

# Abraham – Knight of Faith or Counterfeit?

Abraham Figures in Kierkegaard,  
Derrida, and Kafka

*Gitte Wernaa Butin*

## 1. Preface An Other Abraham

A midrash<sup>1</sup> recounts how Abraham entered his father Tera's idol-making business in Ur and smashed the idols except one, in whose hand Abraham placed a stick. Upon his return Tera questioned Abraham about the occurrence, whereupon Abraham reported that the most powerful of the idols had destroyed the others. Tera cried out, »how could that possibly happen?« How indeed could these dissimulated gods behave like the 'real thing'? An idol cannot smash idols. Or can it? Tera's commitment to idolatry deconstructed itself – with some help from Abraham – because Tera's perception of the idol was undermined by the ironical exposure of the logic of the counterfeit gods. Does Abraham's gesture of exposing the pretensions of what parades as the 'real,' an exposure carried out by means of indirect and insidious subversion, entitle us to consider him a deconstructionist?

In the Western religious tradition, Abraham is often elevated to the role of the exemplary believer because he is regarded as either having the right relation to, or being, the 'real thing.' Throughout history the 'real' has gone through innumerable linguistic metamorphoses, ranging from the True, the Good, the One, essence, foundation, Being, to God; a common characteristic of these expressions is a postulate of the existence of something non-dissimulated. Yet as Abraham's efforts of exposing idolatry demonstrate, the origin of the 'real thing' is shrouded in dissimula-

tion even as it struggles to disentangle itself from counterfeits. Abraham's relation to the idolatrous dissimulation that pretended to be the 'real' god was one of exposing through veiling, and veiling through exposing; of speaking through being silent and being silent through speaking. This de(con)struction of idolatry became Abraham's first step on the path of an exodus towards the wholly other.

In this paper we will join Abraham – specifically in the journeys and transformations he has undertaken in the writings of Kierkegaard, Derrida, and Kafka. Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* has often been read as the paradigmatic account of the authentic relation between religious subjectivity and radical otherness. Because Abraham relates absolutely to the absolute he becomes the embodiment of authentic religious subjectivity. I will argue that Kafka and Derrida both affirm and challenge such a reading, transforming rather than dispensing with the Abraham-figure set forth by Kierkegaard. Their metamorphoses of Abraham are premised on the view that the 'real thing' is always immersed in the play of dissimulation.

I will show that Kafka's and Derrida's positions are already anticipated by *Fear and Trembling* in its portrayal of the relation between the knight of faith, Abraham, and his 'supplement', the narrating pseudonym Johannes *de silentio*. Despite presumably being a counterfeit in regard to religious existence, *de silentio* nevertheless aims at a certain truth by his 'method' of, what I will call, indeterminate revocation. This kind of revocation – also practiced by Kafka and Derrida – proceeds through a series of reversals, whereby attempts at securing a definite, objective truth, or in other words the 'real thing,' are defied. The impossibility of pinpointing the end point of the reversals makes this kind of revocation indeterminate. The reversals as well as the indeterminacy allow this literary strategy to be a suitable starting point for exploring the relation between dissimulation and truth.

## 2. Kierkegaard's Abraham The Knight of Faith

The Abraham, who on God's command set out to sacrifice his beloved son, is the 'real thing.' As John Caputo's puts it in his *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*:

Abraham is the real thing. When confronted by the demand of the *tout autre* [wholly other], Abraham responded without a moment's hesitation, without expecting any payback (...). That was a gift if there ever were one. The *akedah* [binding of Isaac] was absolute, unconditional, absolutely surprising and unconditionally giving. In that gift-giving moment (...) Abraham tore reason and the circle of time to shreds.<sup>2</sup>

According to Caputo, Abraham is the 'real thing' not because he is a perfect reproduction of the True, the Good, etc.; rather, it is his disturbance of the closure that sanctifies him. But Abraham is not the only disruptive element. In *Fear and Trembling*, the Kierkegaardian pseudonym Johannes *de silentio* sets out to attack Christendom's dissimulation of Christianity by raising the price of faith sky-high, in fact so high that faith marks an exit from all economy. Often *Fear and Trembling* is read as a call to imitate the Abrahamic paradoxical double-movement of infinite resignation and of faith. Yet the supposed advocate of this move is a writer, Johannes *de silentio*, a »supplementary clerk« (*FT* 7; *SV*1, 3, 59)<sup>3</sup> who characterizes himself as a »shrewd fellow« (*FT* 32; *SV*1, 3, 84). Johannes *de silentio* can only admire Abraham, he cannot and will not emulate him, and thus he distinctly separates himself from any imitation. This textual move should make the reader hesitate in claiming that Abraham is a paradigm ready-made for appropriation. Abraham is rather, at least initially, the test case for what a truthful relation to God is. Functioning in this way, Abraham reveals that no one crying »I have faith and am ready to go beyond it« really has faith. Surprisingly, Johannes *de silentio* emerges as a more immediate 'role-model', considering that he is honest enough in estimating the price of faith and, upon finding it too high, admits that he does not have faith.<sup>4</sup>

