FEAR AND TREMBLING

A Dialectical Lyric

by

Johannes de silentio

What Tarquin the Proud communicated in his garden
with the beheaded poppies was understood
by the son but not by the messenger.
Hamann[1]

[1] Quoted in German from Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88), *Hamann's Schriften*, I–VIII, ed. Friedrich Roth (Berlin: Bey G. Reimer, 1821–43), III, 190. See *Katalog over Søren Kierkegaards Bibliotek* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1957), nos. 536–44 (hereafter cited by the siglum KSKB followed by entry number). The son of Tarquin the Proud (?-495? BCE), seventh and last king of Rome, sent a message to his father asking how to treat the rulers of Gabii, a city with which the king was at war and where his son had contrived to become a military leader. Distrusting the messenger, the king replied by taking him to the royal garden and cutting off the heads of the tallest poppies with his cane, indicating that the son should put the leading men of Gabii to death.

Preface

Not only in the commercial world but in the realm of ideas as well, our age is holding a veritable clearance sale.[1] Everything is had so dirt cheap that it is doubtful whether in the end anyone will bid. Every speculative score-keeper who conscientiously keeps account of the momentous march of modern philosophy, every lecturer, tutor, student, every outsider and insider in philosophy does not stop at doubting everything but goes further.[2] Perhaps it would be inappropriate and untimely to ask them where they are actually going, but it is surely polite and modest to take it for granted that they have doubted everything, since otherwise it would certainly be peculiar to say that they went further. All of them then have made this preliminary movement, and presumably so easily that they do not find it necessary to drop a hint about how, for not even the one who anxiously and worriedly sought a little enlightenment found so much as an instructive tip or a little dietary prescription on how to conduct oneself under this enormous task. "But Descartes has done it, hasn't he?" Descartes,[3] a venerable, humble, honest thinker whose writings surely no one can read without the deepest emotion, has done what he has said and said what he has done. Alas! Alas! Alas! That is a

[1] *ein wirklicher Ausverkauf.*

[2] Probably an allusion to the Danish Hegelian philosophers, most notably Hans Lassen Martensen (1808–1884), who sought to go beyond not only previous philosophers in transcending faith as well as doubt in philosophy but also beyond their mentor, the German philosopher Georg Wilhem Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), in speculative system building. On Kierkegaard's relation to the Danish Hegelians, see Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 50–69, 307–10.

[3] The French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) is widely recognized as the father of modern European philosophy.

great rarity in our age! As he himself reiterates often enough, Descartes did not doubt with respect to faith. ("At the same time we should remember, as noted earlier, that the natural light is to be trusted only to the extent that it is compatible with divine revelation . . . But above all else we must impress on our memory the overriding rule that whatever God has revealed to us must be accepted as more certain than anything else. And although the light of reason may, with the utmost clarity and evidence, appear to suggest something different, we must still put our entire faith in divine authority rather than in our own judgment." *Principles of Philosophy*, I, § 28 and § 76).[4] Descartes has not yelled "Fire!" and made it a duty for everyone to doubt, for he was a quiet, solitary thinker, not a bellowing street watchman. He has modestly confessed that his method had importance only for himself and was based partly on his earlier distorted knowledge. ("My present aim, then, is not to teach the method which everyone must follow in order to direct his reason correctly, but only to reveal how I have tried to direct my own . . . But as soon as I had completed the course of study at the end of which one is normally admitted to the ranks of the learned, I completely changed my opinion. For I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance." *Discourse on Method*, pp. 2 and 3).[5] – What those ancient Greeks, who also surely understood a little about philosophy, assumed to be a task for a whole lifetime because proficiency in doubting is not achieved in a matter of days and weeks; what was achieved by the old veteran polemicist,[6] who had preserved the equilibrium of doubt through all specious arguments, bravely denied certainty of the senses and of thought, and incorruptibly defied the anxiety of self-love and the innuendos of sympathy – with that everyone in our age begins.

In our age nobody stops at faith but goes further. To ask where they are going would perhaps be foolhardy; however, it is surely a sign of courtesy and good breeding for me to assume that everyone has faith,

[4] Quoted in Latin from *Renati Des-Cartes Opera philosophica*. Editio ultima (Amsterdam: Blaviana, 1685), VIII, 23. See KSKB 473. Translation from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, I–II, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), I, pp. 202–3 and 221.

[5] Ibid., II, pp. 112, 113.

[6] An ambiguous reference, probably to an early Greek skeptic such as Carneades (215–129 BCE), who distrusted the intellect as well as the senses.

since otherwise it would be peculiar to talk of going further. In those olden days it was different; then faith was a lifelong task because it was assumed that proficiency in believing is not achieved in either days or weeks. When the tried and tested oldster drew near to his end, having fought the good fight and kept the faith,[7] his heart was still young enough not to have forgotten that fear and trembling which disciplined the youth and was well-controlled by the man but is not entirely outgrown by any person – except insofar as one succeeds in going further as soon as possible. Where those venerable figures arrived, there everyone in our age begins in order to go further.

