviction of positivity that informs every aspect of his life, seemingly without reflection and with utter disregard for rationality. Penniless, he knows he will enjoy a costly dinner; not a builder, he convinces a stranger (and himself) he could raise a building "in a jiffy" (69). Nobody laughs at his "lusty, hearty, psalm-singing" (68), but if anyone should, Kierkegaard's knight would beam at the compliment.

He is "Carefree as a devil-may-care good-for-nothing, he hasn't a worry in the world, and yet [. . .] not the least thing does he do except on the strength of the absurd" (69). Kierkegaard recapitulates his idea of how, after renunciation, faith can restore pleasure in the finite, applying it to the philistine:

He drains in infinite resignation the deep sorrow of existence, he knows the bliss of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing

everything, whatever is most precious in this world, and yet to him finitude tastes just as good as to one who has never known anything higher, [. . .] he has this sense of being secure to take pleasure in it, as though it were the most certain thing of all. And yet, and yet the whole earthly form he presents is a new creation on the strength of the absurd. (69-70)

While Kafka may see himself in his antihero, Kierkegaard wishes he could in his. About the bourgeois philistine's ability to make the "movement of infinity," he says, "It could drive me to fury, out of envy if for no other reason" (69). Kierkegaard may be thinking of his relationship with Regine Olsen, which, against all logic, he hoped would be restored after he had destroyed it.

These two stories about the antiheroic Abrahams dramatize the difference between the unshakeable doubt of Kafka and the unshakeable faith portrayed but never achieved by Kierkegaard. Because Kafka's Abraham is all too aware of the humble place he occupies in his world, it is impossible for him to make the absurd leap that would be needed to believe that he is the chosen of God. Fear of the laughter he knows would result from any such pretension isolates him further from his surroundings. By contrast, Kierkegaard's Abraham's place in the world is a matter of indifference to him; he has brought about his isolation himself, by renouncing the world in order to achieve the absurd leap of faith. As a result, if we are to believe Kierkegaard, he regains what he has renounced and becomes an enthusiastic participant in his surroundings. He acts out the familiar Christian paradox of gaining his life by losing his life: he is secure in the world only because he has renounced it.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Above all, Søren Kierkegaard's portrayal of Abraham in Fear and Trembling was designed to make his readers think, even if it also made them angry. More specifically, it was designed to make his readers think about the limitations of thought. Ever since the book first appeared in print, his use of "the absurd" to characterize absolute submission to God has been offensive to many who consider their religious convictions to be rational. Just as the idea of the "teleological suspension of the ethical," seems intended to force those who consider their religion to be totally compatible with ethical behavior to think more deeply, so Kierkegaard's use of "the absurd" seems designed to make readers consider seriously what he perceived as the fundamental incompatibility of religion and reason. The identity of "the absurd" with "the irrational" is thus the major organizing principle of the book. "The absurd" as "the ridiculous" is another component of Kierkegaard's portrait, not a major one and not of Abraham himself, of course, but of a knight of faith for whom Abraham is the prototype, nevertheless. The alternative Abrahams suggested by Franz Kafka partake of both senses of the word.

It would be foolish to expect that an examination of Kierkegaard's argument that religious faith is totally divorced from reason, and of Kafka's private response to it, would lead to a firm conclusion for or against Kierkegaard's position. Kierkegaard's book assumes that his readers come to it equipped with an attitude of religious belief. Without that, his poetic flourishes would be less effective, and his dialectical "proofs" would lose force. Why would anyone who did not believe in Abraham in the first place really care, for example, whether Abraham was a murderer, or was not a

murderer because of the “teleological suspension of the ethical?” Kafka’s responses are those of an interested doubter, and his criticisms of Kierkegaard’s ideas and of his portrait of Abraham are mixed with criticisms of Kierkegaard himself, which may or may not be justified, but have no bearing on the validity of Kierkegaard’s position. The best result that can be expected from an exercise like the present one, then, is not a firm conclusion but a fresh perspective (and perhaps a trace of doubt) on the extent to which rationality underlies belief, not just religious belief but any belief.

Kierkegaard and Kafka have in common their emphasis on subjectivity and the importance of the individual, as noted in the introduction to this thesis. Kafka’s antiheroes struggle as individuals, usually in vain, against authority. Kierkegaard’s biblical Abraham submits to God, the ultimate authority, as an individual. In Kierkegaard’s radical Christianity the human/God relationship is exclusively one-to-one; it would have been destroyed if Abraham had broken his silence. Such inaccessibility to the outside world makes it difficult to answer the question posed earlier concerning Kafka’s antiheroic Abraham: How can anyone be certain of the authenticity of a summons from God? (this thesis, 70). Kierkegaard tried to answer this question by writing a book now known as On Authority and Revelation. The book had its genesis in 1845, in the suspension and defrocking by Bishop Mynster of Adolph Peter Adler, a parish priest in the Danish church. The event deserves mention here because, as Frederick Sontag noted in his introduction to a recent edition of the book, “Adler taught S.K. something that Abraham could not do” (xxxiii).

Adler was judged by the Danish church to be mad. He claimed to have been visited by Jesus, who, he said, ordered him to burn his earlier writings and personally dictated much of the contents of a book which Adler then published under the title, “Several Sermons.” Adler actually visited Kierkegaard, whom he considered to be a kind of John the Baptist to his own Messiah, and read some of his work to him, adopting a “peculiar whistling voice” that identified passages of direct revelation

(Lowrie, xlvi-vii). Kierkegaard's alarmed response was to come down firmly of the side of church tradition and objective authority, the same tradition and authority he was to attack so vigorously toward the end of his life. In the book, he says of Adler, "he confounds the subjective with the objective, his subjectively altered condition with an external event" (168). This, from the man who wrote, "objectively Christianity has no existence" (Qtd. in Sontag, F., xxviii).

It is almost impossible to believe that Kierkegaard was unaware of the parallels between Abraham and Adler. The logical difficulties they presented may have played a part in the many revisions the book underwent, the fact that Kierkegaard wrote three separate prefaces, and, ultimately, left the book unpublished. Compared to other books by Kierkegaard, Authority and Revelation has received little attention. The contents of the book – distinctions between being a genius and being an apostle – have been accepted by disciples of Kierkegaard and dismissed as sophistry by skeptics. They are irrelevant to the obvious but fundamental truth that subjectivity needs the environment of the objective world in order to define itself. This is equally true of Kafka's antiheroes and of Kierkegaard's biblical and would-be Abrahams. The coexistence of the individual with the group and its authority is inescapable and, in fact, the two make each other possible.

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