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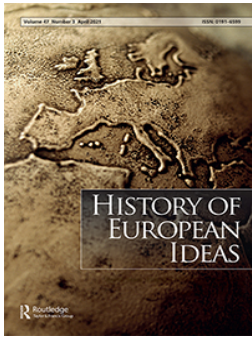
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The sublime in the pedestrian: figures of the incognito in *Fear and Trembling*

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates a novel conceptualization of sublimity: the sublime in the pedestrian. This pedestrian mode of sublimity is exemplified by the Biblical Abraham, the central figure of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous *Fear and Trembling*. It is rooted in the analysis of one of the foundational stories of the three monotheistic religions: Abraham's averted sacrifice of his son Isaac. The defining feature of this new, pedestrian mode of sublimity is that it remains hidden behind what I call a total incognito. It is similar to the classical 'elevated mode of sublimity' as developed by Burke, Kant, and Schiller insofar as it denotes two contrasting feelings at once: repulsion and attraction. It is different insofar as Kierkegaard's pedestrian mode of sublimity remains hidden from view and can only be shown indirectly. This article expounds the new, pedestrian mode of sublimity by investigating the relation between the incognito and the sublime in *Fear and Trembling*. It achieves that goal by engaging three perspectives: (1) the sublime failure that comes to the fore in the incognitos of an imaginary Abraham; (2) the 'fear without being afraid' that is invoked by God's incognitos; (3) the total incognito of the pedestrian which conceals Abraham's sublimity.



KEYWORDS

Kierkegaard; Abraham; incognito; sublime; imagination; failed imagination; faith

1. Introduction: two modes of sublimity

Kierkegaard's pseudonymous *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric* by Johannes de silentio offers an exhaustive analysis of the story from Genesis 22: 1–14 in which God tests Abraham's faith by demanding him to sacrifice his only and long-promised son Isaac. This outrageous demand to sacrifice Isaac is eventually averted, despite Abraham's willingness to act upon it and Isaac's seeming compliance with the whole business of sacrifice. What happened exactly? Was it all just a whim? A temptation that had been conjured up by the self-inflicted demands of a deranged father who could not believe that God had finally made good on his long-awaited promise? And can we know how Abraham experiences this ordeal? After all, the eponymous *fear and trembling* from Johannes's book is not really a leading theme in the Biblical story and Abraham's ordeal takes place almost entirely outside of the purview of the reader of the Book of Genesis.

Within the extensive secondary literature on *Fear and Trembling*, there is a growing number of studies that pay attention to the complicated rhetorical apparatus that Kierkegaard has set up in order to address Abraham as a single individual who cannot even express his ordeal to his own family but has to face it alone.¹ While my reading builds on these nuanced analyses, I develop a

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¹To name just a few: Chris Danta, *Literature Suspends Death: Sacrifice and Storytelling in Kierkegaard, Kafka and Blanchot* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Mary Finn, *Writing the Incommensurable: Kierkegaard, Rossetti, and Hopkins* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1992); Joakim Garff, 'Johannes

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new perspective on *Fear and Trembling* by highlighting that Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes de silentio can only achieve his goal to get a hold on Abraham – as the single individual – through a deliberate failure of the imagination. I will read the imagination's 'achievement by failure' through a twofold lens, that of the sublime and the incognito.

Following Peter Fenves and Bo Kampmann Walther, I will distinguish between 'two distinct, but also depolarized modes of sublimity'.² The first mode of sublimity is the one that we are all familiar with and that has dominated the discourse of the sublime ever since Longinus' notion *hypsos* was translated and popularized as 'le sublime' by Boileau. It was further developed and nuanced by philosophers like Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Schiller. We could call this first mode: the elevated sublime. Even though the triumphant tone of the elevated sublime would be entirely out of place for Johannes, he does develop a new conception of the sublime that follows a similar trajectory. This new, second mode of sublimity is what Johannes calls 'the sublime in the pedestrian'. It provides a radical new conception of the sublime in which sublimity is no longer linked to an upward movement of elevation, but becomes intertwined with a downward movement in which foolishness, madness, and hatred take prevalence.

Interpreters like Agacinski, Fenves, Milbank, Pattison, and Walther have analyzed various aspects of this new mode of sublimity.³ What has not yet been discussed much, however, is how this pedestrian mode of sublimity remains hidden behind a total incognito. In contrast to the elevated mode of the sublime, this new form of the sublime does not address a spectator at all. Quite the contrary, it remains completely hidden behind the incognito of the pedestrian and cannot be witnessed. In fact, the one who expresses this form of the sublime – the knight of faith – cannot possibly be distinguished from any other pedestrian figure (who remains far removed from expressing anything sublime). It is this connection between the pedestrian mode of sublimity and the total incognito that interest me here. If there is no spectator, how can we still speak about the sublime? After all, doesn't the sublime denote a feeling that is invoked within the spectator?

In light of this, it seems rather strange that Johannes takes Abraham as the ultimate example to illustrate the total incognito of the knight of faith. Ultimately, Abraham is one of the patriarchs, celebrated in as much as three different religious traditions. He can hardly be presented as a pedestrian figure. Nevertheless, I think it is exactly the discrepancy between Abraham's *visibility as patriarch* and his *invisibility as the single individual (den Enkelte)* that makes him such a good case study for Johannes. As a patriarch Abraham appears to be fully visible for everyone to see. As a single individual he ultimately remains hidden behind a total incognito. Abraham's outer circumstances of the ordeal can be easily understood, imagined, and articulated; his inner anxiety and his absurd conviction that he will ultimately receive his son back, remains untraceable. Johannes relies on the sublime resonances of the former in order to circle around the hiddenness of the latter.

