Søren Kierkegaard as the “Affective Turn” in Philosophy?

Many philosophers have been interested in the role of emotions and affects in people’s lives. Among philosophers of our own time, Martha Nussbaum is one who has written most zealously and persistently about the meaning of feelings, and has attempted to give them cognitive and ethical value. In her major work *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001), she resorts to the Stoics in order to anchor her points of view. Aristotle also plays a central role in her philosophy. The psychologist Keith Oatley traces his historical interpretation back to the Epicureans, and, like Nussbaum, to the Stoics. Important representatives of the twenty-first century’s so called “affective turn,” for example Brian Massumi and Eve Sedgwick build upon Spinoza, Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari to a large degree. But few philosophers have given emotions so central a place in their philosophy as Søren Kierkegaard. Two of his major works carry emotions in the title, *Fear and Trembling* from 1843 and *The Concept of Anxiety* from 1844. *The Sickness unto Death* can be named in the same context because this work deals with despair in two different variants. Despair is “the sickness unto death.”

Anxiety is a basic concept in all of Kierkegaard’s authorship. It characterizes the very existence of humanity, and is for Kierkegaard therefore much more than an occasional feeling that can come and go. The legendary Danish literary historian Frederik Julius Billeskov Jansen writes: “In the beginning there was anxiety. That is Kierkegaard’s fundamental observation, that anxiety is a primeval element in humanity, the sign of being human” (Billeskov Jansen 1992, 55–56.) In his influential *Terminologisk Ordbog* from 1936 [1964], Jens Himmelstrup writes:

Kierkegaard thus comprehends anxiety as a point of intersection between two worlds within the human being, the nature determined world and a higher spiritually determined world. In the center of the natural world, man, himself a creature of nature, carries Anxiety’s badge of nobility in his breast

(Himmelstrup 1964, 16.)

*The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* by Vigilius Haufniensis is one of Søren Kierke-
gaard’s least accessible works. Like Fear and Trembling, it is one of his pseudo-
nymous writings, but many Kierkegaard scholars seem to believe that pseudony-
mity in this case is of minor importance for understanding the text’s meaning. There is a widespread point of view that this work could just as easily have been published in Kierkegaard’s own name; that, in fact, it was originally intended to be so (Kierkegaard 1980, 177). In the book, Kierkegaard links the “psychological” phenomenon of anxiety with the dogmatic question of original sin, a doctrine that was adopted in Carthage in the Councils of 412, 416 and 418 plus in Ephesus in 431. The dogma was later appropriated by the Protestants. In a draft for the book among Kierkegaard’s journals, Kierkegaard defines anxiety in the following way: “Anxiety is a desire for what one fears” (Kierkegaard, 1967, 39). The most well known definition is found in The Concept of Anxiety: “Anxiety is a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy” (Kierkegaard 1980, 42).

The Sickness unto Death. A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening by Anti-Climacus deals with an illness in the human spirit. The author calls this illness despair and there are two fundamental variants:

If a human self had itself established itself, then there could be only one form: not to will to be oneself, to will to do away with oneself, but there could not be the form: in despair to will to be oneself. This second formulation is specifically the expression for the complete dependence of the relation (of the self), the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation (Kierkegaard 1980b, 14).

So there is no doubt that in the last resort it is about humanity’s relationship to God. Man is, according to Anti-Climacus, a synthesis of several elements – the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal, freedom and necessity, and despair is a disparity in this synthesis, a synthesis that is originally also “from God’s hand.”

Fear and Trembling, Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio is one of Søren Kierkegaard’s most literary works. It thematicizes its concerns by means of several different discourses, including meditative “moods,” stories, a panegyric, clarifications, and problems treated contemplatively. The book deals with the “Knight of Faith,” Abraham, who had such a strong faith in God that he was willing to sacrifice his only son Isaac when God demanded it of him. The sacrifice of his son does not just appear gruesome; the background also makes it absurd. The Bible relates that Abraham and Sarah were childless until well into old age. Abraham was 100 years
old when God finally complied with his prayers and gave them a son. The story of Abraham and Isaac does end well since God lets the father keep his son anyhow, after he has shown himself willing to comply with God’s demand. The book elucidates the distinctive character of faith; Johannes de Silentio calls it “The movement of faith” together with the relationship between faith and ethics, and the relationship between the individual’s relations to God and obligations to fellow human beings. As an introduction, the author writes four different meditative versions of the story of Abraham on his way to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son. The four versions accentuate different implications of the extreme event. Then the author explains his concerns by means of three problemata: 1. Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical? 2. Is there an absolute duty to God? 3. Was it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his purpose from Sarah? from Eleazar? from Isaac? The title Fear and Trembling refers intertextually to Paul’s letter to the Philippians 2:12, which states that one must work out one’s salvation with fear and trembling.

