

SELF-DECEPTION, CONFUSION, AND SALVATION IN *FEAR AND TREMBLING* WITH *WORKS OF LOVE*

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ABSTRACT

Reading *Fear and Trembling* with *Works of Love* heightens Kierkegaard's summons to acknowledge the ambiguity of our aims and the treachery of our love. *Works of Love* underscores that there is a "neighbor" in *Fear and Trembling* whose justified or damnable banishment occasions Kierkegaard's attempt to "track down" the "illusions" of love. Through de Silentio, Kierkegaard prompts the reader to consider whether the promise has been broken due to radical obedience, lack of faith, dearth of imagination, or a gnarled combination of motives. We are to recognize our kinship with the duplicitous merman and discover that we must, like Tobit's Sarah, receive an extravagant gift. *Fear and Trembling* is thus a text with soteriological import, but with ethical import as well. Convicted by and indebted to God, we are to find in Abraham's act a premonitory paradigm for every engagement.

KEY WORDS: *Abraham, gratitude, love, Kierkegaard, repentance, self-examination*

JOHANNES DE SILENTIO'S POETRY IN *Fear and Trembling* (1843) depicts literarily the theme of self-delusion that Søren Kierkegaard develops more explicitly in *Works of Love* (1847). Referring to the very text he authored, de Silentio writes: "I could easily write a whole book if I were to expound on the various misunderstandings, the awkward positions, the botched up movements I have encountered in just my own little experience" (*FT* 46).¹ *Fear and Trembling* is Kierkegaard's indirect attempt, through the poet de Silentio, to sort through the "various misunderstandings" that determine whether the banishment of "the girl" from his life and from the text is due to divine command, fear, lack of

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¹ All references to *Fear and Trembling* (abbreviated as *FT* in the citations) and *Works of Love* (*WL*) are from the Princeton University editions, translated by Howard and Edna Hong and published in 1983 and 1995 respectively.

faith, or dearth of imagination. De Silentio's "awkward positions" in *Fear and Trembling* become the material for our own query, as we take up Kierkegaard's call in *Works of Love* to detect our own "botched up movements." Each book is best read with the other book in view. In order for us to read *Works of Love* well, we must be pried open to the possibility that what we think to be the case about ourselves and our purposes in relation to others is a knot of faulty suppositions.² In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard writes that "one can be deceived immediately and remain so for a long time—but to become aware of the deception takes time" and warns that "no earnest person" tires "of tracking down the illusions" (WL 124). The call, in *Fear and Trembling*, for us to stand shuddering and baffled before Mount Moriah should be read in service to this more explicit summons to self-examination in *Works of Love*. De Silentio's sporadic musings suggest to us our own task of self-critical discernment in our engagements. In *Fear and Trembling*, we are textually pestered to be sufficiently "earnest," to "track down" our own fallacies, and to "prevent love from coming to a standstill in any self-deception or from gratifying itself in any illusion" (WL 126).³ Kierkegaard narratively involves the reader with de Silentio, Abraham, and each of his other conjured characters in order that we might distinguish our predicament from Abraham's and acknowledge our veiled and confused aims with respect to our beloved. Reading the two texts together, we are able to hear more acutely Kierkegaard's warning that love is fraught with occasions for self-deception, confusion, and grave error.⁴

The quotation through which the reader enters *Fear and Trembling* implies that the message of that text is potentially deceptive: "What Tarquinius Superbus said in the garden by means of the poppies, the son understood but the messenger did not" (FT 3). Kierkegaard intends for the reader to worry over the layers of truth, confusion, and intentional deception created by the confused and potentially untrustworthy de Silentio. The merman discourse in Problema III provides a clue to an instructive thread that is tangled up in the last of de Silentio's quandaries and that is significant for the whole. In the merman passage Kierkegaard prompts us to consider this conundrum: while those

² I will most often employ plural first-person pronouns when referring to the reader. Occasionally, I will refer to the reader using singular masculine pronouns. I assume that most men are less likely than most women to include themselves in a statement with a pronoun of the other gender, particularly when that statement implies an indictment of the reader.

³ I am grateful to Vanessa Rumble for pointing me to Mark C. Taylor's and Louis Mackey's readings of *Fear and Trembling* as a text about silence, sin, and deception.

⁴ My reading of *Works of Love* as Kierkegaard's attempt to sober us and drive us toward repentance is less optimistic than Jamie Ferreira's reading of the text as Kierkegaard's effort to make room for proximity and attention (Ferreira 1997).

around Abraham could not understand his act because Abraham had received a private command from God, one who similarly acts outside the ethical—by breaking an engagement, for instance—may be acting out of sin (*FT* 88).⁵ The reader is to consider the possibility that hidden and obscure actions may not be laudable, but may rather be a matter of deception. For those living after the fall, the encoded message of *Fear and Trembling* is a summons to disclose and confess what otherwise remains hidden to the world. As C. Stephen Evans sums it up, “For some people, the possibility that ethics is not the final word is very important, for if ethics is the final word, then their lives are hopeless” (Evans 1993, 20). If we are more like the duplicitous merman than the divinely sanctioned Abraham, then our hope lies in finding another way to God, another way to make “a movement by virtue of the absurd”—and that is the route that de Silentio sketches in Problema III. Unlike the confident Abraham but like the nefarious merman, the reader is to find his way toward repentance and the humble reception of a gift.

With this reading of *Fear and Trembling*, another hero (or rather an alternative heroine) emerges, again from Problema III: Tobit’s Sarah, whose courage to receive, humbly and graciously, Tobias’s self-sacrificial gift of love is to prefigure our own reception of grace through Christ. Here again, a prominent strain from *Works of Love* resonates with de Silentio’s meandering reflections. According to Kierkegaard’s description of faithful intimacy in *Works of Love*, true love is contingent upon our recognition that we are dependent upon God: we love best when we are situated in a context of gratefully acknowledged indebtedness.⁶ Through de Silentio’s seemingly erratic link between a fallen merman and a grateful bride, Kierkegaard subtly insinuates a decisive passage for the reader who would be properly formed by the text. De Silentio moves from the merman to a call to judge oneself honestly to a consideration of Sarah’s willingness to receive love even though she is “a damaged specimen of a human being” (*FT* 104). The reader, pulled along with de Silentio, obliquely glimpses the possibility of sin and guilt, is pressed to consider the likelihood that he, too, is a “damaged specimen,” and is introduced to another biblical mentor, the humble and grateful Sarah. Although de Silentio, as one who lives in infinite resignation, is himself ultimately unable to make the movement toward hopeful repentance and grateful reception, Kierkegaard hopes that his unwitting narrator will evoke in the reader the response of which the narrator is incapable. By analogy with the book’s epigraph: what Kierkegaard says in the text by means of the poet’s musing, the careful reader may

⁵ Kierkegaard did himself break his engagement to Regine Olsen in 1841.

⁶ See, in particular, the chapter “Our Duty to Remain in Love’s Debt,” with which Kierkegaard closes the first series of *Works of Love*.

understand but the poet does not. By reading *Fear and Trembling* with *Works of Love* in the background, we may better discern and perchance heed Kierkegaard's religious invitation in both texts.

