The Absurdity of Faith in the “Preliminary Expectoration” of Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling

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Methodological Concern: How to Stay Out of the Abyss

It is sometimes said of Michelangelo that when he sculpted he pulled the figure out from the block of marble. With respect to the matter of the absurd, the subject of this paper, it helps to see Kierkegaard in a similar fashion. The block of marble for him is a mass made up of many things, including the Bible, the entire history of philosophy (ancient in particular), the history of literature, Hegelianism, and Christendom. Kierkegaard pulls the absurd out of this block. Rather than imposed on the block from the very beginning, the absurd is an expression of strains peculiar to the mass on which Kierkegaard works. It is most readily seen to emerge only at the end of a reflective process. I say this to emphasize that beginning directly with the absurd would force us to halt before an abyss. Like Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, Kierkegaard’s absurd is an abyssal thought, more like a chasm and ending than a beginning, easier to fall into than to go around. In Nietzsche’s case, the eternal recurrence is an equalizer. We read in Thus Spoke Zarathustra:

Naked I had once seen both, the greatest man and the smallest man: all-too-similar to each other, even the greatest all-too-human. All-too-small, the greatest!—that was my disgust with man. And the eternal recurrence even of the smallest—that was my disgust with all existence. Alas! Nausea! Nausea! Nausea! (331)

The disgust expressed here, along with the concomitant views of humanity, opens a chasm. By this, I do not mean that Nietzsche’s thought has reached its culmination, nor insist that my interpretation of the passage is conclusive. I want only to indicate that to begin with a thought like eternal recurrence denies access to the “block of
marble,” that is, too much in Nietzsche and elsewhere on which even the thought itself rests. As for why this should be, as well as why our methodological restraint is required, the simplest answer I can offer will just lead to additional complexity. I cite Derrida to “affirm that within the decisive concept of . . . difference [what he calls differance (with an a)], all is not to be thought at one go” (23). A rapid appropriation of this statement suggests that in every case, where the chasm is an issue, much will be left unthought, even when this unthought is the condition on which the possibility of the chasm itself lies. To say this in another manner, the chasm belongs to the economy of its unthought origin. But since all of this is a prelude to Kierkegaard, we must resist further second-order digression. In the name of an eventual temporal return to the issue of the absurd, without further delay, we must now address Nietzsche’s particular abyss.

We need to be more specific on the eternal recurrence as an abyss. For our purposes, it will be enough to offer one possible understanding of this. I cite Bernd Magnus, who sees in the thought of eternal recurrence a kind of stoic resignation to the impossibility of Nietzschean life-affirmation. For Magnus, it turns out that the Übermensch is not entirely healthy, that übermenschlichkeit is humanly corrosive. Health in übermenschlichkeit, in his words, is “a self-consuming human impossibility” (172), which I take as a subversion of the possibility of life-affirmation.

Certainly if Magnus is right, he puts a crimp in the style of all prospective Übermenschen. According to his reasoning (which I find most provocative), “only an Übermensch sincerely wills her own life. The rest of us will our life in an edited version, if we are honest with ourselves” (173). For, as he insists, “who could live, as some of us have had to do, in the midst of extermination camps and love that unconditionally?” (172). Indeed, this bears a striking similarity to the reasoning in Fear and Trembling, when in Kierkegaard’s words, we should “either cancel out Abraham or learn to be horrified by the prodigious paradox that is the meaning of his life” (52–53). But to let Kierkegaard alone for the moment, Magnus’s lesson, as stated in the strongest possible terms, turns Nietzsche into a stoic. The message is, with the eternal recurrence no human being can truthfully affirm life, given life’s negativity. Given the recurrence together with what an actual human life is, the eternal recurrence necessarily remains unwilled. To repeat what I said earlier, to begin directly with a thought such as the eternal
recurrence is to confront an abyss. An abyss is not something we can either ignore or embrace. It is a fundamental thought at the end, the subsequent imposition of which on the “block of marble” is essentially problematic. This reasoning will be highly condensed, but what I mean is that even if the thought is adequate or true (notions which themselves must be put into question), it initiates a chain of self-consuming effects. As we saw with Magnus above, eternal recurrence consumes the notion of Nietzschean life-affirmation. This in turn would have the effect of collapsing the so-called “space” of Nietzsche’s thought, of undermining the Nietzschean economy of life. Finally, the effect would be to undercut the thought of eternal recurrence itself (as this thought is itself based on the life-economy), leaving us either with nothing at all or else with everything as it was from the beginning. Leaving us with either nothing or everything, or nothing and everything, the thought can be truly destructive. It is not fruitful for us to impose it on the “block of marble,” as if it were the simple origin of the concepts from which the thought sprung. The abyssal thoughts of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are not simple origins. This is why they resist direct comprehension, as well as why, conversely, the direct approach to them will meet with much failure and, under the best conditions, only minimal success. Moreover, it is why I began this paper on the absurd with a series of (I would like to say) necessary digressions from Kierkegaard. It was necessary to address the issue of direct comprehension. This led to discussions of Derrida, Magnus, and in particular to Nietzsche for another example of an abyss. It could have easily led elsewhere, and in this sense the digressions were accidental. Again, however, they were necessary for revealing the limits of direct comprehension. The opening digressions will allow us to avoid an analysis of Kierkegaard that simply consumes itself. In the analysis to follow, instead of one major player there will be two. The first of the major players will not be the absurdity of the leap. This will come second. The first major player is the greatness of Abraham. We need to begin by examining the system of gains and losses to which this greatness belongs.