That Johannes *de silentio* takes precedence over Abraham in respect to being a 'role-model' parallels the fact that the movement of infinite resignation must precede the paradoxical movement of faith. Abraham is the 'knight of faith' by virtue of making both movements: he resigns infinitely in regard to the imminent loss of Isaac, yet in the very same moment he believes, by virtue of the 'absurd,' that he will get Isaac back *in this life*. The 'absurdity' consists in going beyond human calculation, in believing that for God all things are possible (*FT* 46; *SV*1, 3, 97). The absurd is not »the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen« (*ibid.*); these terms remain within the confines of calculation – nothing hinders the occurrence of the unexpected. Infinite resignation is far from a com-

mon phenomenon, it may very well be the improbable yet it still amounts to accepting the terms of economy, economy meaning the logic of the probable and the expected. The absurd, on the other hand, may be compared to the impossible, to that which transgresses calculation. This impossibility functions as a condition of possibility: that for God all things are possible becomes the condition of faith for Abraham. Hence the absurd is not the result, it is not the surprising survival of Isaac; rather the absurd is what enables Abraham to make the double-movement. This paradoxical faith believes in something absolutely other (happening).

To give to God expecting to receive a return on the investment is nothing but idolatry in so far as such a gesture inscribes God's otherness into human calculation. So why does Abraham give, give the gift of death to Isaac as a gift to God? For Abraham, 'why' is a non-question. Even if it were still a question, he could not answer because entering the sphere of the absurd renders Abraham absolutely incommensurable with the probable, the foreseeable, the expected – the same.

*Fear and Trembling* has been criticized<sup>5</sup> for being extreme in its »teleological suspension of the ethical.« The extreme position contends that what ethically speaking is murder becomes, from a religious point of view, a sacrifice. Defending Abraham's intended sacrifice/murder by pointing to its being commanded by the absolutely Other is simply no defense, it is non-sense. The absurd cannot be translated into the rationality of the ethical sphere. The ethical sphere is expressed in sameness and transparency: the same rules apply to everybody, nobody can hide, nothing is hidden. An ethical individual is a person who »produces a trim, clean, and, as far as possible, faultless edition of himself, readable by all« (*FT* 76; *SVI*, 3, 124). The ethical invites disclosure meaning that each and every individual can 'translate' herself and her reasons into language. This 'translation' is a re-presenting that avoids contamination by the other. It is trim. Clean. Readable. Non-Abrahamic.

Even if Abraham could represent his case he could not make himself understandable. When spoken to he responds by speaking silence. Abraham answers Isaac's question concerning the sacrificial lamb with the non-answer: »God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.« This is not an untruth because in making the movement of faith, Abraham believes that this is possible. On the other hand, Abraham must keep the secret from Isaac because he cannot speak. Yet in an even deeper sense the secret is a secret because Abraham truly does not know. God

has not translated anything, has not provided any readable edition. God is absolutely Other. Abraham's response to Isaac is ironic; it speaks but remains silent in so far as it says nothing.

Abraham is not the only one who speaks silence in *Fear and Trembling*. Johannes *de silentio* – Johannes *of* silence, Johannes *about* silence. As has been pointed out by Joakim Garff in his *The Insomniac*,<sup>6</sup> both titles are equally proper: Johannes speaks about silence, Abraham's silence, yet Johannes is also »of Silence,« i.e. his speaking is silence. At first glance, a lot of speaking is going on. Johannes constantly reminds us that he cannot understand Abraham – only to explain in the very next moment what it is that he cannot understand. Another gesture of revocation is Johannes' infinite admiration for Abraham juxtaposed with his declaration that such admiration is inappropriate. Or is Johannes only explaining that he cannot explain? Johannes *de silentio* is certainly not the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* who asserted: »Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent«<sup>7</sup> – whereupon he did not say any more (at least in the *Tractatus*). Johannes speaks and speaks of the terror, the anxiety, the fear and the trembling involved in sacrificing Isaac and in attempting to understand Abraham. Despite the asserted incomprehensibility of Abraham, Johannes nevertheless finally admits that: »I, for my part, perhaps can understand Abraham« (*FT* 119f.; *SV1*, 3, 165) – but please note the disclaimer: »but I also realize that I do not have the courage to speak in this way« (*ibid.*). Yet Johannes does speak.