In the following I shall attempt to read Fear and Trembling from the perspective of what it implies for Kierkegaard to have chosen emotions as his approach to some of his most important concerns as a philosopher. In the secondary literature, fear, trembling and anxiety are mostly analyzed as concepts without particular reference to the fact that it is actually a question of designations of fundamental human emotions. An illustration of this in Danish reception can be found in Joakim Garff’s thesis “Den Søvnløse,” [The Sleepless One] which has taken its title from Fear and Trembling. Here the affective aspect does not play any real role in the analysis of Kierkegaard’s work. The same hold true for Poul Erik Tøjner’s depiction in the 1995 article “Stilens tænker” from Kierkegaards æstetik [Kierkegaard’s Aesthetics] in which he analyzes Fear and Trembling, among others. Despite statements such as “Anxiety is the phenomenon that must be understood when one speaks of Abraham” (Tøjner 1995, 31), neither anxiety, fear or trembling, or for that matter, other affects are particularly involved in the analysis. The same is true of Garff and Jørgen Deh’s interpretation in the same book. On the other hand, Arne Grøn devotes a good deal of attention to both anxiety and despair in his dissertation Subjektivitet og negativitet: Kierkegaard (1997). Grøn’s work is primarily an analysis of The Sickness unto Death. But even though he directs attention to affects, it is the conceptual content in them that he analyzes – not the emotional implications. In this respect his analysis is representative for Kierkegaard research as a whole. Emotional or affective terms are in general dealt with as any other philosophical concepts. From Norwegian reception one can refer to two articles in Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift from respectively 2006 and 2007, wherein first Roe Fremstedal and then Marius Timmann Mjaaland discuss Fear
and Trembling. In both cases it is a question of philosophical and theological discussions of requisite concepts such as ethics, religion, fundamentalism and paternalism. The most interesting reception internationally in recent times is probably Emmanuel Levinas’ Kierkegaard critique in *Noms Propres* (1976) and Jacques Derrida’s discussion of both in *Donner la mort* (1995). Levinas advances a very direct and coarse critique of Kierkegaard’s view of the relationship between the religious and the ethical. Derrida attempts to deconstruct the direct opposition between the two, and between ethics and religion, by expanding on the ambiguity in the concept the others/ the other, who can be both God and another person.

Even in its critique of Kierkegaard concerning ethics and generality Lévinas’s thinking stays within the game – the play of difference and analogy – between the face of God and the face of my neighbor, between the infinitely other as God and the infinitely other as another human. (Derrida 2008, 83–84)

Derrida’s point is that the distinction between ethics and religion in Kierkegaard and Levinas’ meaning of the concepts cannot be supported.

But since Lévinas still wants to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and the “same” infinite alterity of every human, or of the other in general, then he cannot simply say something different from Kierkegaard either. Neither one nor the other can assure himself of a concept of the ethical and of the religious that is of consequence; and consequently they are especially unable to determine the limit between those two orders. Kierkegaard would have to admit, as Lévinas recalls, that ethics is also the order of and respect for absolute singularity, and not only that of the generality or of the repetition of the same. He can therefore no longer distinguish so conveniently between the ethical and the religious. But for his part, in taking into account absolute singularity, that is to say the absolute alterity obtaining in relations with another human, Lévinas is no longer able to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and that of every human: his ethics is already a religion. (Ibid. 84)

Both Levinas’ and Derrida’s reception of Kierkegaard are quite interesting with respect to the discussion of the meanings of the concepts of ethics and religion, but neither Levinas nor Derrida attach much importance to affective implications in *Fear and Trembling*.
However in my opinion there is something fundamentally characteristic in Kierkegaard’s thinking with his positioning of affects. He was a dogged opponent of Hegel and the entire notion of a system-philosophy. By giving emotions the position he does, Kierkegaard provides for the very dynamics and movement of his philosophy. Kierkegaard’s paradigmatic thinking is well known; he operates basically with three life stages: an aesthetic, an ethical and a religious. But the fact is that without movement between the stages, his own philosophy would largely have resembled a system-philosophy not so different from the one he criticized. And the movements are emotionally determined. Søren Kierkegaard’s thinking represents a kind of “affective turn” in philosophy. And yet; the emotionality in his writings is quite controlled and Biedermeier-like, especially if compared to the portrayals in Dostoevsky. So the topic for the following analysis is the central position of emotions in Søren Kierkegaard’s thinking, but also the muted character of these same emotions.

