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kierkegaardinprocess@gmail.com

Necessary Sustenance: Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and the Weaning Stories

Niki D'Amore, PhD Student
York University, Toronto, ON
damore.niki@gmail.com

Abstract

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* retells the Biblical event of Abraham's trial by God. It has elicited considerable debate yet little insight into the weaning stories with which Kierkegaard punctuates the dominant narrative. This paper analyzes the weaning stories departing from the interpretation which likens parental figure to parental figure (Abraham and the mother) and child to child (Isaac and the infant), arguing alternatively that Kierkegaard utilizes a triadic relational dynamic between God, Abraham, and Isaac represented, respectively, by the mother, the breast, and the infant. Each weaning account thus becomes deeply insightful for understanding Kierkegaard's retellings of that fateful day.

Keywords

Kierkegaard; *Fear and Trembling*; weaning metaphors; symbolisation.

Introduction

Published in 1843, *Fear and Trembling* is a pseudonymous work written under the pen name Johannes *de Silentio*. It is primarily an expression of *de Silentio*'s preoccupation with the actions of Abraham during the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. *De Silentio* retells the pivotal biblical story of the trial of Abraham by God in four distinct ways. Each of the four retellings of the biblical story of the binding is put forth in the section titled "Exordium," therefore, in our analysis of the text, these binding retellings are designated the 'Exordium stories.' Each of the Exordium stories is punctuated by a story of weaning, that is, a statement by *de Silentio* concerning that crucial maternal moment of transition when a child must be provided food in place of breast milk, sustained by nourishment other than that provided by the body of the mother. These weaning stories are the primary focus of the article to follow.

[1] The article will demonstrate that two theories feature prominently in the existing discourse around the weaning stories. First, the theory that the weaning stories are an indirect commentary by Kierkegaard on his engagement to Regine Olsen, which was broken off a year and a half before the publication of *Fear and Trembling*. Second, the theory that the parental figure and the child in the Exordium stories (that is, Abraham and Isaac), respectively, are analogous to and are to be identified with the parental figure and the child in the weaning stories by which the Exordium stories are punctuated (that is, the mother and her child). [2] We offer an alternative and original interpretation of the weaning stories, re-evaluating and revaluing the breast as a central figure or object which we contend is analogous to the figure of Abraham in the Exordium stories. This changes the relational structure in the weaning stories from dyadic to tripartite and this, in turn, allows us to read the stories anew, to rethink and understand differently their significance in relation to the Exordium stories—and, also, in relation to any commentary Kierkegaard may be trying to make by way of *de Silentio* regarding his own broken engagement to Regine Olsen. It is our contention that God, Abraham, and Isaac in the four Exordium stories may be understood as analogues, respectively, of the mother, the breast, and the child in the four weaning stories.

To illustrate this I will provide a brief sketch of the weaning stories and show how our theory of the triad deepens our understanding of them. [2.1] In the first weaning story, the breast of the mother is blackened but she remains the same for the child, and this punctuates an Exordium story in which Abraham discloses the trial and becomes a dark figure in the eyes of Isaac while the latter maintains his faith in God. [2.2] In the second weaning story, the child both loses and does not lose a mother whose breast is concealed, and this punctuates an Exordium story in which Abraham remains silent as he performs the binding but loses his faith in its aftermath while Isaac thrives as before. [2.3] In the third weaning story, the mother strives to keep close the child while it survives the sorrow of its separation from the breast, and this punctuates an Exordium story in which Abraham becomes mired in confused rumination after the binding, as he cannot reconcile himself to its logical impossibilities, while

Isaac remains conspicuously unmentioned. [2.4] In the fourth weaning story, we celebrate the survival of a fortunate child weaned from the breast by a mother who has at hand more solid food, that is, stronger sustenance, and this punctuates an unfortunate Exordium story in which Isaac loses his faith in God because he sees his father, Abraham, falter in his own faith with a shudder of despair while preparing to make the sacrifice.