Yet Abraham is not excluded as an ethical guide. Although we are to be first humbled and warned by the passages on the merman and on Sarah, Kierkegaard intends that the reader should reconsider Abraham. While *Fear and Trembling* is about sin, duplicity, and our need for graced forgiveness, it returns to the reader as a text about ethics—about the untranslatable obligation of the individual before God alone and God's judgment against an idolatry that fuses self and other. As Ronald M. Green has argued in "Enough Is Enough! *Fear and Trembling* Is Not about Ethics," *Fear and Trembling* is about "divine conduct" and even "the classical Pauline-Lutheran theme of justification by faith" (Green 1993, 192), but it is also a text regarding proper human conduct in the midst of faith. While the latter theme is necessarily subsequent to the former, as faithful love must be subsequent to repentance, ethics is not so "radically secondary" as Green proposes (Green 1993, 193). On the other side of our recognition of "persistent human failure" and "God's redeeming grace" (Green 1993, 199) lies our "direct relationship to God" (Outka 1993, 211) and all the terror that that relationship ethically entails. The text supports both Green's and Gene Outka's readings because Kierkegaard intends the reader to experience in *Fear and Trembling* the tension of truly Christian ethics. Both scholars are correct but mistaken; neither a strictly soteriological nor an exclusively ethical reading is in itself sufficiently troubling.

Neither the merman nor Sarah eclipses Abraham as a focal point for our imaginations. Instead, Kierkegaard designs Problema III to disorient and reposition us in relationship to de Silentio's defense of Abraham in Problemata I and II. While we who live in sin are not able to walk confidently with Abraham up Mount Moriah, Kierkegaard wishes for us to be startled and instructed by Abraham's story; Abraham's example is intended, as Outka suggests, to have "normative force" (Outka 1993, 211). The chastened and humbled individual, rereading Problemata I and II, is able to reconsider Abraham as a severe reminder to love our own beloved from a self-critical and reverent distance. Kierkegaard makes clear in *Works of Love* that those who would live faithfully and love truly must face God's demand that each of us relate to God as individuals. The most fundamental relationship for which I exist and for which my beloved exists is the relationship to God. The God-relationship is prior to all other relationships and thus takes priority over all relationships.⁷ However, given that we, like de Silentio and the

⁷ For an explicit statement to this effect, see "Love Is a Matter of Conscience," from the first series of *Works of Love*.

merman, continue to live in sin as well as grace, we are often unable to discern whether the deeds by which we distance ourselves from our beloved are due to deception and cowardice or are due to appropriate and holy caution. The note of peril returns in that we can neither “fully anticipate what God commands us to do” (Outka 1993, 213) nor assess accurately whether the voice we hear is the voice of good or evil. Thus, the task of loving both God and neighbor faithfully is one undertaken not with blessed assurance but, rather, with “fear and trembling.”

Treading closely behind de Silentio as he muses on Abraham and the other conjured or borrowed characters, my method in the sections that follow will be to read this pseudonymous work closely with an eye toward its textual and thematic intersections with *Works of Love*. We will first move through the introductory sections of the book, wherein we are separated from Abraham and are ourselves called into question. We will then consider Kierkegaard’s radical position in *Problemata* I and II; proceed to the passages from *Problema* III in which de Silentio introduces sin, repentance, and gratitude; and return, finally, to consider Abraham as a stark reminder that we each belong, ultimately, to God.

1. Considering Abraham and Doubting Ourselves

While many who teach *Fear and Trembling* skip over the first four sections to dwell upon *Problemata* I and II as the heart of the text, I contend that we must give careful attention to the discussion that precedes de Silentio’s first quandary.⁸ Before embarking on his explicit philosophical argument for Abraham’s case against G. W. F. Hegel and Immanuel Kant, de Silentio moves slowly from a “Preface” to an “Exordium” to a “Eulogy” to a “Preliminary Expectoration.” The material in these sections and their presence as a structural barrier between the reader and *Problema* I are both important to a right reading of the text. These complex preliminary sections are intended to disconcert the reader and distinguish the reader’s story from the scriptural story of Abraham and Isaac, in a way not dissimilar from Kierkegaard’s attempt in *Works of Love* to make strange again the biblical command to love. Before we consider the possibility that we are, like Abraham, called to sacrifice our beloved, we must trudge through de Silentio’s extensive qualifications of our relationship to the father of faith. Through de Silentio’s multiple preliminary sections, Kierkegaard compels the reader to recognize the

⁸ I make this statement after having worked through *Fear and Trembling* with numerous graduate students, at two different institutions, who had been taught as undergraduates to read the work in this way. See Mooney 1993, 77, for a discussion of these preliminary sections as “a set of *false starts*” through which we must read in order to understand the import of the *Problemata* (emphasis in original).

multiple ways in which the reader and the narrator are *not* Abraham. By the time we move to de Silentio's more straightforwardly philosophical discussion in *Problemata* I and II, we have learned to see Abraham as one whose faith and action "no thought can grasp" (*FT* 53). We have been prompted to see Abraham's case as beyond moral comprehension and to search for the reason our own lives, loves, and actions are not readily demarcated as obedient or rebellious. It is not until *Problema* III that de Silentio comes around to positing sin as the circumvented answer to this question.

De Silentio begins by stating that he must drive up the price of true understanding. While some suppose themselves to have easily made a "preliminary movement" of doubt and to have "gone further" than faith (*FT* 5), de Silentio, as he suggests later in *Problema* III, wishes to "chastise many a man in our day who believes he has already attained the highest" (*FT* 100). We are to enter the book thinking of René Descartes, that "venerable, humble, [and] honest thinker" who spent so much time attempting to doubt sufficiently (*FT* 5). De Silentio seeks to evoke "proficiency in doubting" in order to reacquaint the assured reader with "the anxiety and trembling that disciplined the youth" (*FT* 6, 7). This text concerning Abraham, Isaac, and God's command to the individual thus begins with de Silentio's suggestion that we imagine ourselves as Descartes, who "found [him]self embarrassed with so many doubts and errors that it seemed to [him] that the effort to instruct [him]self had no effect other than the increasing discovery of [his] own ignorance" (*FT* 6). From the outset, de Silentio links the possibility of faith with the prerequisite of self-doubt. As Louis Mackey so effectively phrases it, Kierkegaard wishes, through de Silentio, to "deceive this generation out of its self-deception" (Mackey 1986, 67). De Silentio forewarns that the form and the content of the ensuing text are intended to disconcert.

Kierkegaard wishes us to confess ourselves, at the very least, ignorant and even willfully self-deceiving in our attempts to determine what is definitively ethical. In both *Works of Love* and *Fear and Trembling*, our hidden and obscure intentions are at issue. We are warned, in *Works of Love*, that "there is no work, not one single one, not even the best, about which we unconditionally dare to say: The one who does this unconditionally demonstrates love by it" (*WL* 13). Everything "depends on how the work is done" (*WL* 13). This obscurity applies, in *Works of Love*, to our discernment of both our own and the other's motives; our own intentions are often intricately selfish, and our perception of another's work is most often clouded by our desire to judge others to be unworthy. Given the resilience of selfish aims and the hiddenness of faith, no act in itself discloses either devotion or transgression. Even an act so supposedly selfless as donating all to the poor may be done with an intention that renders the giver self-loving rather than truly charitable (*WL* 13).