“THE SHUDDER OF THE IDEA”

On the way to the sacrificial site where Abraham clearly has the intention of killing his own son with his knife, the strongest expression of affect that Kierkegaard depicts in his hero is the following:

Abraham made everything ready for the sacrifice, calmly and gently, but when he turned away and drew the knife, Isaac saw that Abraham’s left hand was clenched in despair, that a shudder went through his whole body – but Abraham drew the knife. (Kierkegaard 1983, 14)

There is also another portrayal of affects in the mood-setting Exordium. It goes like this:

…but when Isaac saw Abraham’s face again, it had changed: his gaze was wild, his whole being was sheer terror. He seized Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground, and said, “Stupid boy, do you think I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you think it is God’s command? No, it is my desire.” (Ibid. 10)

This depiction is considerably more dramatic. But it is fake. Abraham is pretending, and displays a wild frenzy towards Isaac in the purpose of preserving his son’s faith in God, because “it is better that he believes me a monster than that he should lose faith in you” (11). Isaac’s reaction is as Abraham wished it to be, and this is probably the strongest expression of dread in Fear and Trembling:
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!” (10)

At the same time, of course, Abraham’s dissimulation intimates that God himself is a “monster,” and even if he attains what he had hoped with his son, Abraham’s deception implies that Isaac has no father, either in heaven or on earth. Isaac preserves the faith in a God who actually is a “monster” who has demanded his death, and he loses faith in his father who claims he desires to kill him.

Dissimulation is not the only characteristic of Abraham’s emotional reactions in the Exordium section. Concealment and silence play an important role. When a hand clenched in despair is the strongest expression of Abraham’s situation, it is obvious that we are confronted with a figure who does everything he can to control himself and control his feelings. Self control and concealment also characterize Isaac’s reaction in the fourth Exordium version:

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

It is Abraham himself who suffered a serious life loss in Exordium version number two:

From that day henceforth, Abraham was old; he could not forget that God had ordered him to do this. Isaac flourished as before, but Abraham’s eyes were darkened, and he saw joy no more. (12)

The four introductory versions of the story of Abraham function as empathetic meditations with the aim of having “witnessed that event,” when “Abraham rode with sorrow before him and Isaac beside him” (9). The Exordium is introduced by means of the story of a man who more or less became obsessed by Abraham’s situation, and almost basks in the “shudder of the idea” that the event arouses in him. “The shudder of the idea” is an appropriate expression on the part of the author, because in Fear and Trembling it is a matter of a distinctive Kierkegaardian combination of reflection and feeling – with a clear emphasis on feeling in preference to reason: “…his enthusiasm for it became greater and greater, and yet he could understand the story less and less” (ibid.)
SØREN KIERKEGAARD AS THE “AFFECTIVE TURN” IN PHILOSOPHY?

PHILOSOPHICAL SCRIPTS

The point of departure for Johannes de Silentio in the section “Preliminary Expectoration” is an old saying from Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians 3:10 that only he who works, receives bread. That is not how it happens in the real, external world, Silentio concludes. But in the world of the spirit, in contrast, he thinks this is valid. Then he formulates a central doctrine in which a series of dissimilar elements are positioned in relationship to each other:

It is different in the world of the spirit. Here an eternal divine order prevails. Here it does not rain on both the just and the unjust; here the sun does not shine on both good and evil. Here it holds true that only the one who works gets bread, that only the one who was in anxiety finds rest, that only the one who descends into the lower world rescues the beloved, that only the one who draws the knife gets Isaac (27).

The statement about anxiety, “only the one who was in anxiety finds rest,” is important for further treatment in this analysis. The idea of the emotions’ tendency or inclination to form combinations is completely decisive for the conception of Søren Kierkegaard as philosophy’s “affective turn.” It is a phenomenon that is described by many psychologists. Keith Oatley asserts that emotions must be seen in connection with motivations, and notes that “motivations combine easily” (Oatley 2004, 94). He claims also that “emotions that derive from the different kinds of motivation succeed each other, and when they do, they follow narrative sequences” (ibid.). A similar idea forms the basis for scripts theories, such as were introduced by Roger Schank and Robert Abelson, and pursued by Sylvan Tomkins. Both the theories about general scripts and individual life scripts are based on the assumption that emotions have a tendency to be entered into in fixed combinations and form sequences. Conceptions of scripts often refer to relatively trivial combinations, such as fear/flight for example, or to special individual and deviating connections. In Søren Kierkegaard there are conceptions about fixed, philosophical or existential combinations or scripts that emotions enter into. The assertion “only the one who was in anxiety finds rest” refers to both a temporal and a causal inclusion of an important emotion in a fixed combination or a essential script. Anxiety is not just an isolated feeling; it leads to something: namely, rest. It is actually the case that only the one who has experienced anxiety can find the Kierkegaardian rest. The script is not random and not individual, but is a part of a philosophical way of thinking about existence. Anxiety is an emotion, but it is also an element in a sequence that leads to existential rest.
With this background in the conception of a type of philosophical \textit{script}, it makes sense that Silentio makes use of the designation “movement” in connection with core phenomena in the book. “The movement of faith” is the most important, but it is seen in connection with “the movement of infinity” or “the movement of infinite resignation.” Faith and the character of Abraham seen as “the Father of Faith” or “the Knight of Faith” is the book’s main concern. But faith is not comprehended as a thing or a condition; faith is a “movement,” and preceding the movement of faith comes the infinite resignation or the movement of resignation.

Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith, for only in infinite resignation do I become conscious of my eternal validity, and only then can one speak of grasping existence by virtue of faith. (Kierkegaard 1983, 46).

Here too then, is found a fixed combination and a sequential order, a \textit{script}. It is relevant in this context to observe what Silentio writes about the role of emotions. For the author, a central postulate is that “movement” is set in play by the power of emotions – not by means of thought, reflection or logic:

This [to initiate movement] requires passion. Every movement of infinity is carried out through passion, and no reflection can produce a movement. This is the continual leap in existence that explains the movement, whereas mediation is a chimera, which in Hegel is supposed to explain everything and which is also the only thing he never has tried to explain (ibid. 42).

Here likely lies one of the explanations of the prioritization of the power of emotions in Søren Kierkegaard’s oeuvre, that is, the ubiquitous polemics against Hegel and Hegelian dialectics. Or perhaps it can be the other way around: Maybe the controversy is due to the underestimation of the power of emotional passion in the Hegelian system, as understood by Kierkegaard? In any case, in work after work it is a fundamental point for Kierkegaard to hammer in that the Hegelian logic with its “mediation” cannot lead anyone to where the Kierkegaardian “movements” can. The power of thought does not work, reflections provide no movement, dialectic phases do not lead forward. But \textit{that} is what passion does; emotions – fear and trembling and anxiety and despair. The polemics against Hegel also has its background in the fundamental disagreement about the movement or \textit{scripts’} endpoint. Indefatigably Kierkegaard makes fun of what he comprehends as Hegel’s disavowal of faith. Already in the Preface to \textit{Fear and Trembling}, he has Silentio write:
In our age, everyone is unwilling to stop with faith but goes further. It perhaps would be rash to ask where they are going, whereas it is a sign of urbanity and culture for me to assume that everyone has faith, since otherwise it certainly would be odd to speak of going further. It was different in those ancient days. Faith was then a task for a whole lifetime, because it was assumed that proficiency in believing is not acquired either in days or in weeks. (ibid., 7)

For Hegel, faith represents the “immediate” that is, the point of departure in a path towards an intellectually well-founded position: Faith is to be nullified, mediated. For Kierkegaard faith is the highest or the very terminus of “the movement.” There is no thought or reflection that can exceed or “nullify” faith. The Knight of Faith is the foremost hero in life. There is no movement that leads beyond faith. The sequences of script stop there, and one cannot arrive there by means of “mediation.” One can only arrive there by means of what Kierkegaard calls “the Leap.”

The Leap is a well-known element in Kierkegaard’s conceptual world. It is in direct contrast to the idea of mediation, transition or dialectics, as Kierkegaard understood it in Hegel. In Kierkegaard’s world of thought there is no continuous or gradually gliding transition into the realm of faith. Neither can one attain it by reasoning. The movement of faith can only be undertaken as a “Leap,” and then only “by virtue of the absurd.” In our context, the point is, as cited in the italicized quotation above, that “the Leap” has its basis in passion, that is, in emotionality. Jens Himmelstrup stresses this point in the following manner: “The Leap (...) has a passion, a passionate movement, Pathos, as a prerequisite” (Himmelstrup 1964, 191).

THE TRAGIC HERO AND THE KNIGHT OF FAITH

The two “movements” in Kierkegaard’s script, “the double movement,” form two sequences that follow each other in fixed order: “the movement of infinity” first, and then “the movement of faith.” The two movements are also linked to passion, as we have seen. In addition, the two sequences are tied to two different sets of emotions, so that an emotional script is also created. This is already implied in the section “Preliminary Expectoration” where “the infinite movement” or “the infinite resignation” is several times combined with pain, grief and tears, while it is said of “the Knight of Faith” that “What is omitted from Abraham’s story is the anxiety” (Kierkegaard 1983, 28), or pushed to extremes:

The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac – but precisely in this
contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is. (ibid. 30)

In the section “Problema I,” where precisely such a transgression of the ethical is discussed, Kierkegaard develops both the connection and the difference between the two “movements,” including the emotional contexts. The main problem in the section is to what extent there exists a “teleological suspension of the Ethical.” If not “the single individual as the individual is higher than the universal” then Abraham is a murderer, and the entire incentive to murder Isaac is a temptation. For the murder to be considered as a sacrifice, faith must take care of “this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal” (54, 55).