Perhaps Johannes should be renamed: Johannes *de simulation* because his speaking is a dissimulation of speaking and thus results in a certain silence. Despite all the talking, the reader is no more knowledgeable at the end of the text. If she has been initiated into fear and trembling then it is primarily due to her own 'passion.'<sup>8</sup> The text is nothing but a catalyst. Yet it is in refusing to represent a readable, pre-digested model, ready-made for easy appropriation, that the text forces the reader into her own secrecy, perhaps to the point where she exhausts the movement of infinite resignation, perhaps 'only' to the point where she admits that her religiousness was not the 'real thing.'

*Fear and Trembling* is *about* the non-representable – God as absolute Other, Abraham as being in absolute secrecy. It is also *of* the non-representable: it does not represent its 'theme' of the limitations of representation – or perhaps it does in so far as it does not represent it. But non-representational 'representation' is only possible by means of dissimulation, of a speaking that is not speaking. The secret is kept through an ex-

posure. As Derrida says: »Speaking in order not to say anything is always the best technique for keeping a secret.«<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Derrida's Abraham The Logic of Dissimulation

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida transfigures the secrecy and exceptionality of Kierkegaard's Abraham into the seemingly disclosed responsibility for the Other in the shibboleth: »*tout autre est tout autre*« [every other is every bit other (or: wholly other)]. I will argue that Derrida's transfiguration of Kierkegaard's knight of faith into a response to alterity passes through the 'logic' of dissimulation; this response simultaneously retains the unconditionally of Abraham's act and disseminates his absolute relation to the absolute.

For Derrida, dissimulation is intertwined with secrecy; moreover, dissimulation is a highly reflexive and equivocal matter, leaving its traces in the play between so-called 'authentic dissimulation' and 'inauthentic dissimulation.'<sup>10</sup> To talk about authenticity in the context of dissimulation seems highly ironical given that dissimulation usually is defined as the non-authentic. Yet in pairing authenticity and dissimulation, Derrida is not just reversing the usual valorization of these terms; he is challenging us with infinite reversals, or what I call indeterminate revocation, as being the only attainable 'truth'. Derrida states:

However, if one holds to the logic of (inauthentic) dissimulation that dissimulates (authentic) dissimulation by means of the simple gesture of exposing or exhibiting it (...) then one has here an example of a logic of secrecy. It is never better kept than in being exposed. Dissimulation is never better dissimulated than by means of this particular kind of dissimulation that consists in making a show of exposing it, unveiling it, laying it bare.<sup>11</sup>

Derrida seems to suggest that authentic dissimulation is a dissimulation that acknowledges that it is dissimulation. It is *authentic* because it admits that it is not the 'real thing.' While this gesture of conceding appears to be an exposure, the result of such an 'unveiling' is a veiling. Derrida says: »Authentic mystery must *remain* mysterious, and we should approach it

only by letting it be what it is in truth – veiled, withdrawn, dissimulated.«<sup>12</sup>

The mission of inauthentic dissimulation is one of unmasking and exposing (authentic) dissimulation as being dissimulation. By implication, this unmasking aims at that which is behind the mask, i.e. the ‘real thing.’ In the attempt to unmask, inauthentic dissimulation denies its own inscription in dissimulation and assumes a privileged access to reality. According to Derrida’s position, unmasking cannot and indeed should not be imposed on the ‘face’ from the outside. That being said, unmasking from the inside is precluded because the ‘face behind the mask’ remains in secret; consequently, unmasking cannot take place at all. Denying its inscription in dissimulation is precisely what makes this form of dissimulation inauthentic, yet more significantly the denial is counterproductive because the intended exposure preserves that which it meant to expose. Inauthentic dissimulation has entered, unwillingly, unknowingly, into the service of authentic dissimulation. Inauthentic and authentic dissimulation are beginning to become indistinguishable; their borders are deconstructing.

Deconstruction is not destruction; rather deconstruction, according to Caputo, »bends all its efforts to stretch beyond (...) boundaries, to transgress (...) confines, to interrupt and disjoin (...) gathering.«<sup>13</sup> In the view of deconstruction,<sup>14</sup> an attempt to gather something into a totality is futile because stabilizing meaning and trying to determine what is real, apart from the violence such a move commits, produces an effect opposite of the desired: the (real) ‘thing’ inevitably slips away.<sup>15</sup> Nor can deconstruction procure the ‘real’. In his ‘manifesto’ of deconstruction, *Of Grammatology*, Derrida calls attention to deconstruction’s inhabiting of the structures it intends to subvert. Yet this inhabiting is a double-edged sword: it allows insidious dismantling but it also makes deconstruction fall prey to its own work.<sup>16</sup> Deconstruction must work in, and on the terms of, the structure inviting deconstruction; moreover, it should constantly be revisiting its obligation to not exempt itself from itself: deconstruction should be auto-deconstruction. Or said otherwise, dissimulation must acknowledge that it can never attain to the ‘real thing.’ Deconstruction cannot and indeed does not wish to transcend the disrupted structure, yet by disturbing the structure deconstruction aims at altering it in order to make it into a perhaps more hospitable habitat. Deconstruction appears to create tremors in structures, rather than erect them; or to revoke statements rather than to assert them.