2. A twofold lens: the incognito and the sublime

In 'A Propos of 'Kierkegaard Vivant', Levinas argues that Kierkegaard 'brings something absolutely new to philosophy'. He further specifies this new conception of truth in 'Kierkegaard: Existence and

de silentio: Rhetorician of Silence', *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (1996): 186–210; Jeffrey Hanson, "'He speaks in Tongues": Hearing the Truth of Abraham's Words of Faith,' in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel W. Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 229–46; David Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant: On Beginnings* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007); Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance & Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ben Ware, 'Johannes de Silentio and the Art of Subtraction: From Voice to Love in *Fear and Trembling*', *Parallax* 22, no. 4 (2016): 391–411. For a summary of an extensive segment of other secondary literature, see John Lippitt, *The Routledge Guidebook to Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (New York: Routledge, 2016), especially chapter 6.

²Bo Kampmann Walther, 'Web of Shudders: Sublimity in Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*', *MLN* 112, no. 5 (1997): 765.

³Sylviane Agacinski, 'We Are Not Sublime: Love and Sacrifice, Abraham and Ourselves,' in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Johnathan Rée, and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 125–50; Peter Fenves, 'Chatter', *Language and History in Kierkegaard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); John Milbank, 'The Sublime in Kierkegaard', in *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, ed. P. Blond, 131–56. (London: Routledge, 1998); Walther, 'Web'.

Ethics' as a 'prosecuted truth' that emerges from a relation to 'a humiliated God who suffers, dies and leaves those who he saves in despair'.⁴ He rightly emphasizes that the revelation of this truth seems to be contrary to its essence. The revelation seems to allow for certainty, whereas the essence of what is revealed is shrouded in absolute uncertainty. As such, Levinas believes that it is inherent within the logic of this prosecuted truth that it disappears behind 'a total *incognito*'.⁵ I think Levinas highlights a crucial aspect of Kierkegaard's philosophy. The problem is, however, that he does not fully engage with the heterogeneity of Kierkegaard's oeuvre. Within a context that is clearly defined by *Fear and Trembling* (although the book is not mentioned), Levinas suddenly brings in the notion of a humiliated God. Nevertheless, the suffering and humiliation that Levinas highlights here do not refer to the God of Genesis, but to the figure of Christ. It echoes *Practice in Christianity* by Anti-Climacus rather than *Fear and Trembling* by Johannes de silentio.

There is a second point of confusion that obscures Levinas's reading concerning the notion 'total *incognito*'. Levinas ascribes the total *incognito* to a humiliated God (referring to Christ, rather than to the God of Genesis). Whereas, in the context of *Fear and Trembling*, it should be ascribed to Abraham. In order to disentangle the confusion, a distinction needs to be made between two different conceptions of the *incognito*, which I already discussed elsewhere: the *incognito* as a category of existence and the *incognito* as a category of communication.⁶

Within Johannes' analysis, the *incognito* functions as a category of existence. The aim of this type of *incognito* is to protect the inner realm of the single individual, by creating a deliberate contradiction between her true character and her outer appearance. The inner remains hidden behind the disguise of the outer. In *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham – exemplifying the knight of faith – appears as an ordinary pedestrian, even though he simultaneously expresses the sublime. This appearance is a total *incognito* as there is no trace on the basis of which the knight of faith can be distinguished from any other, ordinary pedestrian (who does not express the sublime).

It is true, that there is reason to believe that, from the perspective of *Fear and Trembling*, the appearance of God can also be understood as an *incognito*. However, here the *incognito* should not be understood as a category of existence, but rather as a category of communication. As we will see below, the aim of God's *incognito* is not to hide his inner realm from the outer world, but to communicate a sign of contradiction. God appears in disguise, but at the same time provides a hint that this is not his true form. God's *incognito* ensures that the one who is approached by him – Abraham – is not overwhelmed by his divine manifestation, which would leave no other option open than absolute obedience. Instead, God's divine nature is continuously in dispute, ensuring that Abraham remains free in his response and is never pushed into absolute obedience.⁷

In his journals, Kierkegaard himself, as the unsigned author of *Fear and Trembling*, claims that he has used the *incognito* (as a category of communication). The aim of this *incognito* is, so he explains, to intensify the sense of horror that is invoked by the book. Here, for the first time, a possible connection emerges between the *incognito* and the sublime:

People will practically shiver [*gyse*] at the frightful pathos [*frygtelige Pathos*] in the book. But at the time it was written, when the person who was believed to be its author went about in the *incognito* of a flaneur, looking like the very soul of roguishness, wit, and frivolity, no one could really grasp the seriousness. Ah, you fools, the book

⁴Emmanuel Levinas, 'Kierkegaard: Existence and Ethics', in *Proper Names*, trans. M.B. Smith, 69 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁵Ibid.

⁶Martijn Boven, 'Incognito', in *Kierkegaard's Concepts*, Tome III, ed. Stephen M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart, 231–8. Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014). For other, relevant mentions of the *incognito*, see: Fenves, *Chatter*, 177; Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, 197 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). See also Boven, Martijn, 'The Incognito of a Thief. Johannes Climacus and the Poetics of Self-Incrimination,' in *The Kierkegaardian Mind*, ed. Adam Buben, Eleanor Helms, and Patrick Stokes (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 409–20.

⁷In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus shows a completely different test of faith which indeed, as Levinas suggests, comes to the fore in the *incognito* of the humble servant in which the prosecuted truth (i.e. Christ) manifest itself. This is not how God appears to Abraham.

was never as serious as it was then. That itself is the true expression of the horror [*Rædselens*]. Had the author appeared to be serious, the horror [*Rædselen*] would have been less. The reduplication is what is monstrous [*det Uhyre*] in the horror [*Rædselen*]. (KJN 6:237, modified/ SKS 22:235)

In this journal entry, Kierkegaard highlights the contradiction between the incognito of the flaneur (the jest) and the real position of the author who wrote *Fear and Trembling* (the seriousness). A series of distancing techniques contribute to the impression that the one who speaks – the author, the pseudonym – is a nonperson who is not personally involved in what he is saying. First of all, the author (Kierkegaard) walks around in the incognito of the flaneur. Secondly, he presents himself under the assumed name of Johannes de silentio. Thirdly, this Johannes confesses that he can neither imagine nor understand Abraham. Each of these distancing techniques increases the unresolved tension between jest and earnestness of the book. They guarantee that the horror of the book will hit the reader even stronger by making the reader self-active in response to it.