With the background of this approach to the problem, Kierkegaard turns to mythological and literary examples, and discusses the Greek Iphigenia, the Biblical Jephthah, and the Roman Brutus before Abraham. All of these stories deal with the murder or sacrifice of one’s own children. Kierkegaard establishes a fundamental distinction between the tragic hero and the Knight of Faith. The tragic hero remains within the ethical, and his emotional gamut is pain. Agamemnon could wish he were a “lowly man who dares to weep” (57). In the terrible moment, the tragic hero must “heroically have overcome the agony” (58). The object of his sacrifice cries and grieves over her fate, and the story arouses tears of compassion for their pain by those of us who hear it:

The tragic hero finishes his task at a specific moment in time, but as time passes he does what is no less significant: he visits the person encompassed by sorrow, who cannot breathe because of his anguished sighs, whose thoughts oppress him, heavy with tears. He appears to him, breaks the witchcraft of sorrow, loosens the bonds, evokes the tears, and the suffering one forgets his own sufferings in those of the tragic hero. (61)

But for the Knight of Faith the situation is different. One cannot weep for Abraham, claims Kierkegaard: “where is the soul so gone astray that it has the audacity to weep for Abraham? (61). His emotional gamut is different: “One cannot weep over Abraham. One approaches him with a horror religiosus, as Israel approached Mount Sinai.” Abraham’s story causes us to tremble with “anxiety…deference and horror” (ibid.). Not grief, nor pain – but anxiety: “the anxiety, the distress, the paradox” (63). In “Problema II,” which deals with the question “Is there an Absolute Duty to God?” the dimensions of anxiety, distress and the paradox are developed. The emotional range does not exist just in the relationship to the heinous-
ness of the act of murder, but is also connected to the loneliness of standing in an absolute relationship to God. To overrule the universal is more or less in principle uncommunicable when confronted with the universal:

But the distress and the anxiety in the paradox is that he, humanly speaking, is thoroughly incapable of making himself understandable. Only in the moment when his act is in absolute contradiction to his feelings, only then does he sacrifice Isaac, but the reality of his act is that by which he belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer. (74)

So the Knight of Faith is always in “absolute isolation.” Only a sectarian faith creates fellowship: “the spurious knight is sectarian.” The Knight of Faith is “… simply and solely the single individual without any connections” (79). De Silentio reinforces the contrast between the single individual and the universal by drawing in yet another intense emotion, that is, hate. He refers to the passage in the Bible from Luke 14:26, which states that anyone who wants to come to Christ must hate his father and mother, his wife, sister, brother and his own children. The author snorts at exegetical practices that weaken the drama in this statement, and “ends by slavering instead of terrifying” (73). Seen ethically, de Silentio says, the correct expression for what Abraham does is that “he hates Isaac” (74). From the perspective of faith, the action is otherwise, that is, a sacrifice, but it cannot be communicated in an understandable way. It is a paradox and it remains so in silence, as it enters into “the distress and anxiety in the paradox of faith” (75).

The approach to the problem of the incommunicable is developed further in “Problema III,” in several quite elaborate digressions which the author attempts to legitimize towards the end of the section when he again returns to Abraham. The primary point with respect to the “Incommensurable” in the relationship between the ethical and the individual is however already elucidated in the two preceding sections.

THE TAX COLLECTOR AND THE YOUNG LAD

And yet, de Silentio leaves open ever so slightly the possibility that the Knight of Faith is still found among us. In the chapter “Preliminary Expectoration” Johannes de Silentio undertakes an attempt at bringing his concept up to date. This is one of the most astonishing elements in de Silentio’s account. He tries to conceive of a contemporary Knight of Faith (Contemporaneous to 1843). How would a person appear who had overruled the ethical, who transgresses the universal? We must
envision a person who believes that the individual is superior to joint community, who “suspends” ethics and believes himself to stand in an absolute relationship with God.

Transplanted to our own time, the 2010s, it is not difficult to envision a fundamentalist of one or another type, a person who believes that God demands something groundbreaking, something unprecedented, of him. He wants to sacrifice something for God. Not a son, perhaps, but something that the whole world besides will regard as murderous and hateful, but in his eyes – as “the individual” – emerges as a sublime act in its expression of a faith devoted to God. It would not be difficult to fill in such a category with examples from everyday life in our own time. There is no doubt that one inevitably envisions a very dangerous person. There are many today who believe that they have an absolute relationship with their God, and who set themselves above the universal, the ethical and everything that belongs to community. It is difficult to feel any kind of admiration for this type of person, as de Silentio obviously does. On the other hand, it is easy to feel both anxiety, fear and trembling.