The Economy of Greatness in Fear and Trembling

An economic theme runs throughout Fear and Trembling. At the very beginning of the book, we read of a general devaluation of things.
“Not only in the business world but also in the world of ideas, our age stages ein wirklicher Ausverkauf [a real sale],” Kierkegaard writes. “Everything can be had at such bargain price that it becomes a question of whether there is finally anyone who will make a bid” (5). Does this mean there is in fact little or nothing of value? *Fear and Trembling* instead raises the possibility that the devaluation says much less about the value of things than it does about us who devalue them. Appropriately, at the other end, the Epilogue begins by considering another remedy to the problem of devaluation. “Once when the price of spices in Holland fell, the merchants had a few cargoes sunk in the sea in order to jack up the price.” Says Kierkegaard, “This was an excusable, perhaps even necessary, deception. Do we need something similar in the world of spirit?” (121). In other words, is spiritual deflation a result of surplus spiritual goods? *Fear and Trembling*, of course, is about the opposite. With its thoroughgoing consideration of Abraham, it is largely about the undersupply of spiritual achievement. This brings us then to the middle of the text, the part called “Preliminary Expectoration.” I am a bit constrained by the title of this section, for I would like to say that this is where the main action begins to take place, but the preliminaries are before the main action. It is certainly worth noting that Kierkegaard did not just call this section of the book “Abraham and Faith” or the “Knights of Resignation and Faith,” which would have referred directly to the subject-matter contained therein. By naming it as he did, without direct reference to the subject matter, he invites speculation as to the title’s meaning. Relevant to this, we know from the Hongs that “in the final draft . . . the heading was changed from . . . Introduction” (1983, 343n). There are five brief points I shall put forth on this. First, the Hong and Lowrie editions both translate the title of the section as “Preliminary Expectoration,” whereas Hannay gives us “Preamble from the Heart.” Without rushing to judgment, it is clear to me that the connotations of the latter are far fewer. The Hong footnote on this title reads “From the Latin *ex* + *pectus* (from + heart, breast), an outpouring to the heart, in line with the subtitle, ‘Dialectical Lyric’” (1983, 343n). Hence Hannay gives us the heart but omits the breast. He loses the sense of clearing the lungs, as a speaker may do, for instance, when trying to prepare an audience to listen. (Ahem.) Indeed, in the second place, *Cassell’s New Latin Dictionary* gives “*pectus*” most literally as “breast” (as in the English word “pectoral”). But
it also gives two transferred usages: “(1) the breast as the seat of the affections; the heart, soul . . . [as in] to love with the whole heart . . . (and) (2) as the seat of reason, understanding, the mind: [as in] toto pectore cogitare” (429). Hannay’s “Preamble from the Heart” may not capture this second transferred usage. (Of course, he may be thinking of Pascal. The heart doesn’t need the mind’s reason; it has its own.) Third, Webster’s New World Dictionary gives “expectorate” as derived from the Latin expectoratus, the past participle of expectorare, meaning “to banish from the mind, expel from the breast” (511). Here, the Hong and Lowrie translations become the hands-down winners. The “Preliminary Expectoration” is the preparatory banishing of faith from reason. “Preamble from the Heart” misses this entirely. It also misses the common meaning of expectoration as spit, which is the fourth and next to last point. We cannot simply dismiss the possible relevance of this meaning. In volume one of Either/Or, the aesthete reflects on himself:

Time passes, life is a stream, etc., so people say. That is not what I find: time stands still, and so do I. All the plans I project fly straight back at me; when I want to spit, I spit in my own face. (26)

Indeed, if we take this as our guide, the title “Preliminary Expectoration” would be a warning not to become too enthusiastic about the reflections in the chapter moving us too far. We may imagine that we are spitting away, but when it comes to the movements of faith, reflection ends up unrewarded, that is, all wet. Finally, the fifth point is a continuation of this last one. As mentioned earlier, the earlier drafts of the section were simply titled “Introduction.” Is this section essentially a prelude to the three Problema to follow? It is included with these in the large division of the text entitled “Problemata.” This would suggest that the important discussions are to come not in this section but afterward. Indeed, perhaps it is for this reason that Kierkegaard changed the title, so as not to mislead the reader in this way. Certainly I concur with the view that in the “Preliminary Expectoration” we have already entered the main event. But this needs to be qualified. As the fourth point above suggests, the reader as reader will never enter the main event, since this concerns the movements of faith, which readers or reasoners as such can never make. As concerns these movements, all thought is an introduction. Perhaps then the “Preliminary Expectoration” is the
introduction of all introductions, in this way the sine qua non of *Fear and Trembling*. In the least, it is most certainly the case that all of the most important themes of the text are present and developed here. This includes the economic theme, in all of its major permutations. One of the primary goals of the “Preliminary Expectoration” is to assign value to three stages of selfhood. In ascending value, these are the stage that is merely finite, the stage that is infinite, called infinite resignation, and the stage that is both finite and infinite, called faith. Faith is the stage with the highest value, which it achieves “by virtue of the absurd.” Moreover, vis-à-vis the high value of faith, there is also a value assigned to reflection. This is a negative value, for reflection is continually simulating the movements of faith. According to Kierkegaard, reason is in no position to make these movements. That it continues to pretend to do so is to its discredit. It “does not stop with the miracle of faith, turning water into wine—it goes further and turns wine into water” (Kierkegaard 1983, 37). Or as Kierkegaard continues in the concluding paragraph of the book:

This urge to go further is an old story in the world. Heraclitus the obscure . . . said: One cannot walk through the same river twice. Heraclitus . . . had a disciple who . . . went further—and added: One cannot do it even once. Poor Heraclitus. . . ! By this improvement, the thesis was amended into an Eleatic thesis that denies motion, and yet that disciple wished only to be a disciple . . . who went further, not back to what Heraclitus had abandoned. (123)

Does reason go further or does it go back? It is all a matter of valuation. Of course this has nothing at all to do with money. It has nothing to do with purchasing things but with “purchasing” self. In Kierkegaard’s view, it is a matter of expectation, struggle, and love: in short, passion. In the preceding chapter “Eulogy,” he writes:

No one who was great in the world will be forgotten, but everyone was great in his own way, and everyone in proportion to the greatness of that which he loved. He who loved himself became great by virtue of himself and he who loved other men became great by his devotedness, but he who loved God became the greatest of all. Everyone . . . became great in proportion to his expectancy. One became great by expecting the possible, another by expecting the eternal; but he who expected the impossible became the greatest of all. Everyone was great wholly in proportion to the magnitude of that with which he struggled.
For he who struggled with the world became great by conquering the world, and he who struggled with himself became great by conquering himself, but he who struggled with God became the greatest of all. (16)