To ensure this effect, Johannes continuously stresses his own inability to properly present Abraham. ‘I cannot understand Abraham’, he states several times, ‘I can only admire him’ (FT 112/SKS 4:200). In addition, he highlights the failure of his imagination to get a hold of Abraham as the knight of faith.

I can imagine myself in the position of the hero [*tænker jeg mig ind*], but I cannot imagine myself in Abraham’s position [*i Abraham kan jeg ikke tænke mig ind*] when I approach that height, I fall down [...] I have seen the terrifying face to face, and I do not flee from it in horror, but I know very well that even though I advance toward it courageously, my courage is still not the courage of faith and is not something to be compared with it. (FT 33, modified/SKS 4:128–9)

Acknowledging his inability to either understand or imagine Abraham, Johannes nevertheless expresses his admiration for Abraham’s courage. On the one hand, Johannes admires Abraham as the knight of faith who has reached the greatest heights one can achieve and has gone where not even the tragic hero can go. On the other hand, Johannes continuously stresses the horror of Abraham’s situation, the monstrous nature of the test of faith he has to pass, the terrifying prospect of going against his own will, against his family, and against the ethical order as a whole. The maddening mixture of admiration and horror provides the book with a double register. The two registers cancel each other out and place the reader in a place of uncertainty. Should we admire Abraham the knight of faith? Or should we denounce him for attempted murder? Should we affirm that Abraham, as the single individual, is higher than the universal? Or should we condemn Abraham by holding him accountable according to the standards of the universal? None of these responses seems right.

This co-existence of two contradictory impulses – one that repels (horror), another that attracts (admiration) – is often linked to a particular state of the imagination: the sublime. In fact, in the notion ‘fear and trembling (*Frygt og Bæven*)’, which figures so prominently in the title of Kierkegaard’s book, one could easily hear an echo from Immanuel Kant’s ‘Analytic of the Sublime’. ‘The mind [*Das Gemüt*], Kant writes, ‘feels itself set in motion in the representation of the sublime in nature [...] This movement, especially in its inception, may be compared with a trembling [*Erschütterung*], i.e. with a rapidly alternating repulsion and attraction [*Abstoßen und Anziehen*]’ produced by one and the same object.⁸ This trembling of the mind has a repulsive side insofar as it stretches the imagination beyond its own limits, confronting it with an excess that is ‘like an abyss [*Abgrund*] in which it fears to lose itself [*worin sie sich selbst zu verlieren fürchtet*]’; in this way, the imagination deprives itself of its own freedom.⁹ The trembling has an attractive side insofar as the imagination, now regarded as an ‘instrument of reason [*Werkzeuge der Vernunft*]’, exercises its dominion over sensibility and ‘gains an extension and a might greater than that which it sacrifices’.¹⁰

⁸Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Werke in zwölf Bänden. Band 10*), 78 (Frankfurt am Main: Weischedel, 1977); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.C. Meredith, 88 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), modified.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Kant, *Kritik*, 87; *Critique*, 99; Ibid.

From Kant's perspective, the inadequacy of the imagination to grasp the full magnitude or might of the object painfully reveals what its limits are (as long as it operates under the law of the understanding). At the same time this inadequacy pushes the imagination to subject itself to the higher law of reason, inducing the pleasant 'feeling [*Gefühl*] that we possess a pure and self-sufficient reason [*reine selbständige Vernunft*]' that is tied to our own freedom.¹¹ In this way, Kant presents the trembling of the mind as a failure that is immediately turned into an achievement. Although *Fear and Trembling* remains far removed from this triumphant perspective, the imagination's 'achievement by failure' nevertheless provides us with a hint of how to approach the book. It is only by presenting Johannes's repeated failures to imagine himself into Abraham and his inability to fully grasp what happened on mount Moriah, that Kierkegaard can slowly achieve an insight into Abraham's total incognito.

3. Abraham's incognitos: sublime failures

The first contours of the sublime already emerge in the opening section of the book, which is announced under the heading *Stemning* (attunement, mood, setting the tone). Although *Fear and Trembling* is written by Kierkegaard (real author) under the pseudonym Johannes de silentio (fictional author), neither of them is presented as the narrator of the *Stemning*. Strictly speaking it is possible that Johannes is the narrator, but the opening line seems to suggest otherwise, evoking the collective unconscious of the fairy tale: 'Once upon a time [*Der var engang*] there was a man who as a child had heard [*hørt*] that beautiful story [*skjønne Fortælling*] of how God tempted Abraham' (FT 9/SKS 4:105). In addition, this fairy tale concerns an anonymous man who is struggling to understand the story about Abraham (which, as one of the foundational stories of the three monotheistic religions, rests even deeper in the collective unconscious).