We who would be ethical must therefore spend much time and effort determining the true intentions behind our actions. De Silentio's attempt, in the preliminary sections of *Fear and Trembling*, alternatively to fracture and to simplify the motives and actions of Abraham gives us an instructive opportunity to become ethically befuddled and humbled.

In the "Exordium," as we walk along with de Silentio, as he walks with Abraham up the mountain, we are to doubt our own insight into Abraham's action. How is Abraham able to walk resolutely "with sorrow before him and Isaac beside him" (*FT* 9)? Anticipated grief and companionship seem mutually exclusive. If Abraham must obey God and thus distance himself violently from Isaac, then how is he to keep Isaac truly in view? We are to "understand the story less and less" (*FT* 9) as we read four possible variations of the scene. If Isaac had pleaded for his life, desperate to delay his father's act, surely Abraham would have been tempted to shield Isaac from the truth and present himself as an idolater (*FT* 10–11). If Abraham had been determined to meet God's requirement, how could he have gratefully received his son back from the hand of the one who had threatened to destroy Isaac? Surely Abraham's eyes would have been "darkened" and his joy extinguished after such a radical encounter with God's power over life and death (*FT* 12). How could Abraham have escaped doubting his reception of God's command? How could he have failed to understand himself as a terrible sinner rather than the father of faith (*FT* 13)? What effect would such irresolution have had on Isaac, who had to return to live alongside a father who doubted God's goodness yet still went up the mountain toward death (*FT* 14)?

Following each possibility, de Silentio ponders the many methods of weaning a child, considering the ambiguity of the process and a mother's ambivalence as she separates from her infant (*FT* 11–14). As Ed Mooney insists, the weaning passages are not "an outcropping of anomalous imagery," but rather are an instructive example of "separation that simultaneously acknowledges profound dependence" (Mooney 1993, 84).⁹ How is a mother to remain loving and confident that her child will survive even while she physically distinguishes herself from the infant as a dependent other? As we muse with the poet on the many possible motives and methods for separation and sacrifice, and the multiple occasions for error, we are indeed to "understand the story less and less" (*FT* 9). De Silentio concludes his "Exordium" by asking:

⁹ Mooney's is the only reading of *Fear and Trembling* with which I am familiar wherein we are not rushed (with eyes averted) past the nursing/weaning passages. He suggests, "Most significant is the bare fact that the essence of the patriarch's faith is rendered here in the imagery of motherhood. These vignettes describe an ordeal of love and separation, of anxiety and hope" (Mooney 1993, 83).

Who indeed can comprehend the certitude and determination of Abraham?

The clash between the “ethical expression for what Abraham did” and “the religious expression” should “render” us “sleepless”; if we are to begin to comprehend Abraham, we must be “willing to work and be burdened” by the fact that God definitely calls Abraham to go against God’s own command that Abraham love Isaac (*FT* 28). Beginning the text for a fourth time with his “Preliminary Expectoration,” de Silentio attributes Abraham’s holy anxiety to his being called by God to go against his deeply held love for and commitment to Isaac (*FT* 30). We must note that Abraham is asked to give up not “the best” as some “vague” concept for that from which we may all comfortably part, but rather the son whom he has been called to love, and indeed does love, more than himself (*FT* 28). The fact that Abraham is truly called also to love Isaac, and that he meets this element of God’s command even while being willing to sacrifice Isaac, is crucial. Imaginatively placing himself in that moment on Mount Moriah, de Silentio insists, “that I loved [Isaac] with my whole soul is the presupposition without which the whole thing becomes a misdeed” (*FT* 35). If God’s command to give up Isaac has come as anything other than a terrifying collision of two commitments, Abraham would not be the father of faith but, instead, a horrifying opportunist. As de Silentio describes him, Abraham is “great by the love that is hatred to oneself” (*FT* 17). It would be a different matter altogether if Abraham were great by a love of self that is hatred, or even just lack of love, for Isaac.

De Silentio asks the reader to ponder how the pastor should then preach this narrative to the average Christian. The proper homiletic method would be to preach much as de Silentio writes—that is, initially to spend ample time (perhaps several successive Sundays) on the difference between Abraham and ourselves. Abraham was “worthy of being called God’s chosen one” whereas “who [here] is such a person?” (*FT* 31). De Silentio suggests that the preacher then spend several Sundays focusing on Abraham’s love for Isaac: “I hope to describe [Abraham’s love] in such a way that there would not be many a father in the realms and lands of the king who would dare to maintain that he loved in this way” (*FT* 31). He continues, “If it were done properly, the result would be that some of the fathers would by no means demand to hear more but for the time being would be pleased if they actually succeeded in loving as Abraham loved” (*FT* 32). These two methods by which the preacher distances the listener from Abraham correspond to de Silentio’s efforts in his “Eulogy” and “Preliminary Expectoration.” Abraham should be seen as a contrast to the listener both in his faithful confidence in God and in his love for Isaac. By “speaking humanly about [Abraham’s greatness], as if it happened yesterday,” de Silentio intends to “let the greatness

itself be the distance that either elevates or judges" (*FT* 34). Although there may be a person genuinely called by God and enabled by grace to continue like Abraham up Mount Moriah, de Silentio stops: "Abraham I cannot understand; in a certain sense I can learn nothing from him except be amazed" (*FT* 37).

2. Mounting a Winged Horse

To draw out the subtle differences between himself and Abraham, de Silentio conjures up three knights: the happy knight of faith, the knight of resignation, and the knight who moves from resignation to faith. It is in studying his descriptions of these knights that the reader begins to surmise that our narrator is intimately at odds with his subject. Our narrator's own confessed inability to "make" the "movements of faith" colors the way that he "describe[s] the movements of faith," in that, as de Silentio depicts him, even the faithful lover fails to receive "the finite whole and intact" (*FT* 37). As de Silentio understands faith, one does not receive the *other*; indeed, one does not *receive* at all, but rather "gains" (*FT* 37). The form of de Silentio's discourse reflects two facets of de Silentio's confusion: first, in his account of our resignation prior to faith, the beloved, whether in the form of Isaac or the girl, is lost, and, second, the movements of each knight are of his own making. In his description of resignation and faith, de Silentio reveals his own inability to receive the beloved back from God, in life or in the text. By the time de Silentio describes the knight of resignation, whose work he knows personally and with whom he identifies himself, Kierkegaard grants the reader a clue as to de Silentio's particular distortion of faith. The movement of resignation de Silentio makes is one that he wills, as he puts it, "all by myself" (*FT* 48). By "starving [him]self into submission," de Silentio hopes to hurry the process along, renounce the girl and the world, and prepare himself for the absurd (*FT* 48). De Silentio's impatience betrays him as one who, like his contemporaries, wants to hurry past the real work of faith: "We mount a winged horse, and in the same instant we are on Mount Moriah, in the same instant we see the ram. We forget that Abraham only rode an ass, which trudges along the road" (*FT* 52).