We can read in a number of ways the parallels between the weaning stories and the Exordium stories. However, the tripartite relational structure and the analogue we posit (that is, God/Abraham/Isaac = Mother/breast/child) remain consistent throughout, as the weaning stories generate fresh significance with respect to the Exordium stories and alike shore up the premise that it is better for the child to suffer a separation from the breast in order to keep or renew the connection with the mother because the mother can provide a superior, more-vital, sustenance. This premise echoes the overarching moral of the four Exordium stories: It is better for Isaac to suffer a separation from Abraham—as their natural, conventional, familiar and familial bond is suspended in the binding (along with the normative ethics of this world)—if such a difficult rift proves to be an occasion which preserves or founds Isaac’s faith in God.

1. Existing Analyses of the Weaning Stories

Extensive commentary has been written on *Fear and Trembling*; however, there remains relatively little commentary on the weaning stories presented therein. What commentary can be found tends to focus solely on the first weaning story, while failing to examine the potential correlation between the weaning stories and the Exordium stories presented by *de Silentio*, despite the fact that a weaning story has been placed directly after each of the Exordium stories. One must assume that the weaning stories are significant, their placement purposeful, and, furthermore, that a sound understanding of these stories is essential to appreciate *Fear and Trembling* as a complete philosophical text.

Linda Williams (to whom we will return) contends that one reason the weaning stories have been overlooked by scholars is that scholars have tended to regard the weaning stories as autobiographical statements by Kierkegaard (by way of *de Silentio*) on his broken engagement to Regine Olsen.¹ This tendency is exemplified by both Dera Sipe and Anthony D. Storm.

1.1. Sipe and Storm

Sipe presents an analysis of the weaning stories which relies heavily on corresponding autobiographical information concerning Kierkegaard’s broken engagement to Regine Olsen.²

¹ Williams, L. L. (1998), ‘Kierkegaard’s Weanings’, in *Philosophy Today*, 42: 3, (310-318). See 310-11. Williams moves beyond autobiographical analyses and contends that the weaning stories are more instrumental to *Fear and Trembling* than previously imagined, as they foreshadow its main theme, “the existential leap of faith by the knight of faith” (310). Another exception to the rule of disregard for the weaning stories is Mooney, E. F. (1991), *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling*, Albany: State University of New York Press (30-31).

² Sipe, D. (2004), ‘Kierkegaard and Feminism: A Paradoxical Friendship’, in *CONCEPT*, 27, ed. E. Pettit, Villanova: Falvey Memorial Library Villanova University (1-25).

Sipe addresses only the first weaning story and argues that the mother weaning the child by blackening the breast is analogous to Kierkegaard discouraging Regine from further pursuing their relationship by darkening his character. Sipe links the weaning stories to *The Diary of the Seducer* based on a comment made by Kierkegaard in his journal, quoting *Fear and Trembling* with reference to the blackened breast, in which he claims that he wrote the *Diary of the Seducer* to repel Regine.³ The section in Sipe's paper entitled *The Depiction of Women in the Seducer's Diary: Misogyny as a Means to Blacken the Breast*, contains the claim: "The Seducer's Diary [is] Kierkegaard's attempt to wean Regine Olsen from their relationship via indirect communication."⁴

Sipe goes on to question: "Is his misogyny indeed only a method by which to wean, and so a sort of negative maieutics meant to awaken Regine to the knowledge that he is bad for her?"⁵ For the purposes of this paper, the answer to this question is inconsequential; what is significant, however, is that, in asking this question, Sipe makes clear her interpretation of the blackening of the breast as Kierkegaard's dissuasion of Regine. According to Sipe's interpretation, the mother and the child in the first weaning story respectively represent Kierkegaard and Regine, while the milk symbolizes Kierkegaard's love and the blackening of the breast his cruelty. Sipe reduces the meaning of the first weaning story to yet another implicit message from Kierkegaard to Regine. Unfortunately, Sipe does not investigate the weaning stories in their own right; she fails to examine the first weaning story in the context of the first Exordium story and she also neglects to address the other three weaning stories, overlooking them completely.