The old man acts as an interpreter of this story, but he is not a 'thinker [*Tænker*]' (FT 9/SKS 4:105) nor an 'exegetical scholar [*lærd Exeget*]' (FT 9/SKS 4:106), but a non-specialist who admires Abraham without being able to understand him. 'No one was as great as Abraham', the old man concludes after each consecutive trip to mount Moriah, 'who is able to understand [*forstaae*] him?' (FT 14/SKS 4:111). In his youth, the old man could still relate to the story in 'restful contemplation [*ruhi-ger Kontemplation*]',¹² simply enjoying the 'artful weave of the imagination' (FT 9, modified/SKS 4:105). In his old age, the harmonious feeling of the beautiful has disappeared. The narrator describes it as follows:

The older he became, the more often his thoughts turned to that story; his enthusiasm for it became greater and greater, and yet he could understand the story less and less. Finally, he forgot everything else because of it; his soul had but one wish, to see Abraham, but one longing, to have been a witness to this event. [...] for what occupied him was not the artful weave of the imagination [*Phantasiens kunstrige Væven*], but the shiver of thought [*men Tankens Gysen*]. (FT 9, modified/ SKS 4:105)

Driven by the desire to witness Abraham in real life, the old man becomes more and more occupied by what the narrator calls 'the shiver of thought'. Simply imagining the event as a beautiful story no longer satisfies the old man, he wants to grasp what really happened and as such he pushes his imagination to the limits of what it can represent. He is not able to go beyond these limits and that is why the *Stemning* cannot really reach the mood it tries to present, marking a shift from the beautiful to the sublime.

In the *Stemning*, the old man presents four variations of the original story. 'Thus', the narrator states, 'and in many similar ways this man of whom we speak thought about those events' (FT 14/SKS 4:111). In each of the variations, Abraham fails to live up to the test of faith. The whole event is now recast as a tragic story that focuses on Abraham's suffering rather than his faith. In

¹¹Kant, *Kritik*, 79; *Critique*, 89, modified.

¹²Kant, *Kritik*, 181; *Critique*, 88.

light of Friedrich Schiller's essay 'Über das Pathetische [On the Pathetic]', in which the Kantian sublime is re-interpreted and applied to tragic drama, this can be interpreted as follows: Abraham's suffering stresses the *pathetic* element of the tragic story; whereas his moral resistance, opposing this suffering, ensures that it simultaneously becomes *sublime*.¹³

Given the focus of this article, I will only focus on the first and the fourth imaginative variation.¹⁴ Here we see that the sublime becomes entangled with the incognito as a category of existence. In both imaginative variations, Abraham deliberately adopts an incognito to hide his true nature from Isaac, either by suggesting he is something lower than he is (adopting the incognito of the idolater) or by suggesting he is something higher (adopting the incognito of the true believer). In the first imaginative variation, Abraham hides himself behind the incognito of an idolater in order to offer Isaac a plausible explanation for his inexplicable attempt to sacrifice him. In the words of the old man:

Then Abraham turned away from him for a moment, but when Isaac saw Abraham's face again, it had changed: his gaze was wild, his whole being was sheer terror [*Skikkelse var Rædsel*]. He seized Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground, and said, 'Stupid boy, do you think I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you think it is God's command? No, it is my fancy [*Lyst*]. Then Isaac shuddered [*skjælvede*] and cried out in his anxiety [*Angst*]: 'God in heaven, have mercy on me, God of Abraham, have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, then you be my father!' But Abraham said softly to himself, 'Lord God in heaven, I thank you; it is better that he believes me a monster [*et Umenneske*: an inhuman] than that he should lose faith in you'. (FT 10–11, modified/SKS 4:107)

The incognito replaces the image of the loving father with that of the monstrous idolater in order to ensure that Isaac does not blame God. Abraham rather erases himself as a father than risking that Isaac loses faith in God. In the process, the role of the father is transferred from Abraham to God. (Isaac calls on God and says: 'have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, then you be my father!' (FT 10/SKS 4:10)). The incognito is successful, but only reaches its goal through a violent deception that not only estranges a son from his father, but also presents a false image of God. To put it even stronger: by adopting the incognito of an idolater, Abraham has remade God in his own image: projecting his own conception of a good father as a false God while at the same time impersonating the true God. Moreover, he also acts as the one who ultimately saves Isaac, taking again the place of God.

There is more than a hint of the sublime in this. As Schiller suggests, in order to experience the sublime 'two distinct operations of the mind are wanted'.¹⁵ First, the reader needs to recognize God's demand as a terrible force that no one can oppose (the suffering, the pathetic). Second, the reader needs to become aware of the possibility to resist God's unreasonable and immoral demand, expressing a remainder of human dignity in the face of ultimate oppression (the resistance, the sublime). Abraham does so by taking God's place and turning himself into a deranged idolater. The roles of Abraham and God have changed places. By forcing a conception of faith on Isaac that is not in line with the type of faith that God actually demands, he presents his own position as a sublime intervention that preserves the ethical order.

In the fourth imaginative variation, the situation is reversed. This time Abraham adopts the identity of a true believer as an incognito. With the help of this incognito he tries to hide his own lack of faith from his son but fails to do so because of an inadvertent sign of contradiction that is seen by Isaac (revealing that we are not dealing with 'total incognito's' here, but with relative ones that can be identified).

Abraham made everything ready for the sacrifice, calmly and gently, but when he turned away and drew the knife, Isaac saw that Abraham's left hand was clenched in despair [*Fortvivelse*], that a shudder [*Skjælven*] went through his whole body – but Abraham drew the knife.

¹³Friedrich Schiller, 'Über das Pathetische,' in *Sämtliche Werke, Band 5* (München: Hanser, 1962), 207–33; Friedrich Schiller, 'The Pathetic,' in *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays: Volume 1* (Boston: Niccolls, 1902), 138–67.

¹⁴Four imaginative variations are presented. In Kierkegaard's journals we can find quite a few more (e.g. KJN 8:379–80, 392–3, 465–6/SKS 24: 374–5, 387, 458; 9:250–51/SKS 25: 248).

¹⁵Schiller, 'Über das Pathetische', 216; 'The Pathetic', 152.