According to de Silentio's account, a true movement of faith "must continually be made by virtue of the absurd," but in such a way "that one does not lose the finite but gains it" (*FT* 37). De Silentio first tries, in his poetic way, to imagine a person on the other side of such a gain. In his description of the happy knight of faith, de Silentio grasps a thread that Kierkegaard takes up later in his insistence that a faithful person is often "impossible to distinguish" from the "rest of the crowd" (*FT* 39), but the way that de Silentio draws out that thread is dubious for two reasons having to do with de Silentio's depiction of what it means to

receive rather than lose the finite. First, the most significant object of love for which this first knight is hopeful is a “roast lamb’s head with vegetables” (*FT* 39). In de Silentio’s description of the happy knight of faith, the knight does not receive back an invested attention for a beloved with whom he is to sup and live, but rather wills for himself a bumbling and “reckless” “freedom from care” (*FT* 40). His movement after resignation is about his own resilient amusement. This knight’s “movement of infinity by virtue of the absurd” manifests itself most clearly in his “passion” for food and his “keen appetite,” but we get no clue here about how such a knight relates to his wife (other than the information that she is the one who will cook the meal). As de Silentio describes faith’s return to the finite, it is marked by one’s “finding pleasure in everything” without “attachment” (*FT* 39). Second, this faithful man does not receive back finitude but, rather, “grasps it by virtue of the absurd” (*FT* 40). There is no true other or Other in this story. What de Silentio apparently does not realize is that Isaac is surely not akin to a good meal, and God’s gift is not to be seized.

This confusion continues as de Silentio moves on to the next knight. Conceding that the knight of faith, as he has described him, may “easily deceive,” de Silentio recounts another story to “illuminate” faith’s “relation to actuality” (*FT* 41). This alternative knight falls in love with a princess but, after “examining the conditions of his life,” decides that his love “cannot possibly be translated from ideality into reality” (*FT* 41). While the young man “feels a blissful delight in letting love palpitate in every nerve,” he determines that the girl, the occasion for that blissful love, is herself an impossibility (*FT* 42). As de Silentio speaks of this man’s love, he once again loses all sense of the other. According to his account of this “love,” the man becomes “totally absorbed” with his own experience of loving the girl and quickly moves beyond the tediously mundane matter of the girl herself (*FT* 42). De Silentio explains with misplaced approval that this knight concentrates on the love itself in an attempt to “transfigure [it] into a love of the eternal being,” for otherwise his love might dissipate. The latter possibility would be embarrassing; the knight “is too proud to be willing to let the whole substance of his life turn out to have been an affair of the fleeting moment” (*FT* 44). So the young man wills himself above her. At this point, de Silentio concedes, “From the moment he has made [this] movement, the princess is lost” (*FT* 44). The young man is decidedly above reality and above the girl who lives within the finite, clutching as he does “the deep secret that even in loving another person one ought to be sufficient to oneself” (*FT* 44). By disconnecting himself from “the lower natures,” the young lover is able, according to de Silentio’s calculation, to move beyond the “baser natures” and to prepare himself for faith (*FT* 45–46).

This description of faith's precursor again reveals much about the narrator. First, the girl as other is lost, subsumed under the young man's idea of his love for her and banished as an inextricable part of the finite. Only if she "has the courage to enroll herself" in this alternative realm does she become again a viable (and ethereal) option (*FT* 45). Second, according to de Silentio, the movement of faith that follows true resignation should occasion a change in the finite possibilities, but it does not hold direct implication for this self who has determined the finite to be impossible. The movement of faith does not impinge upon the lover himself, but rather involves the beloved object. As de Silentio shifts in this section from the third to the first person, we begin to surmise that our narrator is himself a personification of this confusion. The willfully "courageous" manner of de Silentio's resignation of the finite (not, we note, of self) promotes a stance that cannot prepare for the receptivity of faith. Something is clearly amiss when de Silentio celebrates his own power "through resignation" to "renounce everything" and "make a movement all by [him]self" (*FT* 48). To his credit, de Silentio seems to have some perception of his predicament, for he explains that, through this mustering of strength, he exhausts himself beyond "getting" the princess back (*FT* 49). Nonetheless, our pitiable narrator does not grasp that love cannot be about grasping. While de Silentio may, in his courageous act of resignation, "gain" his "eternal consciousness in blessed harmony with [his] love for the eternal being," he is left alone. Although he has moved beyond what he has, mistakenly, relegated to the "lower natures" (who "forget themselves" and thereby "become something new"), he has done so without the girl and without the God to whom he must humbly turn for new life (*FT* 43). Forgetting the girl rather than forgetting himself, de Silentio tricks himself out of love.

The formidable work of appropriately releasing the beloved while sustaining the hope of receiving her back is also a motif in *Works of Love*, but in a different "key" than in *Fear and Trembling* (Evans 1993, 26). In his "Preliminary Expectoration," de Silentio describes faith as an effort to transcend and distinguish oneself from "the baser natures," a refrain throughout this section. For de Silentio, the movements toward faithful love ascend from the girl and her impossibility "upward" to the idea of loving her, to the love itself, to love for "the eternal being," and then back to the idea of loving, without a corresponding return "below" to the girl in her actuality (*FT* 44). Through this supposedly upward progression, de Silentio hopes to protect his love from the fluctuating nature of what is possible and impossible. By contrast, Kierkegaard insists forcefully in *Works of Love* that the first and recurrent movement of faithful love entails a movement of self not upward from finite reality, but inward toward one's relation to "duty's shall," the only means whereby "love is

eternally and happily secured against despair" (WL 40). Whereas the young man described by de Silentio aspires to "examine the conditions of his life," and evaluate externally the probability of "translating ideality into reality" (FT 41–42), the imperative made explicit in *Works of Love* is to turn "duty's shall" inward in order to examine the currently implicit conditions of one's love. The first and continual movement toward genuine discernment is thus self-inspection in the face of God's command that we continue to love regardless of external circumstances.

Kierkegaard does suggest that such self-inspection requires distance from the beloved, but the sort of distance recommended in *Works of Love* contrasts decisively with the distance achieved by de Silentio's young knight. In *Works of Love*, the call to relinquish the other acts as a wedge between the lover and his parasitical and deluded dependence on another. Confusion ensues precisely when one attempts, as does de Silentio, to progress from "relating oneself with infinite passion to a particular something" to loving the eternal (WL 40). The message of *Works of Love* is that one must wrest oneself away from the illusory state wherein the beloved becomes a "possession" by means of which the lover climbs to eternity; one must turn toward God as the sole definition and source of one's love (WL 38). Whereas de Silentio asserts that his resigned distance from the girl establishes that he is "one who is sufficient unto oneself" (FT 44), Kierkegaard represents resignation as the necessary condition of turning to God as the sole source and test of love's possibility. The movement from love of the beloved to love of God is thus not a willed upward progression, as de Silentio suggests; on the contrary, it involves a humiliating break of self from other and a full turn toward God. Only then may one attempt, with God's law and grace in view, to love within the uncertain realm of finitude: "The love that has undergone eternity's change by becoming duty is not exempted from misfortune, but is saved from despair" (WL 42). As Kierkegaard describes it in *Works of Love*, the command to love distances the lover from the beloved in order to place God between the lover and the object of his possession, and only then can the chastened young man receive back the one with whom he is daily to sup.