The present writer is not at all a philosopher; he has not understood the System,[8] whether it exists or whether it is finished. He already has enough for his weak head in the thought of what huge heads everyone in our age must have since everyone has such huge thoughts. Even if one were able to convert the whole content of faith into conceptual form, it does not follow that one has comprehended faith, comprehended how one entered into it or how it entered into one. The present writer is not at all a philosopher; he is, poetically and tastefully expressed,[9] a free-lancer[10] who neither writes the System nor makes *promises*[11] about the System, who neither swears by the System nor pledges himself *to* the System. He writes because for him it is a luxury that becomes all the more enjoyable and conspicuous the fewer who buy and read what he writes. He easily foresees his fate in an age when passion has been abandoned in order to serve scholarship, in an age when an author who wants readers must take care to write in such a way that his work can be conveniently skimmed through during the after-dinner nap, and take care to fashion his outer appearance in likeness to that polite garden apprentice in *The Advertiser*,[12] who with hat in hand and good references from the place

[7] 2 Timothy 4:7.
[8] The Hegelian philosophical system, the object of much irony, criticism, and ridicule in Kierkegaard's writings.
[9] *poetice et eleganter*.
[10] *Extra-Skriver*.
[11] Probably an allusion to the Danish Hegelian philosophers Rasmus Nielsen (1809–1884) and Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791–1860), whose unfulfilled promises of a logical system of philosophy were satirized by Kierkegaard in his journals. See *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, 2nd enlarged edn., I–X VI, ed. Niels Thulstrup (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968–78), V B 47.7; 49.5 (hereafter cited by the siglum SKP followed by volume, group, and entry number). See also Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 384–5.
[12] An abbreviated reference to the local newspaper, *Berlingske politiske og Avertissements-Tidende*, which ran such an advertisement in 1843. See SKP IV A 88, editors' note.

where he was last employed recommends himself to an esteemed public. He foresees his fate of being totally ignored; he has a frightful presentiment that zealous criticism will put him through the mill many times. He dreads what is even more frightful, that one or another enterprising summarizer, a paragraph-gobbler (who in order to save scholarship is always willing to do to the writings of others what Trop[13] magnanimously did with *The Destruction of the Human Race* in order "to save good taste"), will cut him up into paragraphs and do it with the same inflexibility as the man who, in service to the system of punctuation, divided his discourse by counting the words so that there were exactly 50 words to a period and 35 to a semicolon. – I prostrate myself in deepest deference before every systematic snooper: "This is not the System, it does not have the least thing to do with the System. I invoke all the best upon the System and upon the Danish investors in this omnibus, for it is not likely to become a tower.[14] I wish them one and all good luck and prosperity."

Respectfully,
Johannes de silentio[15]

[13] A character in J. L. Heiberg's vaudeville play, *The Reviewer and the Beast*, who writes a tragedy and then tears it in two, saying: "If it costs no more to save good taste, why shouldn't we do it then?" See KSKB 1553–9: *J. L. Heibergs Samlede Skrifter. Skuespil*, I–VII (Copenhagen: J. S. Schubothes, 1833–41), III, *Recensenten og dyret*, Act I, sc. 7, p. 221.

[14] Cf. Luke 14:28–30. Also probably another "dig" at the unfinished Hegelian philosophical system.

[15] John of silence, the pseudonymous author of the text, is an imaginary figure who claims to be neither a poet nor a philosopher but nevertheless writes in a lyrical and dialectical fashion, as indicated in the subtitle of the work.

Tuning Up

There was once a man who as a child had heard that beautiful story about how God tested[1] Abraham and how he withstood the test,[2] kept the faith, and received a son a second time contrary to expectation. When the man became older, he read the same story with even greater admiration, for life had separated what had been united in the child's pious simplicity. Indeed, the older he became, the more often his thoughts turned to that story; his enthusiasm became stronger and stronger, and yet he could understand the story less and less. Finally he forgot everything else because of it; his soul had only one wish, to see Abraham, one longing, to have been a witness to that event. His desire was not to see the beautiful regions of the Far East, not the earthly splendor of the Promised Land,[3] not that god-fearing married couple whose old age God had blessed,[4] not the venerable figure of the aged patriarch, not the vigorous youth of Isaac bestowed by God – it would not have mattered to him if the same thing had taken place on a barren heath. His longing was to accompany them on the three day journey when Abraham rode with sorrow before him and Isaac by his side. His wish was to be present at the hour when Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw Mount Moriah in the distance, the hour he left the asses behind and went up the mountain alone with Isaac, for what

[1] *fristede*.
[2] *Fristelsen*. See Genesis 22:1–19. The Danish word *Fristelse* literally means "temptation" and is used in two senses in this text. The first corresponds to the common biblical rendering of it as a test or trial to which one is subjected by God, as in the present instance; the second connotes the ordinary meaning associated with the term, as in being attracted or lured to do something base, wrong, or unethical.
[3] See Genesis 12:1–2; 17:8. [4] Genesis 18:1–15; 21:1–3.

engrossed him was not the artistic weave of the imagination but the shudder of the thought.