Derrida's 'logic' of dissimulation does indeed perform an exemplary gesture of indeterminate revocation in so far as dissimulation revokes itself indefinitely. Dissimulation is no longer the anti-thesis of 'the real;' now the opposition – if there is any – is between dissimulation and dissimulation, their distinctive characteristics slowly dissolving. Inauthentic dissimulation serves authentic dissimulation by veiling it and authentic dissimulation exposes its own inadequacy, thus performing the task of inauthentic dissimulation. The binary opposition has been deconstructed from the inside. Moreover, so has the 'double-edged' sword of deconstruction in so far as it has become impossible to discern which sort of dissimulation is deconstructing which. All attempts at once and for all settling the 'real' has been unsettled. The 'real' has been reduced to the confession that we are caught in dissimulation, pretending to be not dissimulating. An awareness of the penetrating pervasiveness of dissimulation seems to be the only trace of authenticity left – and it remains authentic only in so far as it is intertwined with dissimulation. The 'real' has been reduced to the honesty of admitting one's dissimulation.

Despite this 'reduction' deconstruction remains on a 'quest.' According to Caputo deconstruction is: »the relentless pursuit of the impossible, which means, of things whose possibility is sustained by their impossibility, of things which, instead of being wiped out by their impossibility, are actually nourished and fed by it.«<sup>17</sup> The deconstructive breach in the structure creates an aperture through which – perhaps – the impossible will pass. Will it be a dissimulation acknowledging the impossibility of the 'real thing'? What will come is a secret, a secret of otherness, an other which only comes in secret. And keeps others in secret. Like God did with Abraham, and Abraham did with Isaac.

Dissimulation, indeterminate revocation, and secrecy echo disturbingly in Derrida's appropriation of *Fear and Trembling's* notion of absolute otherness. In Johannes *de silentio's* account, God is absolutely Other and Abraham enters this realm to the effect that he cannot communicate. Over against this Derrida asserts: »every other (one) is every (bit) other.«<sup>18</sup> 'God' has become the name of the wholly other *human being* that is as secret and transcendent as is the god of *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>19</sup> This human other demands absolutely, demands absolute respect as other – just as the god of *Fear and Trembling* did. Fulfilling the requirement of respecting the otherness of the other seems as impossible as being the knight of faith.

Is Derrida's shibboleth a tautology or a radical heterology? Is it dis-



simulation or real respect for otherness? Is this respect for otherness even possible? Both *de silentio* and Derrida use the an-economical, the Abrahamitic, not primarily as a model inviting imitation but as a way of raising the price of otherness. Both want us to admit that our dissimulation – of Christianity or of responsibility – is exactly that: dissimulation.

Does the Abrahamitic »every other (one) is every (bit) other« follow the 'logic' of (authentic) dissimulation? As dissimulation deconstructs the binaries inscribed in representation, Derrida's shibboleth overturns such binaries as ethics/religion, and otherness of God/otherness of human beings. In positing a »teleological suspension of the ethical« Johannes *de silentio* postulates the difference between the singularity of the religious and the universality of responsibility, but this distinction breaks down in »every other (one) is every (bit) other.« According to Derrida's statement we are responsible to each other in her/his singularity; the scope of the demand is universal while the enactment of the responsibility happens on a singular basis.

Derrida's Abrahamitic approach to otherness also seems to challenge the inability of the knight of faith to communicate about his quandary. It appears that with »every other (one) is every (bit) other« everything is in plain view. Has Derrida retained from Kierkegaard only the extreme, the absolute, and the unconditional – relinquishing on the fear and trembling associated with the incommunicado of Abraham? Considering that Derrida's phrase is situated in a text dealing with secrecy and dissimulation, caution must be exerted in determining whether we are to understand »every other (one) is every (bit) other« as an exposure of the radical 'nature' of otherness, or as a veiling of otherness by means of exposure. If the latter is the case, then Derrida is doing something very Kierkegaardian, or at least something *à la* Johannes *de silentio*. Even if Derrida's dissemination of Abraham's absolute relation to the absolute is a dissimulation of Kierkegaard's Abraham, the Abrahamitic is no less 'real.'