Then they returned home again, and Sarah hurried to meet them, but Isaac had lost the faith. Not a word is ever said of this in the world, and Isaac never talked to anyone about what he had seen, and Abraham did not suspect that anyone had seen it. (FT 14, modified/SKS 4:111)

In the vivid image of the hand that is clenched in despair the pathetic element takes prevalence over the sublime. Nevertheless, there is still a hint of the sublime in the mixture of terror and relief that we, as readers, feel. Here too there is a link with the incognito as a category of existence. Despite Abraham's uncanny ability to remain calm and gently, he is not able to keep the incognito of a true believer in place. Isaac notices the contradiction between the calm posture and the convoluted body, sees through the incognito, and identifies Abraham's true nature behind it. It is not clear whether it is Abraham's lack of faith that makes Isaac turn away from God or whether it is his hypocrisy, pretending to be somebody he is not, while still going through with the sacrifice.

The two deliberate incognitos – Abraham the idolater and Abraham the true believer – reverse each other. Moreover, while the first one succeeds in its attempt to hide the truth (in a double sense: both God's and Abraham's true nature is hidden from Isaac); the second one fails to do so because a sign of contradiction betrays Abraham's true nature. The *Stemning* as a whole approaches Abraham by imagining his failure, highlighting the many ways in which the test of faith could have gone wrong; invoking the fear and the trembling – the shiver of thought – that belongs to the register of the pathetic and the sublime. As such, the tone is set for the rest of the book. The reader is getting closer to sensing – imagining – Abraham's ordeal, but only *via negativa* by eliminating what it is not.

4. God's incognitos: fear without being afraid

Once the tone is set by the *Stemning*, the mixture of admiration and non-understanding is given a new type of expression in a so-called 'Eulogy on Abraham [*Lovtale over Abraham*]'. Everything seems to indicate that the eulogy switches from the imagination of Abraham's failure (*via negativa*) to the commemoration of heroic action (*via positiva*). In a discourse that is filled with 'bravado' and 'prima facie bizarre claims', Johannes directly speaks to 'My listener! [*Min Tilhører!*]' or 'You, to whom my speech [*Tale*] is addressed'.¹⁶ The tone of sublime failure that was struck by the *Stemning*, seems to have shifted to the exalted speech of an unapologetic enthusiast that is delivered under the sign of this economy of memory, casting Johannes in the role of the poet and Abraham in the role of the hero.

At first sight, the exalted speech of Johannes is indeed entirely in line with the conventional rhetoric of heroism that one can find in ancient legends and similar forms of epic poetry. However, it slowly becomes clear that the greatness that Johannes ascribes to Abraham is embarrassingly unheroic:

'... Abraham was the greatest of all, great by that power whose strength is powerlessness, great by the wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by that hope whose form is madness [*Vanvid*], great by that love that is hatred to oneself ...' (FT 16–17/SKS 4:113)

In ancient legends, the hero does not become great because of his powerlessness, foolishness, madness, and hatred. Quite the contrary, these unheroic qualities do not fit the framework of conventional heroism at all and neither do Abraham's rather absurd actions.

This contradiction between the exalted tone of the speech and its unheroic content signifies an unmarked break in the economy of memory; indicating that if Abraham can be considered a hero, he is not a hero in any conventional sense, but rather an antihero of sorts. Johannes implodes the heroic register from within, shifting it to an ambiguous greatness that is hard to stomach and even harder to admire. On the side of the poet, a similar break occurs. This happens most clearly at the end of the eulogy when the address of the speech shifts from 'My listener' to 'Venerable Father

¹⁶Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Reader's Guide*, 57 (New York: Continuum, 2010). Lippitt, *Routledge Guidebook*, 32.

Abraham!' (FT 22/SKS 4:118). Here Johannes confesses that Abraham does not need a eulogy. By thus simultaneously embracing and denouncing the rhetorical format of the eulogy, Johannes complicates his own status as a poet. If he can still be considered a poet, he is not a poet in the traditional sense. Mirroring Abraham as the antihero, he has become the antipoet.¹⁷

Halfway through his speech, Johannes gives a name to the powerlessness, the foolishness, the madness, and the hate that he is praising. This name is: faith. The two lenses that I have adopted in this article – that of the incognito and the sublime – will help to get a better perspective on the faith that becomes manifest in Abraham's 'struggle with God [*stride med Gud*]' (FT 23/SKS 4:119). I will first zoom in on the incognitos of God. This time, it no longer concerns the incognito as a category of existence that is used by Abraham to hide his true nature from Isaac. We are now dealing with the incognito as a category of communication: the incognito that demands faith. These relative incognitos are more complicated than the ones we encountered in relation to Abraham. God adopts these incognitos to test Abraham's faith. They hide God's true nature but only in order to see whether Abraham is able to recognize it, despite its distorted appearance.

Three of these incognitos can be identified in the eulogy, the first of which is described as follows:

By faith he [Abraham] was an alien in the promised land, and there was nothing that reminded him of what he cherished, but everything by its newness tempted his soul to sorrowful longing. And yet he was God's chosen one in whom the Lord was well pleased! As a matter of fact, if he had been an exile, banished from God's grace, he could have better understood it – but now it was as if he and his faith were being mocked [*Spot*]. (FT 17/SKS 4:113f)

On the one hand, God announces that Abraham is the chosen one who will be blessed and who will gain possession of a promised land. On the other hand, God requires Abraham to pursue a new course that will result in exactly the opposite of what is promised. Abraham has to leave his home where he is respected and has to abandon his family, in order to live in exile as a foreigner. My suggestion is that God deliberately adopts the incognito of an unreliable idol who raises false hopes and does not live up to his promises. He does so in order to test whether Abraham is able to see through this incognito, holding on to the promise despite its apparent dissolution. In this way God forces Abraham to prove his faith in the face of absurdity.

In the second scene of struggle, a new promise is added while the old one remains unfulfilled.