Kierkegaard's characters and pseudonyms are often revealingly mistaken in their use of Scripture, and he forewarns and instructs us by way of de Silentio's errors. While de Silentio rightly seeks to distance the reader from Abraham and rightly undertakes to precipitate in the reader the confusion such a story affords, he also, by his own admission, wishes "like a leech [to] suck all the anxiety and distress and torment out of [Abraham's] suffering" (FT 53). In his narrative construal of his predicament, de Silentio closes the gap between himself and the "father of faith" by likening his dismissal of the girl to Abraham's obedience to God's call that he sacrifice Isaac. Kierkegaard intends us to suspect this

construal. De Silentio's resignation comes after he "examines" the situation and "convenes" his own thoughts to conclude that he cannot marry the girl; even as he describes it, it is evident that he has not heard a command from God that she be sacrificed (*FT* 42). The "tears" with which he has spun his yarn and sewn his protective shirt are not his own but Abraham's (*FT* 45).¹⁰ The comfort and security, the "peace and rest" that such a borrowed story of righteous suffering provides are potentially delusive. Through de Silentio's delusion, Kierkegaard warns the reader of a double danger. Under and through de Silentio's earnest discourse on faith and resignation, Kierkegaard manages subtly to suggest that we should suspect the counsel of our self-appointed guide up Mount Moriah. As one who is, by his own confession, in a state of perpetual resignation, de Silentio cannot himself understand the import of his tale. But Kierkegaard's further warning involves the reader himself. Rather than dismissing the narrator as untrustworthy, the reader is to find in *de Silentio's* confusion the traces of his *own*. Kierkegaard's purpose is not simply to inspire us to censure de Silentio, for in that case, these sections would indeed be dispensable. On the contrary, it is Kierkegaard's purpose that we should find in de Silentio's misunderstanding evidence of our own. We are to proceed up Mount Moriah, and through the *Problemata*, suspicious of self.

3. Life under Divine Confiscation

As we move from the prefatory comments in *Fear and Trembling* to *Problemata* I and II, the literary tone of the text shifts from poetic to philosophical, and the argument becomes more straightforward. Although we should read these two short passages with de Silentio's prefatory meanderings and subsequent discussion of sin in view, Outka is correct to say that, for Kierkegaard, these two problems propose the possibility upon which the remaining text is built: the individual stands before God alone.¹¹ While we should reread de Silentio's defense of Abraham from a self-critical distance and adjust our vision of our own predicament after sin is introduced in *Problema* III, *Problemata* I and II are crucial. We cannot proceed without accepting what Kierkegaard wishes to bring home very forcefully to us in these first two problems: any theory of ethics that reduces the individual's moral calling to a clearly articulated

¹⁰ De Silentio describes "infinite resignation" as "that shirt mentioned in an old legend" wherein "the thread is spun with tears . . . but then it also gives protection better than iron or steel" (*FT* 45).

¹¹ Outka calls Kierkegaard's "vindication of a direct relationship to God" the "center" that governs the revolving accounts of "obedience to God, the ethical, sin, and so on" (Outka 1993, 211).

understanding of “social morality” (Hegel) or some rationally grasped universal proposition (Kant) reduces God to an “invisible vanishing point” and belies the radical individuality and potential obscurity of each person’s duty before God (*FT* 55, 68). Abraham, like each one of us, lives a life that is “like a book under divine confiscation” (*FT* 77). His and our responsibility before God is ultimately not “public property,” whether the notion of public be socially complex or derived from some rationally distilled version of the collective *nous*. If Abraham’s story, or Mary’s, or Christ’s, is to have significance for those who profess to have faith, the faithful must not succumb to the explanatory power of Kant’s or Hegel’s moral system. Kierkegaard intends to interject Abraham’s story into the felicitous conversation between philosophical ethics and faith, positing it as a quandary out of which we cannot reason ourselves.

It would be too simple, though, to suggest that these two problems in themselves affirm Abraham’s religious certainty as our own. I will return to the “normative force” of Abraham’s obedience in section 6, but first let me note another important strand of argument in Problema II: *de Silentio* intimates that faith has as its precursor a confession of ethical “ignorance” and has as its consequence a sobering sense of moral peril. Abandoning his prior poetic description of “infinite resignation,” in which the individual was depicted as rising above the finite in order courageously to grasp the infinite, here *de Silentio* tries out the possibility that infinite resignation occurs “only when the individual has emptied himself in the infinite,” and he links this to the individual’s recognition of ignorance (*FT* 69). *De Silentio*’s shift in this section is a subtle one: the would-be knight of faith is first to resign *himself* rather than resigning *the finite*. In relating himself “absolutely to the absolute,” the person of faith acknowledges that there is no intermediary source of assurance that he is in the right (*FT* 71); vindication is hidden with and utterly dependent upon God. The only measure by which a person’s act is, in fact, justified is the same measure by which the action is condemned: Abraham “must love Isaac with his whole soul,” else the act is murder, but the law of parental love to which he thereby conforms condemns his action as heinous (*FT* 74). The “absolute contradiction” must be complete in that his love for Isaac must at no point wane, but his very love for Isaac bespeaks his moral obligation to Isaac. In this way the knight of faith “creeps along slowly” (*FT* 77). It is in this untenable situation of extreme incongruity—justified before God yet morally damned—that the individual must proceed at a crawl. The surliest indication that one recognizes one’s position before God is in the consequent stance of “fear and trembling” in full knowledge of “the terrors,” “the distress and anxiety” of faith (*FT* 75). Only in this precarious state may the person call out, saying “You’ to God in heaven” (*FT* 77). All else is illegitimate familiarity.

4. Cain and Abraham Are Not Identical

De Silentio warns us that Abraham “must love Isaac with his whole soul,” else Abraham’s witness would be as blasphemous as the witness of Cain (*FT* 74). If Abraham’s love of Isaac had been diminished in any way, if his willingness to kill had approximated Cain’s stance for even a moment, he would have walked up the mountain a murderer. De Silentio’s at times agonized and at times detached consideration of Abraham’s plight, his struggle to draw a complete and secure depiction of this paradox, is, in part, his attempt to clarify and redeem the knight’s sudden break with the princess. If in even the smallest way the knight’s actions differ from Abraham’s holy work, then he shares in Cain’s, not Abraham’s, condition. True discernment of our status thus requires unflinching self-appraisal and brutal self-honesty. We must be willing to send out “well-trained doves” of a sort very different from those sent by the knight of resignation (*FT* 42). We must scrutinize ourselves, and we must live “under [our own] surveillance” (*FT* 75). By considering with de Silentio an alternative explanation for the young man’s broken engagement, we are to detect the possibility that we are, in our own situation, more like Cain than Abraham. This theme in *Fear and Trembling* parallels Kierkegaard’s more explicit text on honest self-examination in *Works of Love*. There he undertakes “to penetrate into the innermost hiding place” where a person seeks to evade the law of love, and thus to deny to us “the least little way of escape” (*WL* 18). God’s requirement is like a hall of mirrors wherein we are refused “even the most unnoticed crevice to hide in” (*WL* 248). In his chapter on the law in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard emphasizes that the command to love our neighbor as ourselves forces us out of “any self-deception or illusion” as to the quality of our love (*WL* 113, 126).