To some extent the whole question of dissimulation is not foreign to Kierkegaard because he himself anticipates a sort of authentic dissimulation in the figure of Johannes *de silentio*. Whereas Abraham cannot communicate and hence is »speaking silence,« Johannes *de silentio* speaks while claiming that he cannot. In a certain sense he is speaking the truth, because the core of Abraham's secret cannot be exposed; still the best way to keep the secret is to talk about it. Thus Johannes *de silentio*, the dissimulating admirer of the 'real thing,' veils the secret through exposure. The indeterminate oscillation between the dissimulated and the

non-dissimulated is particularly at play in the ‘fact’ that Johannes *de silentio*’s dissimulation becomes the proper mode of relating to the ‘real thing’ Abraham. Johannes *de silentio*’s authentic dissimulation is the ‘real thing’ over against the inauthentic (Hegelian) counterfeits that claim to have grasped the ‘real thing’ and are now ready to go beyond faith. Perhaps a trace of Johannes *de silentio*’s ambiguous move may be found in Derrida’s dissimulation of Kierkegaard’s Abraham into the equally demanding relationship with alterity embodied in »every other (one) is every (bit) other.« Is Derrida enacting authentic or inauthentic dissimulation? That is a secret.

#### 4. Kafka’s Abraham Fear, Trembling, and Dissimulation

Secrecy, despair, anxiety, broken wedding engagements, indeterminate revocation – and Abraham: these are points of convergence between Kierkegaard and Kafka. Indeed, Kafka metamorphoses Abraham into a gigantic – not insect – but example of revocation. Considering Kafka’s intense occupation with transfiguring Kierkegaard’s Abraham characters, I suggest reading Kafka’s novel *The Castle* as an, among other things, elaborate ironic undermining of Abraham, the knight of the ‘real’ faith. I argue that in the protagonist’s, K.’s, struggle for being or becoming the elect of the castle, Kafka displays the fear and trembling of a pretender.

Indeterminate revocation is, according to my definition, a reversal that in doing something simultaneously undoes it, thereby sending the quest for ‘meaning’ and for the ‘real’ spiraling. As such, indeterminate revocation is an attack on the »will to coherence.«<sup>20</sup> Or said otherwise by the Kierkegaardian pseudonym, Johannes Climacus: »[W]hat I write contains the notice that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked« (*CUP* 619; *SV1*, 7, 539).<sup>21</sup> To revoke a book is not the same as not having written it. Unsayng the said is not arriving at a point previous to the said. Nor is unsaying, in Kafka’s version, a means of reinstating the unsaid in the privileged position of the said. Unsayng is, for Kafka, continuing to unsay – indefinitely. In his work *Franz Kafka. The Necessity of Form*, Stanley Corngold describes Kafka’s method of revocation, which he calls »chiastic recursion,« as follows:

As an interpretation proceeding via reversal, it never lands on a primary sense: it does not land at all (...) what is true is neither the assertion achieved by reversal which privileges the Other nor the 'normal' wisdom-sentence which privileges the self but rather the principle of recursion, admitting a potentially infinite series of reversals.<sup>22</sup>

For Kafka, unsaying the identity of Abraham, knight of faith, means challenging the possibility of accessing absolute truth.

Kafka's initial sympathetic attraction to Kierkegaard's writings gives way in 1918 to a radical reworking of the understanding of the exceptional existence, embodied for Kafka in the figure of Abraham. In Kafka's view, Kierkegaard's Abraham represents solipsism and the inability to deal with everyday life. In his parodies, Kafka retains the very Abrahamic qualities of fear and trembling yet relinquishes the 'comfort', which Abraham, in Kafka's view, was supplied with through an unquestioning faith.

Inspired by reading Kierkegaard, Kafka explores the Abraham figure through transfigurations. Kafka hollows out the exceptional character in the depressing image of Abraham as an old man, who, having true faith in God's demand, nevertheless doubts his own election. This Abraham fears being transformed into Don Quixote. Putting a further spin on this version, Kafka compares Abraham's situation to that of the worst student who during the graduation ceremony believes that his name is called for the honor of 'student of the year.' The shame and anxiety involved in the student's hearing mistake is, however, increased in the even more debasing possibility of actually being called.<sup>23</sup> Election is punishment.

Spiritualizing Abraham is, for Kafka, denying the horror and anxiety of election. While Kafka's critique of Kierkegaard's Abraham aims primarily at subverting the alienating exceptionality of Abraham, it by implication challenges the guarantor of this election, God. In Kafka's version, God is no venerable absolute paradox but a scandalous version of transcendence that toys with people as if they were objects.