By faith Abraham received the promise that in his seed all the generations of the earth would be blessed. Time passed, the possibility was there, Abraham had faith; time passed, it became preposterous [*urimeligt*], Abraham had faith. [...] Abraham became old, Sarah the object of mockery [*Spot*] in the land, and yet he was God's chosen one and heir to the promise that in his seed all the generations of the earth would be blessed. Would it not have been better, after all, if he were not God's chosen one? What does it mean to be God's chosen one? (FT 17–18, modified/SKS 4:114)

Here God's incognito of an idol becomes even more pronounced. It no longer operates on the contradiction between the land that is promised to Abraham and the exile that is required of him. This time there emerges a contradiction between the promise (a large offspring) and what is humanly possible (being too old for children). After all, Abraham's wife Sarah is old, her childbearing days have been over for a long time. The first time around, Abraham could still tell himself: time will tell that God will make good on his word. But time has passed and still nothing has happened. Now it becomes even more foolish to keep holding onto the promise and to keep recognizing God behind his appearance of an idol. This idol is no longer just unreliable, but has become cruel as well, dangling impossible promises in front of the old couple. And still Abraham is able to see through the incognito and manages to keep his faith.

In the first two scenes of struggle, Abraham has opened himself up to ridicule and derision, but his predicament can still be comprehended, his actions can still be understood. This changes in the third

¹⁷For an attentive reading of the rhetorical structure of the eulogy, see Jeffrey Hanson, *Kierkegaard and the Life of Faith: The Aesthetic, the Ethical, and the Religious in Fear and Trembling*, 68–89 (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017).

scene, which is the central focus of *Fear and Trembling*. After about 25 years of waiting for the impossible, Abraham has finally received a son, Isaac. However, as if his faith has not been tested enough yet, the very same God that promised him a large offspring now demands him to sacrifice Isaac.

So everything was lost, even more appallingly than if it had never happened! So the Lord was only mocking Abraham! He wondrously made the preposterous [*Urimelige*] come true; now he wanted to see it annihilated. [...] And yet Abraham was God's chosen one, and it was the Lord who imposed the ordeal [*Prøvelsen*]. Now everything would be lost! All the glorious remembrance of his posterity, the promise in Abraham's seed – it was nothing but a whim, a fleeting thought that the Lord had and that Abraham was now supposed to obliterate. (FT 19/SKS 4:114)

Here the contradiction takes on a new intensity. God's promise has hardly been fulfilled and now it is immediately betrayed in the most appalling way possible. Worse still, Abraham himself has to undo the promise, taking up the knife and killing his beloved son. The whole thing has become a preposterous affair. God appears here in the violent incognito of a bloodthirsty idol that demands child-sacrifices. Anyone else than Abraham would have given up in despair, no longer being able to trust this fickle and treacherous God. Abraham, however, is still able to see through the incognito. He still manages to recognize the God of the promise behind it. However, this time he not only has to hold on to the promise, he also has to defy his ethical responsibility for his son.

When it comes to sacrifice, tragic heroes like Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus preceded Abraham. In their case the sacrifice was necessary in order to save the nation, to keep an oath, or restore to the ethical order. Not so in the case of Abraham. He has to sacrifice his son in order to show that he keeps recognizing God behind the incognito of a bloodthirsty idol. For him the sacrifice is a test of faith. Johannes emphasizes that this also heightens the fearful prospect that Abraham faces. It is already fearful when you have to sacrifice your own beloved son. It is even more fearful when there is no apparent reason to sacrifice him, when nothing is gained by it, and when it cannot be defended in any ethical terms. It is fearful to be confronted by your daughter when she learns that she will be sacrificed. It is even more fearful when you cannot tell your son about the demanded sacrifice; when you cannot share it with anyone; when you have to keep everything secret, not because you want to, but because there is no language available to speak about it. It is fearful to see your child in mortal danger. It is even more fearful to have to kill your son with your own hands in order to win him back.¹⁸

We saw already that Abraham's failure to live up to God's demand was at least somewhat linked to the sublime. What if Abraham does not fail? In that case, does it still make sense to bring in the perspective of the sublime? As indicated earlier, Kant believes that the sublime only emerges when 'the inner feelings [*das Gemüt*] are not simply attracted [*angezogen*] by the object, but are also alternately repelled [*abgestoßen*] thereby', resulting in what he calls a 'negative pleasure [*negative Lust*]'.¹⁹ It is not that we are actually afraid when experiencing the sublime. Instead, 'we may look upon an object as fearful, and yet not be afraid of it'.²⁰ He illustrates this with the example of a 'righteous man' who 'fears God without being afraid of him, because he is not concerned about wanting to oppose God and his commandments'.²¹ However, if he does choose to oppose God, he recognizes that he is 'to be feared [*furchtbar*]'.²² It is in this way that God can be a source of the sublime.²³

¹⁸For two competing analyses of this theme, see: Michelle Kosche, 'What Abraham Couldn't Say', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Volume 82 (2008): 59–78; and John Lippitt, 'What Neither Abraham Nor Johannes de Silentio Could Say', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Volume 82 (2008): 79–99. Also see, Garff, 'Johannes de silentio'.

¹⁹Kant, *Kritik*, 68; Critique, 76, modified.

²⁰Kant, *Kritik*, 80; Critique, 91.

²¹*Ibid.*, modified.

²²*Ibid.*

²³For an excellent analysis of the Kantian sublime, see Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment*, trans. Elizabeth Ronenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

In addition, for Kant the formula of ‘Problema II’ applies: ‘The ethical is the universal [*det Almene*], and as such it is also the divine’ (FT 68/SKS 4:160). In other words, God’s commandments coincide with the commandments of the ethical. Abraham, of course, is in a quite different situation. He also fears God without being afraid of him, but in his case the fear is further intensified by the fact that God’s command to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac contradicts the commandments of the ethical (‘Thou shalt not murder’). Is this ‘fear without being afraid’ still sublime in the Kantian sense?