In his analysis of the Exordium, Storm arrives at a similar conclusion as Sipe concerning Kierkegaard and Regine. Storm concentrates on the first weaning story and maintains that, when Kierkegaard "needed to sever the relationship [...] he got the notion to convince Regine that he was a scoundrel" and so "paint[ed] himself with black strokes" like a mother who blackens the breast in order to dissuade the child who is hungry for it. At the same time, Storm also contends that the child in the weaning story is analogous to the child that *de Silentio* was when he first heard the biblical story of the binding. Storm constructs an analogy wherein the child in the weaning story represents the reader, who needs "to grow into the religious mindset capable of understanding the Genesis account." In Storm's analysis, the mother who weans the child is symbolic of Kierkegaard, who enables the reader to come to properly understand the Genesis account. It remains unclear, however, how Kierkegaard, "being a poet who speaks dialectically", in any way represents a mother who blackens her breast, unless being weaned off the milk is intended to represent a reader being weaned off worldly understanding (of the

³ Sipe, 2004: 22.

⁴ Sipe, 2004: 6.

⁵ Sipe, 2004: 8.

sort that characterizes the ethical mode of existence). But Storm does not present this argument, nor does he elaborate or elucidate his claims.⁶

The final sentence in Storm's commentary on the Exordium and weaning stories notes: "Again, Kierkegaard may have the rejection of Regine Olsen in mind."⁷ Storm seems to be uncertain which interpretation he likes best; his interpretation differs from, yet is no more comprehensive than, Sipe's interpretation. Like Sipe, he also fails to explore the parallel between the Exordium stories and the weaning stories, and completely ignores the latter three weaning stories found in the Exordium.

Scholars and interpreters of Kierkegaard who, unlike Sipe and Storm, do explore the parallels and theorize connections between the weaning stories and the Exordium stories accept without contention that a dyadic relational structure defines all the stories. In turn, with one notable exception, proponents of a dyad-theory accept that the mother and child in the weaning stories respectively represent Abraham and Isaac. This interpretation maintains that the weaning of the child, performed by the mother, is analogous to the binding of Isaac, performed by Abraham. This interpretation maintains that the weaning of the child, performed by the mother, is analogous to the binding of Isaac, performed by Abraham. Certainly, this seems to be the most natural or reasonable interpretation, given that both the weaning stories and the Exordium stories address a parent-child relationship and feature a parent and child as main characters; and in fact the interpretation has some merit. We maintain, however, that we must move beyond the dyad and rethink the weaning and Exordium stories as stories of a tripartite relation.

1.2. Lippitt

John Lippitt describes the four Exordium stories as "pictures of possible responses Abraham could conceivably have made to his spiritual trial"; each of which, he contends, depicts a 'Sub-Abraham' "whom de Silentio considers not to be worthy of the title 'knight of faith', each an Abraham who is not *the* Abraham." He then remarks that: "Each narrative ends with the use of a weaning metaphor that has met with near silence from commentators."⁸ Lippitt provides an analysis of each of the weaning stories in relation to the respective Exordium story, beginning with the claim that the weaning stories are "clearly connected with the Abraham story at least insofar as they are about a parent's relationship to a child." As Lippitt's analysis remains to date the one that delves deepest into the possible connections between the Attunement stories and the weaning stories, his interpretation shall be outlined here in brief.

Lippitt comments on the first weaning story, in which the mother's breast is blackened as a way of handling the weaning, stating that its significance is to "contrast the tactics of such

⁶ All quotations in the preceding paragraph: Storm, D. A. (2004), 'Fear and Trembling', in *D. Anthony Storm's Commentary on Kierkegaard*, (available at: <http://sorenkierkegaard.org/fear-and-trembling.html>).

⁷ Storm, 2004.

⁸ Lippitt, 2003: 22.

a mother with the more desperate tactics that this first sub-Abraham needed to employ.” He reiterates *de Silentio*’s assertion that “the child [in this story] believes that the breast has changed but the mother is still the same” and claims that this is intended to provide a “stark contrast to the last thing this imagined Isaac would see before he dies: a father who has changed, terribly and horribly, beyond recognition.”⁹

Regarding the second and third weaning stories, Lippett addresses the apparently temporary loss of the mother endured by the child, and argues that this scenario is intended to emphasise, again by contrast, Isaac’s complete loss of Abraham in the second and third Exordium stories wherein Abraham is irrevocably, negatively impacted by the events of Mount Moriah and in their aftermath suffers a crisis of faith.¹⁰ More precisely, Lippett maintains that the enduring and affectionate love of the mother in the second and third weaning stories highlights, as it is juxtaposed against, Abraham’s descent into “a disillusioned self-absorption” (that renders him incapable of genuine care and empathy)¹¹ in the second Exordium story, and Abraham’s “confused”¹² and “inhuman”¹³ quality in the third Exordium story.