In short, the more love, expectation, and struggle—the more passion—the more self. Those who are content to be merely on the level of the finite do not have much self. When Kierkegaard talks about infinite resignation, he gives the example of a young man with an all-consuming but impossible love. People with little passion and little self, he knows, will disapprove. “Of course,” he judges, “the slaves of the finite, the frogs in the swamp of life, scream: That kind of love is foolishness; the rich brewer’s widow is just as good and solid a match. Let them go on croaking in the swamp” (Kierkegaard 1983, 42). These are the people who are, he says, “dissipated in multiplicity from the beginning” and who “act . . . as shrewdly in life as the financiers who put their resources into widely diversified investments in order to gain on one if they lose on another” (43). In Kierkegaard’s economy of passion, these people have no greatness. They may have money, but they have little self. It is different for the knights of resignation and faith. These entail what we would call great or magnificent passions. They both have the passionate intensity to abandon finitude, to leave the pleasures and pains of the everyday world behind. In the case of the knight of infinite resignation, Kierkegaard says he has “the power to concentrate the whole substance of his life and the meaning of actuality into one single desire” (42–43). With this passion, “the knight does not contradict himself. . . . He feels no inclination to become another person, by no means regards that as great” (43). This means that the knight will recollect everything, but this recollection is precisely the pain, and yet in infinite resignation he is reconciled with existence. His love for that princess would become for him the expression of an eternal love, would assume a religious character, would be transfigured into a love of the eternal being, which true enough denied the fulfillment but nevertheless did reconcile him once more in the eternal form that no actuality can take away from him. . . . The knight makes the impossibility [of his love for the princess] possible by expressing it spiritually, . . . by renouncing it. . . . From the moment he has made the movement, the princess is lost. He does not need the erotic titillation of seeing the beloved etc., nor does he in the finite sense continually need to be bidding her farewell, because in the eternal sense he
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recollects her, and . . . he has grasped the deep secret that even in loving another person one ought to be sufficient to oneself. (43–44)

The greatness of the knight of infinite resignation is that by renouncing the finite, he has found a way to regain in the infinite what has been lost in the finite. This great passion keeps the flame of memory burning and has the strength to struggle with the pain of great loss. It has given up the finite, expects nothing from the finite, but has gained the infinite. In Kierkegaard’s economy of the self, it is a genuine step above mere finitude with real additional purchasing power. As for the knight of faith, to become this would mark the greatest possible achievement of the passionate, concentrated self. He or she gains the infinite but without giving up the finite. “Temporality, finitude—that is what it is all about” (49). And along these same lines, “Abraham had faith specifically for this life—faith that he would grow old . . . be honored, and [be] unforgettable in Isaac” (20). Faith, in other words, is the greatest possible love, the greatest possible expectancy, and the greatest possible struggle. Indeed it is so great that it is beyond all human comprehension. It occurs by virtue of the absurd. But as part of this, the costs must also be incomprehensible. Kierkegaard speaks endlessly on this subject, the matter of Abraham’s trial or ordeal. He says, “I do not lack the courage to think a complete thought” (30), and with this he insists on a detailed, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute description of the actual event. He would like to ride with Abraham, insisting that if we want to have faith, we need to do the same. He makes Abraham’s love for Isaac as substantial as he possibly can, describing it in such a way that few fathers anywhere would dare to think they loved in this magnificent way. If he rode with Abraham he would explain at every opportunity that it is still not too late to turn around (32). But Abraham keeps going, can keep going, and this is why Johannes is Silentio (silent); this is what he knows he cannot understand. “Abraham I cannot understand,” he says; “I can learn nothing from him except to be amazed” (37). Again, “I think myself into the hero; I cannot think myself into Abraham” (33). Again, “We forget that Abraham only rode an ass, which trudges along the road, that he had a journey of three days, that he needed some time to chop the firewood, to bind Isaac, and to sharpen the knife” (52). Finally, how could Abraham even have had the strength to raise the knife given his total, passionate, fatherly love. In the words of the second “Problema”: 
In the moment he is about to sacrifice Isaac, the ethical expression for what he is doing is: he hates Isaac. But . . . he can rest assured that God does not demand this of him. He must love Isaac with his whole soul. Since God claims Isaac, he must, if possible, love him even more, and only then can he sacrifice him. (74)