From Kant’s perspective the situation is quite clear. There is no sublimity here. Rather than showing a higher destination, the story only shows moral degradation. ‘Abraham’, Kant argues, ‘should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: “That I should not kill my good son is quite certain; whether you, who appears unto me, are God, I am not certain of”’.²⁴ This response is entirely in line with Kant’s *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*) in which he defines autonomy as the supreme principle of morality (*Sittlichkeit*). ‘The principle of Morality’, he writes, ‘is to choose [*zu wählen*] only in such a way that the maxims of your choice [*Wahl*] are also included [*mit begriffen*] as universal law in the same volition [*wollen*]’.²⁵ By linking individual self-legislation (*auto-nomos*) to the universal law (*nomos*), Kant overcomes the frightful prospect of a morality that is entirely grounded in the individual will. From Kant’s perspective, free will means that the individual annuls her own individuality and expresses herself in the universal.

Johannes is not so sure about this. In his view, the story of Abraham at least shows the possibility of a perspective in which ‘the single individual is higher than the universal’ (FT 55/SKS 4:149). He thereby challenges Kant’s principle of autonomy, breaking the inexplicable link between self-legislation (*auto-nomos*) and universal law (*nomos*). Abraham decides on his own accord that he can still trust the God of the promise that he recognizes behind the incognito of the God of the demand. There is no universal law or principle in which he can ground this decision. In fact, there is not even the possibility of a shared understanding between him and anyone else.²⁶

Here we encounter a new perspective, that somewhat echoes that of the sublime: the double register of the absurd. ‘The absurd’, Johannes writes, ‘does not belong to the distinctions that fall within the understanding’s own domain. It is not identical with the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen’ (FT 46, modified/SKS 4:141). Like the sublime, the double register of the absurd can be understood as ‘fear without being afraid’. The fear is located in the fact that Abraham needs to express himself as a single individual, placing himself at odds with the demands of the ethical order; Abraham’s decision to do so is repulsive and can only be understood as madness, foolishness, and hate. The ‘not being afraid’ comes to the fore in Abraham’s ‘paradoxical and humble courage to grasp the whole temporal realm [*Timeligheden*] now by virtue of the absurd [*Kraft af det Absurde*], and this is the courage of faith’ (FT 46, modified/SKS 4:143). Johannes encounters something attractive in the absurdity of this higher courage insofar as it allows Abraham to counter the seeming idiocy of the demand with the enduring faith in the fulfillment of the promise. Within the double register of the absurd, the contours emerge of a new, pedestrian mode of sublimity.

5. Abraham’s total incognito: the sublime in the pedestrian

In the introduction to the ‘Problemata’, which is titled ‘Foreløbig Expectoration [Preliminary Expectoration]’, Johannes states he has never seen a ‘reliable example’ of someone like Abraham – a knight of faith, a single individual – and that he has failed to track one down (FT 27, modified/SKS 4:123). He expresses, however, an almost touristic interest in finding one:

²⁴Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties/Der Streit der Fakultäten*, trans. M.J. Gregor, 114, 115 (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), modified.

²⁵Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten (Werke in zwölf Bänden. Band 7)*, 74 (Frankfurt am Main: Weischedel, 1977); Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M.J. Gregor, 47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

²⁶For a mere extensive analysis of Kierkegaard’s relation to the principle of autonomy, see Fenves, *Chatter*, 145–62.

Generally, people travel around the world to see rivers and mountains, new stars, colorful birds, freakish fish, preposterous races of mankind; [...] That does not occupy me. But if I knew where such a knight of faith [*Troens Ridder*] lived, I would travel to him on foot, for this marvel [*Vidunder*] occupies me absolutely. I would not leave him for a second, watching every minute how he makes the movements [*Bevægelserne*]. (FT 38, modified/SKS 4:133)

The problem is, of course, that the movement of faith remains invisible and cannot be seen from the touristic perspective of an external observer. All Johannes is able to provide here is a conceptual understanding of the incognito of the pedestrian in which Abraham – as the knight of faith – appears (out of necessity). Maybe that is the reason that he does not say ‘I think myself into [*tænker jeg mig in*]’ (FT 33, modified/SKS4: 128) the knight of faith, but simply states that he ‘can very well think him [*tænke ham*]’ (FT 38, modified/ SKS4 133). Rather than an imaginative exercise where Johannes tries to put himself into the position of the knight of faith, he simply envisions what he would look like in a more abstract, external sense.

“Good Lord! Is this the person, is it really him? He looks just like a tax collector [*Rodemester*].” But this is indeed the one. I move a little closer to him, watching his slightest movement to see whether it reveals a bit of incongruous optical telegraphy from the infinite, a glance, a facial expression, a gesture, a sadness, a smile that would betray the infinite in its incongruity with the finite. No! (FT 39, modified/SKS 4:133)

There is nothing that betrays that the tax collector is indeed someone like Abraham, a knight of faith, a single individual. His total incognito is fully intact. In order to get a better grasp, at least conceptually, on this undetectable incognito, Johannes compares the movements of the knight of faith to those of a dancer.²⁷

It is said that the hardest task for a dancer is to leap into a particular position [*springe sig ind i en bestemt Stilling*] in such a way that he never once has to reach for the position [*griber efter Stillingen*], but already stands in position [*staaer i Stillingen*] in the leap itself [*i Springet selv*]. Perhaps no dancer has done it [*gjøre det*] – but it has been done [*dette gjør*] by this knight [*hiin Ridder*]. (FT 41, modified/SKS 4:135)²⁸

In this image a contrast is created between two nouns: the leap (*Spring*) and the position (*Stilling*); as well as two verbs: standing (*staaer*) and leaping (*spring*). Without destroying this contrast, the leap coincides with the position, while the leaping coincides with the standing. Johannes uses this image to suggest that the invisible movement of infinity – as made by Abraham and other knights of faith – can be compared with the dancer’s leap (invoking the sublime); whereas the visible movement of finitude – which they make simultaneously – can be compared with the dancer’s position (presenting the pedestrian). To give us a full sense of the incognito of the knight of faith, Johannes continues the image, focusing on the moment the dancer lands.