The fourth weaning story celebrates the fortunate survival of a child weaned from the breast by a mother who has at hand more solid food, that is, stronger sustenance. Lippitt extracts from this story a cautionary tale or lamentation of the unfortunate child that will perish if the mother cannot provide more solid food, stronger sustenance, in place of her breast milk. It is this other mother’s unfortunate position which Lippitt takes to represent or echo Abraham’s inability to provide “such spiritual sustenance”¹⁴ for Isaac in the fourth Exordium story.

Lippitt concentrates his commentary on dyadic relational structures and, it seems reasonable to conclude, for him, the mother/child relationship depicted in each of the weaning stories is presented strictly in order to highlight, by contrast of opposites, alternatives and juxtapositions, the relationship of Abraham and Isaac in the Exordium story it punctuates.¹⁵

⁹ Lippitt, 2003: 24.

¹⁰ Lippitt, 2003: 25

¹¹ Lippitt, 2003: 25

¹² Lippitt, 2003: 26.

¹³ Lippitt, 2003: 27.

¹⁴ Lippitt, 2003: 28.

¹⁵ It should be noted that, in his unfettered celebration of absolute faith in *Kierkegaard on Ethics and Faith*, Glenn Kirkconnell mentions very briefly each of the four weaning stories in relation to its corresponding Exordium story. Kirkconnell holds that the Exordium presents a cross-section of Abraham’s faith, revealing it to be a unity of aesthetic, ethical, and religious elements, each of which is essential (2008: 66). Kirkconnell’s analysis of the Exordium stories is primarily an expression of his position of admiration and praise for the biblical Abraham’s absolute faith in God. For Kirkconnell, the Abrahams depicted in the Exordium are wrestling with elements of perhaps-demonic deception, doubt, confusion, despair, and darkness, which “act as a prism, refracting the pure-white light of Abraham’s faith” (64). Kirkconnell does not share in *de Silentio*’s sleepless sickness, anguish and incomprehension, in the face of the binding. To the contrary, regarding any such struggle, Kirkconnell reduces it to an “immediate, untutored reaction” (65) that can be overcome by an absolute faith in God. The weaning

Williams' analysis of the Exordium maintains the pervasive emphasis on dyadic relational structures but, singularly, she departs from the standard interpretation or analogy which identifies parental figure with parental figure and child with child, respectively. Williams contends, to the contrary, that God is analogous to the mother and Abraham to the child, as she presents a compelling analysis of each weaning story in relation to its corresponding Exordium story.¹⁶ Let us examine Williams' analysis.

1.3. Williams

Williams' analysis of the Exordium is a response to Mooney's analysis of the same text.¹⁷ Mooney is chiefly concerned with the "giving up and getting back" that is central to the simultaneous resignation and faith beyond resignation that constitutes a critical criterion of faith-knighthood and he interprets all four weaning stories alike in these terms to have the same message or moral, that is: As Abraham must give up Isaac to get him back anew, the mother must give up a relationship to the child mediated by the breast to get back a healthy and developmentally-appropriate relationship with the child.

Williams takes each weaning story individually to explore its significance. For Williams, the central theme in the first weaning and Exordium story is "pretense" or "deception." Thus, she notes, this first set of stories can be read as follows: pretense is "the means Abraham must use in order to 'give up' Isaac in order to get him back"¹⁸, as pretense is the means the mother must use in order to give up the child in order to get it back. In this sense, the weaning story can be understood to echo the Exordium story and to illustrate juxtaposition, as the mother's means are not nearly so terrible as those utilized by Abraham. In this way, we might "understand the sentence which begins 'Lucky the one...'"¹⁹ Williams then departs from the parent/child analogy and contends instead that the mother who employs deception or pretense in weaning is symbolic of "God [who] has no intention of having Abraham actually complete the command"²⁰, and who thus deceives Abraham in "the hope of [establishing] an even better relationship [with him]."²¹

stories are mentioned in passing only in service of this central point; they are not analysed in their own right. Therefore, it is not necessary to delve deeply into Kirkconnell's treatment of the weaning stories, or "mother parable[s]" (62), as he calls them. It is important to note only that Kirkconnell's passing mentions of the weaning stories uphold the theory of the dyad which is standard in interpretations of the weaning stories and which assumes the validity of the analogy of Abraham to the mother and of Isaac to the child. See: Kirkconnell, G. W. (2008), *Kierkegaard on Ethics and Faith: From Either/Or to Philosophical Fragments* (Continuum Studies in Philosophy, 11), London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, (56-66).