“This,” concludes Kierkegaard, “is the peak on which Abraham stands” (37). In his economy of the self, it is the pinnacle of human greatness, the highest concentration of passion, the greatest struggle, the greatest of all possible achievements. As such, it is what makes it possible for Kierkegaard to sustain a discourse on the absurd. Such greatness is beyond reason. It is higher than reason. Moreover, it is an affront to reason, and Kierkegaard’s conclusion to the “Preliminary Expectoration” does not embrace it. Instead, it stands at the peak of ambivalence. It speaks as a witness to the act. It speaks bluntly of “a paradox that makes murder into a holy and God-pleasing act. It comes to him in fear and trembling. And he asks of us too” (53). As a witness, Kierkegaard cannot forget the act. It comes to him in fear and trembling. And he asks each us too to witness, that the act come to us too in the same manner. He says, “Let us then either cancel out Abraham or learn to be horrified by the prodigious paradox that is the meaning of his life, so that we may understand that our age, like every other age, can rejoice if it has faith” (52–53). We are asked to make a decision, either one way or the other. Despite Abraham’s so-called greatness, this request from Kierkegaard is to be taken seriously. It is not a merely rhetorical gesture.

The Odd Couple: Absurdity and Greatness

Let us call them the odd couple: absurdity and greatness. In Fear and Trembling, they are brought to work together. On the one hand, we have the absurdity by which Abraham, the so-called knight of faith, becomes great. On the other hand, we have the greatness of this knight, by which absurdity is a gain, an achievement. Again, on the one hand, by working with absurdity, greatness is brought to flourish at a level beyond reason. The higher realms of selfhood call for absurdity. On the other hand, by working with greatness, absurdity is given a place higher than reason, more gainful than reason, in the economy of the self. The move into the absurd calls for greatness of
self. As gainful, the absurd movement rests upon the possibility of what Kierkegaard calls “selfhood.”

Now these last claims about the move into the absurd ought to sound strange. They concern the legitimation of the absurd by high achievement. If we formulated a question about this, it would be to ask whether there is a place to occupy for absurd movements in the text of greatness. Is it a part of greatness to behave clearly without reason: for example, foolishly, laughably, monstrously, or grotesquely? A second, different question would have to do with legality. Is it a part of greatness to break the law, in particular the moral law?

Typically, the answer given to both these questions is no. The great woman or man is not grotesque, not a monster, not laughable or foolish or a transgressor of the moral law. Indeed typically, the standard of being reasonable prevails; the connection of high achievement with the absurd does not.

This latter connection is atypical. It is Kierkegaard’s invention. It is what makes Fear and Trembling unique. It is a challenge to the standard of reasonability that ordinarily prevails.

By this standard, we usually assume that to have reasons for our actions and opinions is greater than to not have them. Moreover, we assume that to be able to articulate these reasons is even greater than merely to have them. Ordinarily, reasons are assumed to bring opinions closer to knowledge, to make us more educated. Hence in matters of skill and decisions of importance, they are generally required; opinions alone are insufficient.

Aristotle similarly contends in the Posterior Analytics that “when we know the fact we ask the reason” (1941a, 11.1) and that “to know a thing’s nature is to know the reason why it is” (11.2). In short, we assume the value of reason. Moreover an opinion, in contrast to a reason, is merely “the grasp of a premise which is immediate but not necessary” (1.33). An opinion is a claim held but not demonstrated, that is, it is a premise that does not “come about through [other] premises which are primary and true” (1941b, 1.1). Hence, we assume for an opinion, its value is less than that of a reason, which gives the cause. In Aristotle’s words,

Opinion is unstable, and so is the kind of being we have described as its object. Besides, when a man thinks a truth incapable of being otherwise he always thinks that he knows it, never that he opines it. He thinks that he opines when he thinks that a connexion, though actually so, may
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quite easily be otherwise; for he believes that such is the proper object of opinion, while the necessary is the object of knowledge. (1941a, 1.33)

Not surprisingly, Aristotle confirms our everyday standard of reasonableness. The value of reason prevails in our ordinary assumptions; and in the assumptions Aristotle takes note of as well. Reason has value in that it can give knowledge of what is necessary and is incapable of being otherwise. Opinion, the object of which “may quite easily be otherwise,” has far less value. These contrasting values are based on their respectively contrasting objects. In short, reason but not opinion can give the object of knowledge—the cause—which is the kind of being that is stable, unchanging, and great. Here, like Plato before him, through the notion of immutability, Aristotle asserts a connection between reason and what is great.