*Fear and Trembling* and *The Castle* were first linked by M. Brod in his postscript to the first edition of *The Castle*. Brod saw the »Sortini episode,«<sup>24</sup> in which a castle official, named Sortini, commands a young girl, Amalia, to sacrifice her virtue, as a parallel to Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*. Thus *The Castle* is interpreted as repeating *Fear and Trembling's* »teleological suspension of the ethical.« Brod's less than subtle intention behind this interpretation was to secure a positive theological understanding of the novel in general and the image of the castle in particular

(and hence of the person Franz Kafka). This interpretation has naturally been strongly challenged<sup>25</sup> considering how at odds it is with Kafka's very skeptical view of religiousness in general. On the other hand, outright rejection of the possibility that *The Castle* on some level addresses Kierkegaard's work seems to be a very superficial and rash move, which does not render full justice to Kafka's fictional occupation with Kierkegaard and 'his' Abraham. Leaving aside the fact that I believe Amalia could be interpreted in the light of *Fear and Trembling* (though not in accordance with Brod's intentions but rather as yet another parody of Kierkegaard's Abraham) I suggest reading *The Castle* as being, among other things,<sup>26</sup> a palimpsest of *Fear and Trembling*.

*The Castle* displays the quest of the protagonist K. in gaining access to the impenetrable castle, which is the residence of numerous equally inaccessible castle officials. The lives of these officials are, ironically, exhausted in an obscure and inconsequential occupation with the small village at the foot of the castle mountain. K. claims to have been called by the castle to survey the land; however, upon his arrival in the village K. learns of his being *persona non grata* to the castle as well as to the village. Disregarding and defying this position, K. sets out to gain acceptance. Continual rejection exhausts K. to the point where the original quest for the (transcendence of the) castle is reduced to a search for mundane survival.<sup>27</sup>

Is K. really called by the castle to perform land surveying, i.e. could he be an Abraham surveying the grounds of faith? Few questions have been as inviting and yet as impossible to settle. The reader is only presented with K.'s own claim that the castle called him as land surveyor, but the claim seems partially undermined by the fact that K. is unsure of whether the castle exists. Only one thing emerges as certain: K. is a dissimulator (probably of the inauthentic kind given his unwillingness to admit his pretense). Either he pretends being called or he pretends being unaware of the existence of the castle. The castle's response to K.'s claim is at first outright rejection, yet for some reason the rejection is revoked and K. is appointed to land surveyor (»Landvermesser«).<sup>29</sup> This equivocal recognition is nothing more than yet another mirroring of something whose existence is dubious. Considering the impossibility of settling the truth of these claims it becomes irrelevant whether K. 'really' is land surveyor or not.

Kafka's text frustrates any decision as to the 'truth' of K.'s claims. Thus Kafka institutes dissimulation as the only 'truth' by simultaneously

luring his reader into the seemingly solvable issue of K.'s identity and preventing any arrival at a definite answer. Kafka's text does not side with either option; it only sides with the impossibility of transforming one of the options into the 'truth.' Negating both options is not equivalent to generating a negation of a negation that in turn allows a conversion into a positive; rather the characters, as well as the reader, become enmeshed in indeterminacy.

Kierkegaard's Abraham knew he was called and hence that he was an instance of the extraordinary. Kafka's alternate Abraham-figures doubted the call and questioned the value of the extraordinary. K. sharpens each gesture: if the call has not been issued, it can be invented and forced on transcendence with the goal of attaining the status of the extraordinary. As a result hereof, K. makes the extraordinary not only questionable but also outright ridiculous. Abraham has become Don Quixote. K. is like the crow that storms heaven, unaware that heaven means the absence of crows.<sup>30</sup>

The castle and its officials see it as their task to ensure that no crows will ever enter what, in K. view, appears to be 'heaven,' i.e. the castle. Their most efficient weapon is indeterminate revocation, a method that the castle official Bürgel masters to perfection. When K. accidentally enters the room of Bürgel in the midst of the night, K. is in fact facing his only chance of ever gaining access to the castle. Bürgel's task is to simultaneously illuminate and obfuscate the situation.

According to the illogical logic of the castle, the only premise for gaining access to a castle official is that the seeker must come unannounced. Arriving at the improper moment is the proper thing to do. Bürgel outlines the odds of the fulfillment of the seeker's request as follows:

You think this can never happen. You're right, it can never happen. But one night – who can vouch for everything? – it does happen. (...) Even if it did happen, one could (...) render it quite harmless by showing it proof (...) that there simply is no place on earth for it (...) And even if this perfect improbability had suddenly materialized, does that mean all is lost? On the contrary. That all should be lost is even more improbable than the greatest improbability.<sup>31</sup>

The possibility of gaining access to the castle and everything it represents in K.'s mind – truth, reality, transcendence – is the »greatest improbabili-

ty,« but the castle's deconstruction is »even more improbable.« Does something more improbable than the most improbable really exist? Or is the reader steeped in indeterminate revocation?