¹⁶ Williams, 1998.

¹⁷ Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1991, pp. 30-31.

¹⁸ Williams, 1998: 313.

¹⁹ Williams, 1998: 313.

²⁰ Williams, 1998: 316.

²¹ Williams, 1998: 316.

Regarding the second weaning and Exordium story, Williams holds that the central theme is transformation and loss. She asserts, the mother feels “sadness” as she “loses the feeling of oneness that occurs in nursing a child”²² and as she “becomes self-conscious about her body.”²³ This situation, she adds, is “almost inconsequential”²⁴, contrasted with transformation and loss depicted in the second Exordium story in which Abraham loses his faith and Isaac loses his father as exemplar of faith.²⁵ Williams then departs from the parent/child analogy and contends instead that the mother is symbolic of God who transforms his relationship with Abraham by testing him to sacrifice Isaac and thereby shows him (Abraham) that a faith-relationship with God is shaded with darkness and death, and “does not guarantee all sunlight and flowers.”²⁶

Regarding the third weaning and Exordium story, Williams’ holds that the central theme is a “double bind.”²⁷ We find Williams does not adequately define or make a case for the double bind; so we concentrate our summary here on the theme of “dilemma”²⁸, which is also central in her treatment of this second set of stories. The weaning story “echoes”²⁹ the Exordium story in the sense that both present a dilemma. In the Exordium story, Abraham confronts the logical impossibilities and paradoxes of his trial. In the weaning story, “Weaning is painful and sorrowful to both mother and child.”³⁰ The respective stories contrast, Williams notes, as there is no resolution to Abraham’s dilemma, while the weaning dilemma is resolved by way of “a new, deeper, and healthier [mother/child] relationship [post-weaning].”³¹ In this way we might understand “why the weaned child is lucky in comparison to the Abraham/Isaac story.”³² Again, Williams rejects this interpretation and contends instead that the mother is symbolic of God, who “must understand how abhorrent His demand of Abraham is”³³ and who suffers “to see His creation suffer” for the short period of time before a trial gives way to a “greater good.”³⁴

Regarding the fourth weaning story, Williams holds that the central theme is substitution. Williams admittedly has trouble understanding the fourth Exordium story as a text which correlates or corresponds to that theme. She raises a number of interesting questions as she

²² Williams, 1998: 314.

²³ Williams, 1998: 314.

²⁴ Williams, 1998: 314.

²⁵ Williams, 1998: 314.

²⁶ Williams, 1998: 316.

²⁷ Williams, 1998: 314.

²⁸ Williams, 1998: 314.

²⁹ Williams, 1998: 314.

³⁰ Williams, 1998: 314.

³¹ Williams, 1998: 314.

³² Williams, 1998: 314.

³³ Williams, 1998: 316.

³⁴ Williams, 1998: 316. Actually, Williams contends that it is “Kierkegaard [who] suggests that the long term greater good for the child outweighs any short term suffering: ‘Thus together they suffer this brief sorrow.’” (316; sic). We have chosen to focus on the more-pressing questions at hand and, so, to not address such problematical contentions.

searches for that correlation, then presents her interpretation of this set of stories: Williams rejects a consensus among Kierkegaard scholars as she insists that, when the fourth Exordium story states Isaac has lost his faith, it means that Isaac has lost his faith in his earthly father, not in God. In this way, the mother (who withholds the breast to provide the child more solid food) is symbolic of God, who provides the strongest sustenance of all.³⁵

It is not our present task to determine the merit of Williams' analysis of the Exordium. Regarding that analysis, what is most important for our purposes is a passage therein, an aside, really, which inadvertently anticipates and foreshadows our own interpretation of the Exordium and weaning stories. As Williams struggles with interpretations that uphold the Abraham/mother, Isaac/child analogy regarding the fourth set of stories, she imagines other possible ways of reading:

If the weaning passage parallels the retelling, then there should be a third person in the weaning passage demanding that the mother wean the child. Seeing the mother's reluctance to give up nursing the child, the child "loses faith" in the third person while continuing to love the mother. Then (luckily) the child is fed with solid food and continues to thrive upon that, while (unluckily) Isaac has no such "solid food" with which to be consoled.