One of the crassest Kierkegaard critics precisely on this point is Emmanuel Levinas. He saw the approach to the problem according to the suspension of the ethical in his time:

It is Kierkegaard’s violence that shocks me. The manner of the strong and the violent, who fear neither scandal nor destruction, has become, since Kierkegaard and before Nietzsche, a manner of philosophy. One philosophizes with a hammer. In that permanent scandal, in that opposition to everything, I perceive by anticipation the echoes of certain cases of verbal violence that claimed to be schools of thought, and pure ones at that. I am thinking not only of National Socialism, but of all the sorts of thought it exalted. That harshness of Kierkegaard emerges at the exact moment when he “transcends ethics”. (Levinas 1996, 76)

There were also people in the nineteenth century who, in conformity with Kierkegaard, were occupied with what was “beyond good and evil.” When Nietzsche’s Zarathustra comes down from the mountain and proclaims the “Übermensch,” the one who has transcended “slave morality,” there is no doubt that this is a matter of a potentially dangerous person. One can also see an association with Ibsen’s Brand.19 He too has the notion that God has called him for a special mission. He

sacrifices both his son and his wife in order to follow his conviction. No ram or alternative sacrificial lamb turns up at the last moment. Both his child and wife die because Brand thinks he has an absolute relationship with God, and can transcend the universal.

Johannes de Silentio’s conception of the one who has transcended the universal is different. His attempt at updating is surprising for two reasons. In the first place, in his “Eulogy on Abraham,” and elsewhere, de Silentio takes care to elevate Abraham to such a high degree that no one ever could be imagined to resemble him. It can be said that in this way the phenomenon that he represents, faith, disappears out of the realm of reality. Faith becomes such a rarely conceivable phenomenon that it cannot in any case represent the phenomenon that one considers the fundamental element in the collective religious community. Faith emerges as something other than religion.

In the second place, de Silentio carries out some remarkable literary reversals when he is bringing his hero up to date. It begins, to be sure, with him imagining a man who suffers from ‘sleeplessness,’ who decides that he is going to do the same as Abraham. He wants to sacrifice the best thing he has for God; he will offer his son. The sleepless one gets the idea during the sermon on Sunday when the minister preaches about Abraham. “He goes home, he wants to do just as Abraham did, for the son, after all, is the best” (28). But then de Silentio immediately makes a peculiar choice. In the little story he has started about the sleepless man and the minister, he follows the minister and not the sleepless man in the continuation of the story. The sleepless man’s point of view is not represented in any manner that is reminiscent of the Abraham variations in the first chapter “Exordium.” We only learn that if he goes ahead and carries through with his intention, he will presumably be executed or sent to the insane asylum.

This is followed by several surprising shifts in the text. After having established that “the ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac,” (30) the entire ethical aspect disappears from the depiction of the project of revival. That someone who has transcended the ethical can be a dangerous man is no longer a part of de Silentio’s approach to the problem. The actualized Knight of Faith is a completely harmless, even invisible character. All fear and trembling disappear in a Biedermeier bourgeoisie and a dinner of roast lamb with vegetables (39). De Silentio at first establishes that he has never at any time seen an authentic example of a Knight of Faith. After that he has recourse to imagining a contemporary Knight of Faith: “As I said before, I have not found anyone like that; meanwhile, I may very well imagine him. Here he is” (38).
But de Silentio’s imaginative ability is conspicuously proper. The Knight of Faith, if he exists in 1843, is just like everyone else in the bourgeois society. He is invisible. He does nothing deviant. Quite the opposite; he is one of the crowd. He does not struggle with a desire to sacrifice anyone, and he does not appear to be concerned with ethical approaches to problems. He has apparently adapted himself completely to life in autocratic Denmark. One really has to ask: Where in the world has de Silentio gotten the idea that someone who has transcended the ethical is completely the same as everyone else, totally invisible?

De Silentio’s portrayal falls into two parts, literarily. The first depicts the Knight of Faith in everyday life, as he becomes the subject of a series of metaphorical comparisons. He resembles a tax collector, a philistine, a pen pusher, a mercenary, a postman, a restaurateur, a capitalist, a butcher, a reckless good-for-nothing, and finally a dancer (39–41). Only in the last characterization can he be recognized: He wavers for a moment when his foot touches the floor and “this wavering shows that [he] is an alien in the world” (41).