Bürgel's monologue strives to veil the castle by exposing it. Indeed, secrets are best kept when exposed because the exposure, meandering through Bürgel's revocations, puts K. to sleep, thus causing him to miss his one big chance. However, was K. really missing the authentic path to the 'real'? The castle's self-awareness of its dissimulation appears to place it in the category of authentic dissimulation; yet as Derrida's dissolving of the two kinds of dissimulation has shown, the difference between them is elusive. Considered in this light, K.'s quest was doomed from the beginning. He will never exit the realm of revocation and dissimulation. Appropriately, Kafka intended the novel to end with the castle's pseudo-acceptance of K.; he is permitted to remain in the village, albeit not as land surveyor.<sup>32</sup> The letter of 'approval' reaches K. on his deathbed. Disappointment, futility, despair – and an inability to abstain from the quest, no matter how debased – is the reality of this Abraham, denuded of religious grandeur and certainty. The only 'reality' left is for K. is one of fear and trembling before transcendence. Or before its dissimulation.

## 5. Inconclusive Remarks

Kierkegaard's Abraham figure, as the supposed 'real thing,' needs the supplement of the authentic dissimulator, Johannes *de silentio*. The latter attains what the former seems to preclude – representation as well as an invitation to imitation. Is the implication that, for Kierkegaard, the real is always entangled in the dissimulated? To generalize for his entire authorship on the basis of one work would obviously be untenable. However, my reading does suggest that in attending to the workings of Kierkegaard's text a tension becomes apparent between the 'plain meaning' of the text and how the text presents its message. Disregarding this tension with the intent of smoothing out ruptures and covering up unpleasant truths about truth is equally untenable.

This article argues for the possibility of a fruitful conversation between Kierkegaard and the dissimulators of his Abraham, i.e. Derrida and Kafka. What characterizes Johannes *de silentio*, Derrida, and Kafka is an authenticity in the midst of dissimulation, an honesty fighting for the

noble cause of otherness. Will these Abrahamic ‘counterfeits’ allow the reader to become/remain an inauthentic dissimulator, rejecting dissimulation in whatever disguise and claiming to be able to access Abraham’s truth, Kierkegaard’s truth, indeed the Truth? Or will they inspire the reader to re-evaluate her dissimulation, thereby allowing a certain opening onto ‘truth’ in the sense of authentic dissimulation? The secrecy of selfhood precludes any final answer; still, the disclosure of (inauthentic) dissimulation, the disclosure of the pretensions of religiousness, the disclosure of the absolute character of responsibility to otherness are difficult to cover up.

In retaining Abraham, knight of faith and/or counterfeit, the impossible as condition of the possible emerges. This impossibility does not annihilate but ‘nourishes’ the possible: Abraham makes Johannes *de silentio* possible; Derrida’s disseminated Abrahamic demand for responding to the other makes responsibility possible; the existence of the castle makes the doomed yet necessary quest for it possible. Granted that the possible is a watered down version of the impossible, the alternative of giving up the pursuit of the impossible amounts to capitulation. Pursuing the impossible ‘relentlessly,’ while knowing that one is situated within the finitude of the possible, appears as the only option (if the belief in the possibility of actually attaining the impossible is disregarded).

Perhaps a less controversial argument in favor of retaining the impossible as condition of possibility is the resulting exposure of inauthentic dissimulation. This exposure potentially liberates the reader for the honesty of authentic dissimulation, if she so wishes. A truly pessimistic reading would claim that since the distinction between inauthentic and authentic is thwarted, perhaps even a certain honesty is revoked. The reader would thus be left solely with the final impossibility of really, truly discerning between the counterfeits. A less pessimistic reading would contend that although one idol destroyed the others, bringing down the True and the Real as well, the possibility of setting out on an exodus for the other still remains. Perhaps this exodus has to be conceived of, and undertaken in, the spirit of Kafka’s statement: »[There is] plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope – but not for us.«<sup>33</sup> Likewise, there may be plenty of truth, an infinite amount of non-dissimulated reality – but not for us.