I find the addition of a third person a troublesome point in interpreting the fourth weaning passage in this way, but perhaps this is due to my twentieth century upbringing. It might have been a commonplace in the nineteenth century for a doctor or a husband to demand that a mother wean her child at a certain point in time. If this were common knowledge, Kierkegaard may not have deemed it necessary to explicitly mention a third party in the weaning passages, because he thought his reading audience would already assume the presence of one. Given this possibility, I will simply leave it to you to decide which interpretation is more plausible.³⁶

Indeed, reader, it is up to you to decide; and you may, when we return to our theory of the triad in our analysis of the Exordium.

1.4. Rumble, Mooney, Lloyd

Twenty years after the publication of William's analysis of the Exordium, Edward F. Mooney and Dana Lloyd lament the "[privileged, masculinist] blindness"³⁷ and "deafening silence"³⁸ which continue to surround the weaning stories. Thankfully, two of their fellow contributors to the Cambridge Critical Guide to *Fear and Trembling* have been able to overcome the horror and repulsion that may be elicited in some readers approaching the nauseating, abject, slimy viscosity of weaning, which may have rendered blind and mute other, more faint-of-heart scholars. Daniel Conway, namely, sees and speaks to the weaning stories—more specifically, the withholding, concealing (or covering), and blackening of the breast—as illustrations of a justifiable, indeed, meritorious, particular and singular exception to the

³⁵ Williams, 1998: 315-17.

³⁶ Williams, 1998: 316.

³⁷ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 171.

³⁸ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 169.

general ethical rule that bans all secrecy and concealment.³⁹ Conway's essay is persuasive and, while he engages the weaning stories only briefly as an example that supports his broader line of argumentation, we appreciate the idea that the weaning stories support the notion that exceptions to the rule—while necessarily decided on a case-by-case basis and thus unnerving to individuals with a felt need for predetermined, black-and-white certainties—may cultivate a stronger, more-compelling ethical life, which calls on each of us to exercise her own faculties of discernment and judgement.⁴⁰

Vanessa Rumble, the second of Mooney and Lloyd's co-contributors who does not shy away from the abject revulsion of weaning, has an uncanny capacity to think the unthought questions that duly knot our guts and sink our hearts. When she questions, 'And what did Kierkegaard know of weaning, having lost prematurely to mad milk brains and such so many sisters who left behind inevitably hungry children?'⁴¹, she brings us, rightly and sadly, to a place where we must confront and feel the suffering, the despair, the doubt, the alienation, the family secrets, the violence and vulnerability, the arrogantly-denied interdependency of our precariously embodied, in many ways conditioned and limited, existence. For Rumble, weaning *is* individuation,⁴² which "comes to represent both a 'natural' loss and a more menacing, possibly irrecoverable despair."⁴³ And "may we call it trauma?"⁴⁴ (A most provocative question indeed, particularly in the face of that which feels unspeakable.) With her powerful analyses, Rumble justifies a personal/political/philosophical inquiry into the relation between Kierkegaard's life experiences and his pseudonymous writing of *Fear and Trembling*; however, she does not engage in an inquiry into the connection between the weaning stories and the Exordium stories, that is, the type of inquiry to which we here devote our energies.

Still, it is Mooney and Lloyd who gaze most curiously and see most openly the weaning stories. Their beautifully written exploration of birth, love, and hybridity insists that we remove our blinders, open our eyes, and move out of our comfort zones regarding maternal in-between states of being involving breasts, mouths, tongues, mucous membranes, consumption, and more. Their analysis of the interconnections of the weaning stories and the Exordium stories makes all sorts of provocative suggestions—among them that mothers are candidate knights of faith⁴⁵; that Abraham is not killing Isaac but weaning him⁴⁶; that *de Silentio* may be a spectatorial voyeur fascinated with the binding of Isaac insofar as it constitutes for him a kind of trauma porn⁴⁷. The article is worth reading if only in its insistence that we address the "scandalous omission"⁴⁸ of the weaning stories in analyses of *Fear and Trembling*; yet we

³⁹ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 219.