The second part of the portrayal consists of an exemplar, that is to say an elucidation in the form of “a specific case” (41). What is sensational about the exemplar is that it does not at all concern a person who is put to the test by God, nor about someone who transcends the ethical, nor about one who has an absolute relationship with God. The story of Abraham is replaced by a love story inspired by a folk song about a young lad who falls in love with a princess, but who cannot have her. What follows is a Søren Kierkegaard/Regine Olsen-like story about a man who has resigned his lover infinitely, but retains her “spiritually” by renouncing her:

The knight does not cancel his resignation, he keeps his love just as young as it was in the first moment; he never loses it simply because he has made the movement infinitely. (44)

De Silentio gives a detailed description of how one can carry out infinite resignation confronted with an unrealizable love relationship. The first movement, the movement of resignation, is something he can very well understand. But on the other hand, he cannot understand the second movement at all, the movement of faith, faith that one will after all “get her – that is, by virtue of the absurd, …” (46).

To a certain extent, the exemplar corroborates the rest of the work: The two movements follow each other as in a script. The one presupposes the other. One can be understood with reason, the other cannot. It is paradoxical and absurd.

But emotionally de Silentio’s updating project is remarkable because of his reversals. The emotions involved partly confirm the rest of the work. The two
movements do not only appear in a determined order; they are, as we already have heard, causally related to each other. Infinite resignation is the category of melancholy, grief and pain. But the movement of faith restores joy, joy in life, with “finitude.” Only he who has executed the one movement can sacrifice Isaac, but then all future joy is lost forever: “Now all is lost, God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and along with him all my joy…” (35):

What was the easiest for Abraham would have been difficult for me – once again to be happy in Isaac! – for he who with all the infinity of his soul, *proprio motu et propriis auspiciis* [of his own accord and on his own responsibility], has made the infinite movement and cannot do more, he keeps Isaac only with pain. (ibid.)

Abraham, on the other hand, carries out the second movement, and joy is restored to him: “… his really fervent joy on receiving Isaac…” (36–37). The Knight of Faith recaptures “finitude” by virtue of the absurd, and thereby also joy:

He finds pleasure in everything, takes part in everything, and every time one sees him participating in something particular, he does it with an assiduousness that marks the worldly man who is attached to such things. (39)

The two movements and the two emotional registers are interrelated, and create – as already demonstrated – a sequence:

He drains the deep sadness of life in infinite resignation, he knows the blessedness of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, the most precious thing in the world, and yet the finite tastes just as good to him as to one who never knew anything higher, because his remaining in finitude would have no trace of a timorous, anxious routine, and yet he has this security that makes him delight in it as if finitude were the surest thing of all. (40)

So far, so good, one could say. But the entire updating project in “Preliminary Expectoration” begins, as we know, in a different emotional register: “only the one who was in anxiety finds rest.” De Silentio vigorously polemicizes against making the story of Abraham commonplace. The story has the property of always being “magnificent,” no matter how poorly it is understood. But when de Silentio pounces on the minister and his Sunday sermon instead of following the point of view of the sleepless man, it is precisely because he thinks the minister spoke in
uninspired and generalizing terms about Abraham. De Silentio has no doubt about what the error consisted of: “What is omitted from Abraham’s story is the anxiety” (28). But what is noteworthy in this context is that this is precisely the same thing de Silentio does in his project of updating. Whether it be the tax collector, the philistine, the pen pusher or the mercenary – they are all depicted without anxiety. The same is true of the young suitor who falls in love with his princess. Of course it is sad that he cannot have her, but he does not experience anxiety. None of the examples equate with the title of the work: Here the two movements are actualized, but without fear and without trembling.

This transition gives an excellent opportunity to discuss the meaning of the emotions in Fear and Trembling, but the example also invites a more general discussion about the relationship between story and emotion, that is to say, the fundamental elements in an affective narratology. For this discussion, I will once again have recourse to some points of view from Patrick Colm Hogan’s book Affective Narratology. In several instances in the book, Hogan treats a story’s different elements, classified by extent and distinctive quality, from work to story, episode, event and incident. All of these components are found both in literary works and in what Monika Fludernik calls a “natural narratology” – except for work. Work is a literary phenomenon, and may not have a “precise ‘natural’ counterpart,” Hogan claims (Hogan 2011, 70). The story of Abraham can hardly be called a work by any reasonable standard meaning of the concept. But we certainly can call it a story. What de Silentio has done with the story is to classify it analytically into two event sequences which he designates as two movements, the movement of resignation and the movement of faith. He then discusses and elaborates on these existentially and philosophically. The project of updating is a part of the expanded examination. De Silentio disregards the historical distance, among other things, because he is more interested in the existential distance that Abraham’s faith represents.