## Notes

1. Genesis Rabbah 38.13.
2. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 188.
3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard W. Hong & Edna H. Hong, 1983 (FT), in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, I-XXV, ed. H.V. Hong & E. H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1978-1998, vol. VI. References to the Danish edition, *Samlede Værker*, ed. A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg & H.O. Lange, Copenhagen, 1901-06 (SV1).
4. It can be discussed if Johannes wants faith or not: in so far as it is true that faith is not a movement one can make out of sheer will-power, faith is not within Johannes's grasp. One the other hand, Johannes is adamant about not wanting to transcend the finite boundaries of infinite resignation. Of course, all this could be reversed one more time, if we consider that all Johannes aims at is raising the price of faith. In that case Johannes is striving for faith.
5. See for instance Elie Wiesel, »The Sacrifice of Isaac: A Survivor's Story,« *Messengers of God*, 1976, p. 90; and Martin Buber, »The Suspension of the Ethical,« *Eclipse of God*, 1977, p. 152.
6. See also Joakim Garff, '*Den Søvnløse*'. *Kierkegaard læst æstetisk/biografisk*, Copenhagen 1995 (forthcoming in English as *The Insomniac*).
7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1999, p. 189.
8. Johannes himself hints at this circumstance by his exemplary use of the figure of the 'insomniac' who imitated Abraham through passion. See Garff, '*Den Søvnløse*'. See moreover *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 28-31; SV1, 3, 80-83.
9. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 59.
10. Admittedly, Derrida's sparse comments on dissimulation seem to occupy a minor role in this book, which is on such major themes as 'gift' and 'otherness'. Consequently, commentators, like John Caputo in his *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, focus on these themes. I, on the other hand, want to follow Derrida's own deconstructive logic, displayed in most of his works; this means pursuing the 'supplement' as the key to the 'really' significant issues. Hence I claim that the gift as the an-economical *par excellence* and its 'embodiment' in the (in)famous Derridean shibboleth »*tout autre est tout autre*« only can be appreciated against the backdrop of the logic of dissimulation.
11. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, pp. 38-39.
12. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 37.
13. Jacques Derrida & John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, Fordham University Press, 1997, p. 32.
14. Speaking as if there is only one kind of deconstruction is, of course, a simplification. In the present context I have characterized the methodology of deconstruction, not its empirical manifestations. However, even in terms of method there are differences between deconstructions; after all, deconstruction is the methodology of difference and deferral, and as such it should never coincide with anything, not even itself.
15. Derrida & Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 31.
16. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 24.
17. Derrida & Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 32.
18. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 82.
19. Is this a brilliant misreading of *Fear and Trembling* or a genuinely Kierkegaardian



- move? This might turn out to be the same thing!) In my opinion, Derrida is, of course, ‘misreading’ Kierkegaard in that he refuses to recognize divine alterity as the ultimate alterity – but doesn’t Kierkegaard invite ‘misreading’ on this point? Isn’t the god of *Fear and Trembling*, in all ‘his’ paradoxicality and transcendence, at times just a little too close to functioning as a ‘transcendental signified’, as the end station for all the trains loaded with meaning?
20. See Stanley Corngold, *Franz Kafka. The Necessity of Form*, Cornell University Press, 1988.
  21. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, 1992 (CUP), in *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. 7.
  22. Corngold, *Franz Kafka*, pp. 121–122. The »wisdom-sentence« that Corngold is referring to is Kafka’s aphorism, »A cage went in search of a bird,« *Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope, and the True Way*.
  23. Kafka discusses these transfigurations of Abraham in several letters addressed to his friend Max Brod. Quoted from Wiebrecht Ries, *Transzendenz als Terror*, Heidelberg 1977, pp. 50–55.
  24. Brod’s interpretation is discussed in Wilhelm Emrich, *Franz Kafka*, Wiesbaden, 1975, p. 439.
  25. See for instance Emrich, *Franz Kafka*, p. 440.
  26. I emphasize that this is just one reading of the novel, which indeed invites infinite interpretations. Assuming that *The Castle* is about the impossibility of arriving at the ‘true’ interpretation (the protagonist K. never arrives at his object of interpretation, the castle) my reading abstains from contending to be the only correct one, yet it also claims its right by virtue of the fact that it occupies itself with what appears to be the subject matter of the novel as well as a commentary of the possibility of fiction: dissimulation and truth.
  27. It can be debated whether the castle represents transcendence. In my view, it does albeit as an uncanny parody of the transcendence of the Judeo-Christian tradition.
  28. Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, 1998, p. 2.
  29. Kafka, *The Castle*, p. 5. One connotation of »Landvermesser« is »sich zu vermessen,« i.e. to show audacity in a negative sense – something K. definitely does by virtue of his dissimulation.
  30. This is one of the aphorisms in Kafka’s *Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope, and the True Way*.
  31. Kafka, *The Castle*, p. 268.
  32. Kafka never finished *The Castle*; in fact, the novel ends in the middle of a sentence. The above mentioned ending is recounted elsewhere by Kafka. However, the unfinished character of the book is hardly problematic if one takes into consideration that Kafka intended a revocation of most of his writings. Kafka had ordered his friend and literary executor, Max Brod, to burn most of the texts. Perhaps the final twist of revocation may be that Kafka knew that his best friend would never do such a thing.
  33. Conversation with M. Brod, quoted in Walter Benjamin, »Franz Kafka. On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,« *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, 1968, p. 116.