De Silentio posits that, for Abraham, moral speech is precluded as a result of God’s inexplicable command. The sinner hides from moral inquiry for a very different reason. The subtle difference between Abraham and the sinner is, as de Silentio suggests, “a subject for a poet who [knows] how to pry secrets out of people” (*FT* 93). In Problema III, in an effort to pry open his own secrets (and ours), de Silentio brings up two possible scenarios involving action that is enigmatic because it is outside what is understandably ethical: the account of the justified young man and of the merman. Yet the open disclosure of secrets, to which we are called in this section, does not lead the individual inexorably toward a happy coincidence with the universal. There exists for the merman and for Abraham an “interiority that is incommensurable with exteriority” (*FT* 69), and Kierkegaard assigns de Silentio the task of correcting philosophy’s confidence in appearances. Like the merman, we are called to confess that we are unable immediately or ultimately to do what is

commanded. Sinner and saint are both related as “single individual[s] in relation to the absolute” (*FT* 93), the saint through extreme obedience and the sinner through rebellion, whether original or commonplace. What is “concealed” from “Sarah, from Eliezer, and from Isaac” is a paradox that may be either a “divine or demonic paradox” (*FT* 82, 88), and Kierkegaard prompts us to determine for ourselves what we conceal, to allow this poet to uncover the “esthetic illusion of magnanimity” in our own narratives (*FT* 93). We are, like Queen Elizabeth I, to sit still and ponder, biting our finger and wondering why we have signed Essex’s death decree. If it is even in part because we wanted a ring, we must pray lest we meet Elizabeth’s fate.¹²

In this section, de Silentio first has us consider again the plight of a young man who must call off his marriage to his beloved because of a private, definitively divine pronouncement. In contrast to this justified young man, de Silentio then considers the merman, a “demonic” seducer (*FT* 94). In this story, the merman’s “strength forsakes him” when he sees that trustful Agnes is “willing to go with him” (*FT* 94). The chase is over before it is begun, and thus the merman “cannot seduce Agnes.” Given that the merman is, after all, “only a merman,” he must return to the sea without her (*FT* 95). The merman’s silence is due to his determination to deceive Agnes; if he speaks in order to explain his separation from her, he will disclose to her his menacing motives. Before considering the merman’s options, de Silentio considers a possible twist on the story: perhaps Agnes is not so very innocent, but is instead “a woman who demands the interesting” (*FT* 95). De Silentio is tempted to dwell on the comforting thought that “Agnes is not entirely without guilt,” but instead returns to a consideration of the merman’s impasse and the ways in which he might resolve it (*FT* 95). The merman may choose to “surrender to this demonic element” that takes hold as he “becomes even more unhappy, for he loved Agnes with a complexity of passions and in addition [has] a new guilt to bear” (*FT* 96). If he were to follow this possible trajectory, the merman would revel in his torment and would thereby begin outwardly to resemble the justified young man. However, this is a “similarity that can be misleading”; “all the anguish the merman suffers in silence seems proof that his silence is justified,” but the merman’s silence would be due to his determination to mislead and to cloak his original deception (*FT* 96). Rather than moving from

¹² “Queen Elizabeth sacrificed to the state her love for Essex by signing his death decree. This was a heroic act, even though there was a little personal resentment involved because he had not sent her the ring. As is known, he had in fact done so, but a spiteful lady in waiting had held it back. It is said, *ni fallor*, that Elizabeth learned of this and sat for ten days with one finger in her mouth, biting it and not saying one word, and thereupon she died” (*FT* 93–94).

repentance to disclosure, the merman instead would rupture Agnes's love for him by "endeavor[ing] to incite all the dark passions in her, to belittle her, [and] to ridicule her. . ." (FT 96). Through this movement, the merman's motive would "[remain] hidden," and he would rid himself of (or, as de Silentio puts it, would "save") Agnes (FT 96).

As de Silentio sees it, there are two other options open to one who is, like the merman, aware of his own guilt. First, he may "remain in hiding," give up his beloved and his responsibility for her, relinquish his hold over her to "the divine," and enter a monastery (FT 98). The only other option is to "become disclosed" by accepting "refuge in the paradox" (FT 98): "In other words, when the single individual by his guilt has come outside the universal, he can return only by virtue of having come as the single individual into an absolute relation to the absolute" (FT 98). Here, Kierkegaard gives the reader his most direct textual prompt regarding the crux of de Silentio's text: "I would like to make a comment that says more than has been said at any point previously" (FT 98). The subject that de Silentio admits that he has heretofore "assiduously avoided" is sin. Given that the merman's retreat from the girl is due to sin, only by making an alternate movement by virtue of the absurd could he have avoided total isolation.¹³ The anguished merman is not saved by his anguish; on the contrary, justification requires repentance, followed by courageous self-disclosure. The merman may receive Agnes back only if he arrives at a condition of hopeful repentance; the girl may return to the merman and to de Silentio's text only through God's grace.

According to Louise Carroll Keeley, Kierkegaard is recommending in Problema III that "guilt learn to recognize itself as absolute," thus exposing the "bankruptcy of the ethical view" (Keeley 1993, 136). The absolute relation to which we sinners are called is outside the ethical, but in a way that differs from Abraham's untranslatable obedience. Both Abraham and the merman are beyond the universal, but the merman is outside the ethical because he "lacks the *conditio sine qua non*" (FT 98). Again, as Keeley aptly words it, the merman (like us) suffers from "residual guilt," which, "like sediment at the bottom of the self, is absolute" (Keeley 1993, 136). The plight of both holy Abraham and guilty merman is relevant to God alone, and each is to find his source of aid in God alone. Their lives, however, are incommensurable due to starkly different conditions, and they must therefore call out to God with differently anguished voices. If my own inability to meet the universal is due not to a private, divine pronouncement but to duplicitous

¹³ Mark Lloyd Taylor interprets this passage as crucial for understanding Kierkegaard's aim in *Fear and Trembling*, and he helpfully links the brevity of de Silentio's treatment of sin to the efforts of *Repetition's* young man hastily to liken himself to Job rather than to Cain (Taylor 1992).

aims and dastardly motives, then I must make a movement toward God by disclosing myself and by *confessing my sin*. Mackey puts the point well when he explains, “The man originally flawed by sin is beyond the end of his ethical rope and beyond the reach of the universal imperative” (Mackey 1986, 65). For those of us who live in the reality of sin—that carefully circumvented subject—the text points to the ridiculous hope that moves from repentance to expectant confession.