Nonetheless, for Fear and Trembling, reason is not the way. Greatness is brought together with absurdity, not reason. To put this otherwise, the way of absurdity is greater than the way of reason. All of this is consistent with what we said before. The odd couple (of absurdity and greatness) assigns to the absurd a place higher than reason, at the same time elevating greatness beyond all conception. With this, a critical issue begins to emerge. Kierkegaard does not simply want to dismiss reason; it has its place. Even more importantly, he does not want to sanction everything unreasonable, like murder, for example. He never says, “by virtue of the unreasonable”; rather, he says, “by virtue of the absurd.”

But then, how do we distinguish between the merely unreasonable and the absurd? Clearly, it would be easy to do this in the abstract; they are both species of the unreasonable with respect to greatness. The real trick, however, would be to distinguish them in practice. How can we know, in real life, when an action is merely unreasonable—and hence perhaps ignorant, uncouth, or immoral—as opposed to when an action is something much more—more than reason itself by virtue of the absurd?

At this point, I would like to again call to mind the “block of marble” thematized earlier. I would like us to think of the block now as Kierkegaard’s version of human possibility, the embodiment of that which is most deeply latent in his and our so-called Western culture. A related way to characterize this mass, this possibility (“the heaviest category,” Kierkegaard calls possibility in the conclusion to Concept of Anxiety), is as the economic landscape in which we ourselves live. The
thought of greatness is an essential part of this landscape. Greatness marks the instances where this possibility of selfhood has been actualized, the moments where self-actualization or life-affirmation is obtained. Without such moments, greatness is absent and life is unfulfilled, either to a complete or to a moderate degree, either as self-impoverishment or mediocrity. Mediocrity especially is a condition exacerbated by our so-called good intentions. For much of this, Kierkegaard holds reason’s reflection to blame. Reason cannot actualize greatness, which necessarily occurs moment by moment, a struggle extended in time. Reason, however, feigns actualization, glossing over the struggle. The possibility of greatness, the economy of magnificent passions, is in this way obscured. A self-satisfied mediocrity is the result. As for the block of marble, this remains the embodiment of deeper possibility. The leap into the absurd, which Kierkegaard pulls from the block, continues to be the enactment that satisfies the self’s highest demands.

With this, we return to the distinction between mere unreason and the absurd. Kierkegaard adamantly acknowledges the importance of this distinction. He knows that allowing every unreasonable act to be seen as higher than reason would be a scandal. He does not favor such a scandal. According to Kierkegaard, we cannot afford to lose sight of the distinction between mere unreason and the absurd. He has this in mind, for example, when he berates the preacher who speaks too seductively of Abraham. A seduction makes Abraham into a snare for those who do not know better. In Kierkegaard’s view, this preacher omits from his telling of the story of the ordeal all of the latent contradiction and anxiety, all of the struggle. Kierkegaard subsequently pronounces that if he himself could not “speak unreservedly about Abraham without running the risk that some individual will become unbalanced and do the same things [then he would] say nothing at all about Abraham” (1983, 31). In his words, “the last thing I will do is to scale him down in such a way that he thereby becomes a snare for the weak” (31).

The issue is entirely one of economics, of an adequate assessment of possible losses, of risk. The expenditure involved in faith is maximal. The return on becoming an Abraham is absolute but unlikely to be realized. More likely, the result will be loss of reason, that is, madness, not faith. With madness, the expenditure is maximal while the return is nil. To know this is to be forewarned: mere unreason is in-
sufficient as grounds for banking on a prospective Abraham. Never for a moment should we believe that the world of unreason, of madness, is full of Abrahams. The problem remains, however, of making a distinction between mere unreason and the absurd that would be workable in practice. For Kierkegaard, this distinction is not possible on the basis of appearances alone. He shows this clearly in his light-hearted portrayal of Abraham's counterpart, the married, bourgeois-philistine knight of faith. With this knight, Kierkegaard contends, the leap of life is accomplished in such a way that it appears entirely as no more than a walk. In other words, the sublime assumes the appearance of the pedestrian with nothing at all to give its presence away (1983, 41). Kierkegaard uses the analogy of the dance, where the leap of the dancer always shows strain, inevitably reveals to the careful observer the process of the dancer's struggle in assuming a new posture. But in the realm of faith, unlike in dance, the accomplished performer gives no outward indication of a struggle. "Perhaps there is no ballet dancer who can do it," says Kierkegaard, "but this knight does it" (1983, 41). What the knight of faith does, in short, is remain totally concealed. The knight's faith does not give itself in any immediacy. In short, faith, along with the absurd by virtue of which it is achieved, is no phenomenon. For distinguishing the absurd from mere unreason and madness, then, there remain only the internal marks, that is, those effects produced in inwardness. The converse of this is that the absurd will be indistinguishable from madness unless the internal marks of faith suffice to manifest the absurd as somehow distinct. We discussed these marks in the previous section as the actualizing marks of the passionate self, as the marks of love, expectation, and struggle that characterize the presence of greatness. If the absurd is to be manifest, it will have to be through precisely these. They are the only possibilities for manifestation we have.