That man was not a thinker, he felt no need to go beyond faith; it seemed to him that it must be the greatest glory to be remembered as its father and an enviable lot to possess faith, even if no one knew it.

That man was not a learned exegete, he did not know Hebrew; had he known Hebrew, then perhaps he would easily have understood the story and Abraham.

I

> *"And God tested Abraham and said to him, take Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering upon a mountain that I will show you."*[5]

It was an early morning; Abraham rose early, had the asses saddled, and left his tent, taking Isaac with him, but Sarah looked out the window after them as they went down through the valley[6] until she could see them no more. They rode silently for three days. On the morning of the fourth day Abraham still did not say a word but lifted up his eyes and saw Mount Moriah in the distance. He left the servant boys behind and went up to the mountain alone, leading Isaac by the hand. But Abraham said to himself: "I will not conceal from Isaac where this path is taking him." He stood still and laid his hand upon Isaac's head for a blessing, and Isaac bowed to receive it. And Abraham's countenance was paternal, his gaze was gentle, his speech exhortatory. But Isaac could not understand him, his soul could not be uplifted; he embraced Abraham's knees, he pleaded at his feet, he begged for his young life, for his fair hopes, he recalled the joy in Abraham's house, he recalled the sorrow and the solitude. Then Abraham raised the boy up and walked along holding his hand, and his words were full of comfort and exhortation. But Isaac could not understand him. He climbed Mount Moriah, but Isaac understood him not. Then he turned away from Isaac a moment, but when Isaac saw Abraham's countenance again it was changed, his eyes were

[5] A conflated rendering of Genesis 22:1–2.

[6] Cf. Judith 10:10 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha/Deuteronomical Books*, 3rd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) or *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). See also SKP 3:3822.

wild, his appearance a fright to behold. He seized Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground, and said: "Foolish boy, do you believe that I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you believe this is God's command? No, it is my desire." Then Isaac trembled and cried out in his anguish: "God in heaven have mercy on me, God of Abraham have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, then you be my father!" But Abraham murmured under his breath to himself: "Lord in heaven, I thank you; it is surely better for him to believe I am a monster than to lose faith in you."

When the child is to be weaned, the mother blackens her breast, for it would indeed be a shame for the breast to look delightful when the child must not have it. So the child believes that the breast has changed, but the mother is the same, her gaze is loving and tender as always. Fortunate the one who did not need more frightful measures to wean the child!

II

It was an early morning; Abraham rose early, he embraced Sarah, the bride of his old age, and Sarah kissed Isaac, who took away her disgrace,[7] who was her pride, her hope for all generations. Then they rode silently along the way, and Abraham's eyes were fastened upon the ground until the fourth day when he lifted up his eyes and saw Mount Moriah far away, but his eyes turned again towards the ground. Silently he arranged the firewood and bound Isaac, silently he drew the knife; then he saw the ram that God had chosen. He sacrificed it and went home. – – – From that day on Abraham became old; he could not forget that God had demanded this of him. Isaac flourished as before, but Abraham's eyes were darkened, he saw joy no more.

When the child has grown larger and is to be weaned, the mother covers her breast in a maidenly manner so the child no longer has a mother. Fortunate the child who did not lose its mother in some other way!

[7] Childlessness.

III

It was an early morning; Abraham rose early, he kissed Sarah, the young mother, and Sarah kissed Isaac, her delight, her joy at all times. And Abraham rode pensively along the way; he thought of Hagar and the son whom he turned out into the desert.[8] He climbed Mount Moriah, he drew the knife.

It was a quiet evening when Abraham rode out alone, and he rode to Mount Moriah. He threw himself upon his face, he begged God to forgive his sin, that he had been willing to sacrifice Isaac, that the father had forgotten his duty toward the son. More than once he rode his lonely trail but found no peace of mind. He could not comprehend that it was a sin to have been willing to sacrifice to God the best he owned, that for which he himself would gladly have laid down his life many times. And if it were a sin, if he had not loved Isaac in this way, then he could not understand how it could be forgiven, for what sin was more grievous?

When the child is to be weaned, the mother too is not without sorrow that she and the child are more and more to be parted, that the child who first lay beneath her heart yet later reposed upon her breast will not be so close any more. Thus together they mourn this brief sorrow. Fortunate the one who kept the child so close and did not need to sorrow more!

IV

It was an early morning; everything was ready for the journey in Abraham's house. He took leave of Sarah, and the faithful servant Eliezer[9] saw him out along the road until he turned back again. They rode together in harmony, Abraham and Isaac, until they came to Mount Moriah. Yet Abraham calmly and gently prepared everything for the sacrifice, but as he turned away and drew the knife, Isaac saw that Abraham's left hand was clenched in despair, that a shudder went through his body – but Abraham drew the knife.

[8] See Genesis 16 and 21:9–21. Hagar, an Egyptian slave-girl belonging to Sarah, bore a son to Abraham named Ishmael; both mother and son were driven into the desert at Sarah's request after the birth of Isaac.

[9] Abraham's heir prior to the birth of Isaac. See Genesis 15:1–4.