Fear and Trembling is thus, in part, a call for de Silentio’s readers to “judge themselves honestly” (*FT* 100); by means of the pseudonymous text, Kierkegaard prompts us to be sufficiently forthright, to “know what [we] are able to do and what [we] are unable to do” (*FT* 101). De Silentio explains that, for those of us who resemble the merman or Cain more than Abraham, the first task is to “take the time to scrutinize in sleepless vigilance every single secret thought,” to allow ourselves “in anxiety and horror [to] discover . . . the dark emotions hiding in every human life” (*FT* 100). Whereas most of us, in the hustle and bustle of the modern life, “so easily forget” to be “conscientious about time” and so happily provide one another with comforting “evasions,” de Silentio wonders what would occur if each of us sat, individually, before the thought that the merman is literally sodden with guilt, powerless to return to the world (*FT* 99–100). Such meditation, de Silentio asserts, would “chastise many a man in our day who believes that he has already attained the highest” (*FT* 100). Through de Silentio, Kierkegaard invokes both Abraham’s and the merman’s anguish—the one religious, the other demonic—to call into question our present confidence in our individual and collective progress. There is a method to the ethical muddling that has brought us to this point: we are to seek a way of justification that differs radically from the route of moral certitude.

5. That the Lord May Have Mercy upon Us

After making “the infinite movement of repentance,” one “cannot possibly come back under his own power and grasp actuality again” (*FT* 99). The absurd reality to which we are subsequently called involves something akin to bared receptivity. De Silentio surmises that perhaps what we most need is a story wherein “love is made ludicrous”—but not so that we will laugh. Rather, such an “inspired character would remind [us] of what has been forgotten” (*FT* 102). Confident of our progress, few of us are prompted to acknowledge our debt, nor do we respond to the call to grateful wonder. We must be reminded of what we have forgotten. We who resemble the merman are to go on with de Silentio to read about Tobit’s Sarah:

She is the one I want to approach as I have never approached any girl or been tempted in thought to approach anyone of whom I have read. For

what love of God it takes to be willing to let oneself be healed when from the very beginning one in all innocence has been botched, from the very beginning has been a damaged specimen of a human being! [FT 104]

Sarah, a girl living under a demonic curse that endangers anyone who dares to love her, accepts Tobias's selfless love for her. Sarah's "ethical maturity" manifests itself precisely in being willing "in humility" to accept self-giving love from another. Tobias's prayer for Sarah, "that the Lord may have mercy," is also a call for Sarah openly to receive that mercy from the hand of God (FT 103).

While de Silentio the poet does not finally understand or take up the soteriological invitation here, the one seeking faith must recall what we too often forget. Sarah is to become for the reader an alternative heroine, a model for the humility necessary if we are to accept God's grace in Christ. De Silentio does not dwell here for long, moving restlessly on to another riddle, but the reader catches a glimpse of someone whose relation to the universal more nearly approximates our own after repentance. Subsequent to ethical confusion and repentance, we should seek to embody Sarah's humble and hopeful receptivity to the loving work of another. As de Silentio closes this chapter, he reminds the reader that "unless the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute," Abraham himself is "lost" (FT 120). In Sarah, perhaps even more than in Abraham, we glimpse what that "absolute relation" might entail. The point the reader is to surmise (though the poet does not take it up) is that without such a relation we are all not only lost, but unredeemable.

We must turn away from the poet's riddles to *Works of Love* for Kierkegaard's direct account of redeemed love. De Silentio attests early in *Fear and Trembling* that he is "convinced that God is love," but his knowledge of such love is purely poetic: "for me this thought has a primal lyrical validity" (FT 34). Given this limited view of God, he himself acknowledges that he does not have faith (FT 34). He does not have the "humility" sufficient to ask for more than a "left-handed marriage in this life"; he is incapable of the kind of love for God and reception of love from God that brings all of one's supposedly "little troubles" before the Almighty (FT 34). Evans notes that as de Silentio's voice shifts into Kierkegaard's own in *Works of Love*, we have "morality in a new key, for its motivational propeller is not autonomous striving" but rather "grateful expression" for the life that we have "received as a gift" (Evans 1993, 26). When Kierkegaard shifts from a pseudonymous poetic voice to a more directly religious one in *Works of Love*, he clearly calls the individual to a stance of humble gratitude: "in relation to God, every person begins with an infinite debt, even if we forget what the debt amounts to daily after the beginning" (WL 102). With God's work for us clearly in

view, we may exceed de Silentio's merely poetic appreciation for the divine and approach this "morality in a new key."

In his section on "Our Duty to Remain in Love's Debt to One Another," Kierkegaard calls the individual lover to acknowledge daily the accumulated and original deficit he has incurred, the "infinite debt that cannot possibly be repaid" (*WL* 177). As Kierkegaard describes our condition, it is before God that we both realize the infinite depth of our debt and find our sole source of redemption. We discover before God that we are, like Sarah, "botched," that our attempts at intimacy precipitate treachery, yet we also discover that there is one who has loved and will mercifully love us even though we are "damaged" and dangerous "specimens." This "strange way of speaking" requires "a certain transformation of attitude and mind" in order that the lover remain constantly aware of his indebtedness to God (*WL* 178). The "freedom and life" (*WL* 180), the sense of import, gratitude, and hope that characterize this discussion of love are quite different from the poet's "lyrical" experience of God's love.

We may also, with Kierkegaard's help, contrast Sarah's willingness to accept Tobias's love to the merman's fearful flight from the love of Agnes. In the section on indebtedness in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard makes clear that the beloved's innocence or guilt should not be a factor in determining our own love. With a sense of God's mercy before us, we are not to engage in "comparison's sidelong glance" whereby one "too easily discovers a whole world of relationships and calculations" (*WL* 183). Even knowing herself to be a liability, Sarah "ludicrously" accepts Tobias's love for her. The merman and de Silentio stop at a confession of guilt, unable to open themselves to receive love from an Agnes who is innocently willing, compounding their fault by condemning as ineffective an Agnes of their own construction who is less than wholly without guile. De Silentio narratively colludes in the merman's plight by turning Agnes round to detect whether she is "utterly, utterly, utterly innocent" and then refining her into someone who can "save" the merman through her naiveté (*FT* 95). Sarah does not look closely at Tobias to determine whether she will accept his love, whereas de Silentio and the merman create an Agnes that is both irreproachable and unapproachable, leaving the merman to compare his own guilt with her sheer innocence and to despair in his own contrasting culpability. Kierkegaard explains that the lover who would be true looks only to God's requirement and God's grace. We are likened to personified arrows who fall to the ground if we turn to compare our flight with another's (*WL* 182). One who begins to look around and compare herself with her lover will inadvertently slip into despair of love's possibility (*WL* 186). The hope to which we are summoned in *Fear and Trembling*, albeit by a confused and riddling poet, requires that we be mindful only of our own individual debt and redemption.

6. Returning to Mount Moriah

After introducing the issue of sin and repentance, de Silentio gives the reader a clue as to Abraham's relation to those who live in a context of guilt: "The analogy to Abraham will not become apparent until after the single individual has been brought to a position where he is capable of fulfilling the universal, and now the paradox repeats itself" (*FT* 99). Once we are inside the context of Sarah's humble reception of grace, Abraham should return to us not only as one who confounds the ethical but also as an ethical guide. Living with grateful receptivity to the grace that alone restores the *conditio sine qua non* of the ethical (*FT* 98), we are to return to Mount Moriah. Abraham comes back to us redeemed mermen and mermaids as a mentor for our love. In *Problemata* I and II, Kierkegaard is at pains to indicate philosophically that the individual stands before God, who is the sole judge and justifier of Abraham's and our work. Because, due to sin, our situation is significantly different from Abraham's holy predicament, we are also to find ourselves challenged and inspired by his singular relationship to the Almighty. His untranslatable obligation to God is to return to justified sinners as a stark reminder (1) that we must understand each person as ultimately, individually, accountable to God alone and (2) that we only receive back our beloved as an undeserved gift from the Almighty.