Here I believe it is relevant to draw in what Hogan writes about the relationship between such sequences and the story itself: “It may seem at first that a story is just a sequence of episodes. But clearly this is not the case…” (ibid.). According to Hogan, two additional factors are necessary in order for sequences of events and episodes to become a story. The first is causality, the second is emotional experience:

So, this suggests that proximity in story space is a function of several factors. One is causal relatability. Causal relatability includes such factors as spatial and temporal contiguity. Spatially and temporally distant events may cause one another. However, temporal or spatial proximity makes us more inclined
to interpret events as causally related. A second factor is emotional relatability. Two events or episodes are closer, more readily combined into a story structure, if they contribute to a single emotional experience. (72)

I have mentioned several times how de Silentio stresses consecutive order and causality between the two movements. Only the one who has already carried out the movement of resignation can realize the movement of faith. De Silentio’s analytical sequencing of the story accordingly maintains an important factor in the relationship between events, episodes and story. But, as Hogan indicates:

In short, we have something like “preference rules” here. Two events or episodes are distant in story space if they are both causally and emotionally unrelated. They are closer in story space if they are causally or emotionally relatable. They are closest in story space if they are both causally and emotionally related.

I should note that emotional relatability does not necessarily mean contributing to the same emotion. It means contributing to the same emotional experience, usually as construed from some concluding point. (ibid.)

To me it appears that the expanded treatment of the sequences in the story, especially the section on updating, breaks the principle that components should be “emotionally related” or contribute to “a single emotional experience” in order to be part of a story. In other words: de Silentio has sequenced the story in such a way that the basic connection is lost. The most important, even the most decisive emotional experience in the story – “and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is” – Anxiety, has disappeared from the sequences (30). De Silentio has fallen for the minister’s trap; he has made Abraham’s story commonplace. The narratives of the young lover, the tax collector and the philistine can perhaps still be moving, but they do not arouse Fear and Trembling. They do not contribute to “the same emotional experience” (Hogan 2011, 72). There is reason to be reminded of Hogan’s distinction here: It is not necessarily about “the same emotion,” but rather “the same emotional experience.” In de Silentio’s portrayal this means that the emotional discrepancy manifests itself whether we focus on the represented figures in the text or on the experience of the readers. Neither the young lad or the reader recoils in anxiety or fear and trembling.

In my opinion the emotional element does not just function here as a critical annotation to de Silentio’s project of updating. In line with Hogan’s viewpoints I believe we are probably confronted with a phenomenon that can be generalized, that is to say, it should be included in a theory of affective narratology. The affective or emotional aspect of a narrative belongs to its fundamental, integral character. Being emotionally charged is not a colorful effect that is superimposed on a more fundamental narratological hallmark. The affective aspect is basic in the sense that it should be included as a standard element in a valid narratological analysis. When de Silentio subtracts anxiety, he is telling a different story.

PASSION AS THE NEW UNIVERSAL

When we have come as far as the “Epilogue,” it is interesting to call attention to the establishment of a new category for the universal – perhaps not considered as such from the author’s side, but completely in line with my analysis with respect to the emphasis on the emotional. It is apparent that in the course of his representation, de Silentio has happened to give “passion” a position as an alternative category for the universal. Passion is namely nothing less than the “essentially human” (Kierkegaard 1983, 121). This depiction is foreshadowed throughout the entire book, generally by the stress the author places on emotions and passions, and especially with utterances about passion as humanity’s essential commonality, as for example here at the conclusion of “Problema I”: “for that which unites all human life is passion,” and, of course, the author naturally adds: “faith is a passion” (67). In other places the point of view is inserted in passing, in the form of subordinate clauses: “I shall not review here the human distinction, either to love or to hate, not because I have so much against it, for at least it is passionate, …” (73). In the context it concerns a point that is not relevant, but the author believes that it is appropriate to present his general concern that if it is passionate, he has nothing against it, just because it is passionate. In the “Epilogue” all is drawn in and “passion” becomes the “essentially human.” De Silentio’s conclusion namely deals with the fact that when it comes down to the fundamental condition in existence, each generation must start anew, from the beginning:

Whatever one generation learns from another, no generation learns the essentially human from a previous one. In this respect, each generation begins prim- itively, has no task other than what each previous generation had, nor does it advance further, insofar as the previous generations did not betray the task and
deceive themselves. The essentially human is passion, in which one generation perfectly understands another and understands itself. (121)

Despite a constant bombardment from de Silentio’s side against the universal understood as the ethical, the universal has survived the portrayal and been resurrected as the “Passionate.” This should confirm the affects and emotions’ position in Søren Kierkegaard’s mode of thought. After the depiction in Fear and Trembling, it is naturally not surprising that de Silentio believes “Faith is the highest passion in a person” (122). At the same time, he has made faith into something so rare, unattainable and beyond any description and any fellowship that it is difficult to imagine any other example at all than the one about Abraham. De Silentio’s concern has likely been to elevate faith, make it the last station in the existential script, but in reality he can have had the misfortune of eradicating it among common people. Perhaps it can then be a consolation to belong among the passionate who have a part in the “essentially human.”