But to be able to land [*falde ... ned*] in such a way that in the same second it looks like one stands and walks, to transform the leap in life into a stroll [*Springet i Livet til Gang*], to absolutely express the sublime in the pedestrian [*absolut at udtrykke det Sublime i det Pedestre*] – that can only be done by this knight [*hiin Ridder*] – and this is the one and only marvel. (FT 41, modified/SKS 4:135)

In the case of Abraham, and other knights of faith, the moment of landing cannot be distinguished from the moment of standing/walking. Moreover, the leap on the side of the infinite is immediately transformed into a stroll on the side of the finite. Taken literally, the dancer who leaps cannot longer be distinguished from the pedestrian who strolls. It is a dance that seems like walking. Or, to put it differently, the dancer appears in the incognito of the pedestrian. The sublime and infinite movement of the dance (which remains invisible) is expressed in the ordinary, finite movement of the stroll (clearly visible to everyone).²⁹

²⁷For a different reading of the image of the dancer, see Alexander Jech, ‘Kierkegaard’s Dancers of Faith and of Infinity’, *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 24 (2019): 29–57.

²⁸I have tried to keep the chiasmus ‘gjøre det – dette gjør’ in place.

²⁹At his point a short remark on the notion ‘leap of faith’ or ‘Troen Spring’ (in Danish) is in order. As Alastair McKinnon has sufficiently shown, this notion does not appear in any of Kierkegaard’s works. More importantly, it gives the misleading

The formula that Johannes employs – ‘to absolutely express the sublime in the pedestrian [*absolut at udtrykke det Sublime i det Pedestre*]’ (FT 41, modified/SKS 4:135;) – already indicates that we have moved away from the Kantian sublime. After all, for Kant sublimity never resides in the object itself, but only in the mind of the spectator who is affected by it. In the case of Abraham, however, the sublime leap of the dancer only resides in the stroll of the pedestrian. As such, a new type of sublimity emerges. A sublimity without a spectator that cannot be made visible, but can only emerge in the total incognito of the pedestrian.³⁰ This incognito is so absolute that it becomes impossible to distinguish the sublime knight of faith from an ordinary pedestrian. Seen from the outside they look exactly the same.

Johannes does not specify the contrast between the elevated and the pedestrian mode of sublimity. Instead he contrasts the tragic hero (Agamemnon who fits within the framework of the elevated mode of sublimity) with the knight of faith (Abraham who expresses the sublime in the pedestrian). Agamemnon, the tragic hero, gives up his daughter and renounces himself. He does so to save the community and to express the universal (*det Almene*). In other words, Agamemnon ‘gives up the certain for the even more certain, and the observer’s eye [*Betragterens Øie*] views him with confidence [*trygt*]’ (FT 60/ SKS 4:154). In the case of Abraham, the opposite happens. He renounces the universal to become the single individual. He loves his son but still wants to sacrifice him even though nothing is gained through this sacrifice. Isn’t that madness? ‘Him the observer cannot understand at all, neither can his eye rest in confidence upon him. Perhaps it cannot be done at all, what the believer intended, since it is unthinkable [*utænkeligt*]’ (FT 60–61, modified/SKS 4:154).

6. Conclusion

For Kant, the double register of the elevated sublime ‘summons our power [*Kraft*] [...] to regard the things that worry us (worldly goods, health, and life) as small’.³¹ As such, it shows us that we are not completely determined by the quotidian realm of necessities, but that we have higher principles that exceed this realm. Experiencing the sublime reveals a higher purpose to us. The elevated sublime takes place by moving upwards from the pedestrian towards the sublime. The pedestrian mode of sublimity, on the other hand, makes the exact opposite movement. It is not the ability to leave the quotidian realm of necessities behind that characterizes the pedestrian mode of sublimity. Quite the contrary, its distinguishing feature is the ability to go back to this quotidian realm.

Throughout the book, Johannes has been stressing that Abraham, as the single individual, has to make a double movement: being willing to sacrifice the son while at the same time being able to receive him back by virtue of the absurd. Viewed apart each movement can easily be made; the difficulty is to make both movements simultaneously and to repeat this every second. This double movement is sublime insofar ‘the single individual [*den Enkelte*], as the single individual [*den Enkelte*], relates herself absolutely to the absolute’ (FT 70, modified/SKS 4:162). It is also pedestrian insofar the single individual also relates herself relatively to the quotidian world of necessities. The added problem is that in this case the sublime fully disappears behind the total incognito of the pedestrian, to such an extent that the spectator can no longer distinguish them from each other.

Johannes can only show these movements in an abstract sense, without ever reaching beyond the total incognito of the pedestrian behind which the sublime nature of the knight of faith remains hidden. By necessity, his language keeps oscillating between the double register of the elevated sublime (horror mixed with admiration) and the double register of the absurd (madness mixed with courage). It is only within the continuous tension between these two double registers that Johannes succeeds to keep the imagination of the reader spinning around the untraceable center of the pedestrian sublime.

impression that Johannes thinks that Abraham acts out of blind obedience. See Alastair McKinnon, ‘Kierkegaard and “The Leap of Faith”’, *Kierkegaardiana* 16 (1993): 107–22.

³⁰For a more extensive analysis of the relation of Johannes’ conception of the sublime to that of others (e.g. Longinus), see Walther, ‘Web’. See also Milbank, ‘The Sublime’.

³¹Kant, *Kritik*, 81; *Critique*, 92, modified.

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