Abraham's willingness to separate himself, in faith, from his beloved child may be the most salient and urgent message of *Problemata* I and II. *Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love* intersect very clearly on this aspect of faithful love. Kierkegaard insists in *Works of Love* that intimacy goes awry when we tie ourselves inextricably to our beloved, whether through worship or another form of idolatry. This false kind of union can take two forms, both of which are challenged by Abraham's stark example. First, we, in our self-deception, often disguise self-love as adoration of our beloved; we assume ourselves to be worshiping the beloved when we actually esteem the beloved only as the beloved relates to the self (*WL* 19–21). For this reason, each of us must distinguish self from other and resist the "intoxicating" forms of adoration whereby we seek to fuse ourselves to our beloved (*WL* 38). When joined to another in this way, we are seldom willing to acknowledge that the other may be called by God to separate herself from us. God's command to love faithfully thus entails some form of sacrifice, in that we must be willing to let go of the beloved if she deems that God requires that of her and of us. Some of us are also tempted to another form of idolatrous fusion whereby we lose ourselves in another, allowing the beloved to define who we are. Through this other type of "self-willfulness" and false "devotion," the lover loses the only self through which she may relate to the one who truly does claim her as his own (*WL* 55). Kierkegaard calls such

self-abasement an “abomination” whereby the individual “refuses to know anything higher” (WL 125). God’s word prohibits our complete subordination to any human being or project and thus demands that we be capable of envisioning ourselves alone before God.

We are called to be ready and able to discern God’s will and to follow it even when it would bring us and/or our beloved to grief. Such readiness requires that we be able to distinguish ourselves from another and confess our lives to be confiscated by God (WL 130). In his conclusion to *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard gives a more direct form to what was left oblique in the pseudonymous musings on Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*: “In the Christian sense, a person ultimately and essentially has only God to deal with in everything, although he still must remain in the world and in the earthly circumstances assigned to him” (WL 377). The only relational calling that can be clearly defined for each of us is to love the beloved as, first, God’s own. Thus, our deepest concern for the other must be that our love for her not hinder her relationship with God (WL 130). For our own sake and for the sake of those we love, we must recall continually that we “ultimately and essentially” have to do with God, not one another. For those of us who seek to love properly in the midst of grace, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is to serve as an extreme reminder that truly we do not belong to one another, but to our maker.

We are not only to walk up Mount Moriah but also to descend again, with Isaac beside us. Thus, truly faithful engagements require hope as well as deferential distance. De Silentio can only marvel at Abraham’s ability to receive Isaac back from God with gratitude. Both de Silentio and the merman fail in love partly because they do not trust that, on the other side of either resolute release or repentance, the beloved will return. De Silentio’s young man examines the “conditions of possibility” before sealing his engagement and cannot bend his imagination to accept in hope the absurd reality whereby his engagement would be plausible. As de Silentio describes the situation, in order for the merman to receive Agnes again, he must trust in the absurd chance that she will accept his drastic confession of transgressed boundaries. We must, as Kierkegaard explains in *Works of Love*, sufficiently “presuppose that love is in the other person’s heart” to enable our courageous confession of ulterior and inferior motives (WL 217). The love to which Kierkegaard directly calls us in *Works of Love* requires our tenacious determination to place our hope in the possibility of invested yet reverent engagement and in the reality of forgiveness when (not if) we inadvertently or intentionally forget that our beloved is not our own. Against “hateful expectancy” that deems true engagement, forgiveness, and reconciliation to be unrealistic possibilities, Kierkegaard encourages our ridiculous trust in God’s goodness and our beloved’s willingness to forgive (WL 263).

Kierkegaard contrasts a “temporal expectancy” that can often end in disappointment to an “eternal expectancy” that corresponds to radical Christian hope (WL 249). We stop calculating love’s potential and, like Abraham, trust solely in God’s ability to return to us our beloved.

Even with this hope, however, we must return with *de Silentio* to be morally baffled by Abraham’s work. Reading *Works of Love* and *Fear and Trembling* together, we face the disturbing notions that the truth of our own actions toward our beloved is very seldom clear even to us and that God’s will hardly ever comes as a thunderbolt. It is rare that we walk together with our child, spouse, or parent with a lucid sense of God’s immediate call. Mooney characterizes Abraham’s import this way: “The journey [toward Mount Moriah] stands for a way of dialectical reflection, of threading through one’s intentions, of clarifying one’s soul, of checking the purity of its motivations” (Mooney 1996, 49). If we do not experience fear and trembling before such an examination, we are morally obtuse. At any given moment, we may appropriately be distancing ourselves from another or, instead, retreating out of fear or frustration. Abraham’s act is holy only if his love for Isaac is sufficient to make the act absurd. How are we to hold the beloved lightly enough to hear God’s call while caring and attending as God also commands? Who among us is willing to let go of our beloved while also investing ourselves sufficiently to love the other with our “whole soul” as Abraham loves Isaac? Returning to *de Silentio*’s initial musings, who can both wean and love the child well, walking with loss before us and Isaac beside us? Again, as Mooney gracefully phrases it, this task of “giving up the temporal and getting back is then a test of selflessness, a test of care” (Mooney 1993, 96). It is a task for which few of us, if any, are well prepared.¹⁴

Most of us could, with *de Silentio*, write a whole text about our own “botched movements” in our relations with another. *Fear and Trembling* thus returns again as a summons, calling the reader to ask humbly for God’s aid in each engagement. We can and should combine Green’s and Outka’s readings of the text: we must indeed “cleave to God as the subject of unique veneration” (Outka 1993, 215) precisely because we are befuddled and irresolute sinners. Reading through Kierkegaard’s works, we fail if we do not hear this tone of peril and perplexity in the midst of faith and hope. The poet who writes *Fear and Trembling* should effect in us a sense of apt bewilderment even as we look forward to

¹⁴ Mooney writes more hopefully than I do about the possibility of our being well shaped for moral discernment by *de Silentio*’s text. By reading *Fear and Trembling* with *Works of Love* (rather than with *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*), we may read Kierkegaard’s intent in *Fear and Trembling* to be our humble preparation for *Works of Love*. For his adept treatment of *Fear and Trembling* as a “transitional” text, see Mooney 1996, 55–57.

Kierkegaard's direct description of faithful intimacy in *Works of Love*. In the closing paragraph of *Fear and Trembling*, de Silentio recounts the story of "Heraclitus the obscure" who insisted that one "cannot walk through the same river twice" (FT 123). A disciple refused to "remain standing there" and objected that "one cannot do it even once!" De Silentio's convoluted text pushes us to acknowledge that, although we daily come to that river, we have not even begun to cross it. Kierkegaard insists that "the struggle of faith" is one "in which you can have occasion to be tried and tested everyday" (WL 380). With fear and trembling before such a trial and test, we are to hope in the grace that allows us to keep slogging through.

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