We arrive then at the coalescence of maximal passions as the only possibility for identifying the absurd beyond reason. More specifically, we arrive at the coalescence of maximal love, maximal expectation, and maximal struggle. Greatness is identified as the best of all possible passions. The highest greatness is that of love, expectation, and struggle beyond which no greater love, expectation, and struggle can be held. Anselm, of course, had used this form of argument to prove that God must be thought to exist, as following from the thought of that than which nothing greater can be thought. Unlike
Anselm, however, Kierkegaard does not lead us from our thought to maximal thought. He instead leads us from our passions to maximal passions. These passions indeed elude thought. They are not to be thought. They are not of thought but of passion, available to one only as a gift by virtue of the absurd. The maximal passions, for Kierkegaard, are off “the way of objective reflection [that is, off the way which] makes the subject accidental, and . . . transforms existence into . . . something vanishing” (1941, 173). In the words of *Concluding Unscientifc Postscript*, these passions put us on “the subjective way . . . [where] this danger is at its maximum: madness” (173). The danger of madness is again is connected to the peak of subjective greatness. Kierkegaard speaks of this peak in the *Postscript* as a truth that is subjectivity, defined as “an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness” (182). As part of this subjective truth, in his words, 1) “passion is the culmination of existence for an existing individual” (176); 2) “all eternal decisiveness is rooted in subjectivity” (173); and 3) “when the question of truth is raised subjectively, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true [italics omitted]” (178). From all this we see, in short, that maximal passion is divorced from objectivity, leading us in the *Postscript* like in *Fear and Trembling* to the frightening danger of madness. “In a merely subjective determination of the truth,” we read, “madness and truth become in the last analysis indistinguishable, since they may both have inwardness” (1941, 173–74).

Is Kierkegaard, then, an advocate of madness? I will speak now only of *Fear and Trembling*, where this seems to me uncertain. Here, as the coalescence of maximal passions, Kierkegaard pulls from the block of marble the great obstruction to our assenting to faith, the sacrificing of Isaac. He pulls out violation and transgression, not of abstract or impersonal laws, but of the laws of one’s own passionately constituted self. The transgressions are to be directed against those persons to whom we are most fully and passionately committed by love, expectation, and struggle.

Moreover, these are not people with whom we merely try hard. As we saw earlier, God demands of Abraham that he love Isaac as never before. The sacrifice, as such, demands this heightening of love. Without it, the conditions of sacrifice do not obtain. Abraham’s act would not have been made sacred. The absolute horror, the absolute ugliness of the quintessential sacrifice—this, then, is what
Kierkegaard shows us. He pulls ugliness from the “marble” mass in the name of greatness, in the move to faith. With this in mind, I suggest finally that *Fear and Trembling* be seen as functioning at least as much to challenge as to uphold the greatness of the move to faith. For unlike other texts which gloss over the ugliness of the transgression of the move to greatness, to the higher realms of the self’s economy, *Fear and Trembling* is about thinking the movements of so-called greatness through. *Fear and Trembling* brings these movements just as they must be and must have been onto our scene where we can witness them. It puts the knight of faith where we can see him [or her] if we care to see, hear him if we care to hear, touch him if we care to touch, taste him if we care to taste, and smell him if we care to smell. *Fear and Trembling* makes us bear witness to the sacrifice. As such, it is above all an invitation to pause, to stop, to stare. To bear witness to the so-called greatness of an infinite finitude, an eternity in time, here manifest under the name of Abraham’s faith.

**References**