⁴⁰ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 220-221.

⁴¹ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 258.

⁴² Conway (Ed.), 2018: 257, 259.

⁴³ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 257.

⁴⁴ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 247.

⁴⁵ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 172 & 174-75.

⁴⁶ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 175.

⁴⁷ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 170.

⁴⁸ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 168.

need not delve further into it here because, for the purposes of our analysis, the most important point is that Mooney and Lloyd maintain the dyad: their analysis is premised on the assumption that Abraham and Isaac in the Exordium stories are analogous to the mother and child in the weaning stories. This is evident, for instance, when they inquire why de Silentio's retellings of the binding—"one of the most terrifying and inscrutable events in the Hebrew Bible"⁴⁹—would have been punctuated by the 'unwelcome intrusion'⁵⁰ of the weaning stories: "Why increase the pitch of the cacophony by putting *violent paternal sacrifice* in such immediate proximity to *tender maternal weaning*?⁵¹ (The answer, in short, according to Mooney and Lloyd: Because each set of stories "improvises on the other"⁵² and thus generates interesting affect and meaning.)⁵³ Mooney and Lloyd understand *Fear and Trembling* as a text which "couples mother-infant to father-son"⁵⁴ in such a way which perpetuates an interpretation of the text that centers on the dyadic parent/child relational dynamic. Meanwhile, we continue to maintain: It is time to move beyond the dyad to the triad.

2. Rethinking the Weaning: Towards the Triad

"And God tempted Abraham and said to him, take Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on a mountain that I shall show you."

Genesis 22

Thus begins God's trial of Abraham, the test of his faith by way of the command to sacrifice his child, Isaac. To the reader who does not see the beauty of Genesis 22, it may appear as if God commands that Isaac be murdered, tied up like an animal, cut open with a knife, bled out, and then immolated in faithful fire. This child is the embodiment of Abraham's fate as the father of nations, his only son if we turn a blind eye to the one banished, a servant, in the desert with his own biblical destiny. Isaac is the only son selected by God to be the one who is to actualize His covenant with Abraham, the one through whom His great nation will come into being. But how can Isaac at once be the bright light of a living promise and a child fed to the flames of a brilliant blaze? This, precisely, is the test: can Abraham not be mired in such questions, not get caught up in the logical impossibilities of his present situation, not let the familiar and familial duties of this world and all of the affections that come with them stand in the way of his fidelity and greater duty to God? Can Abraham make an absurd leap

⁴⁹ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 169.

⁵⁰ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 169.

⁵¹ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 169.

⁵² Conway (Ed.), 2018: 170.

⁵³ Interestingly, Mooney and Lloyd identify God with a mother who blackens her breast in order to set Abraham free (Conway (Ed.), 2018: 167), but this is a momentary departure from their sustained perpetuation of an interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* which upholds the exclusive concentration on dyadic parent/child relations.

⁵⁴ Conway (Ed.), 2018: 172.

of faith, resign himself to the sacrifice never doubting that Isaac will not be lost or will be returned to him in this world and lifetime?

In Genesis 22, Abraham keeps the faith, passes God's test, and therefore takes his place as a most-revered religious figure. Is it a reverence perhaps tinged with glib ease, lacking a fittingly sickening, sleepless dis-ease? While a corporate and complacent state of Christendom thunders from the pulpit unthinking praise of Abraham, the binding of Isaac is disturbing if not incomprehensible to many readers. These readers are exemplified in the once-upon-a-time, make-believe man with whom *de Silentio* opens and closes the Exordium, who wants nothing more than to keep the faith yet finds easy understanding of the critical biblical story in question increasingly elusive, slipping away with the simplicity of childhood as life fractures a once united piousness. In the Exordium's make-believe man, the dis-ease of the elusive understanding gives rise to a quite disturbing condition, indeed: The less he is able to understand the story, the more he fixates on it. This impairs his mental state and memory as, "Finally, he forg[ets] everything else because of it;" and becomes obsessed with "but one wish," one "craving," that is, not *to see* all of the beautiful imagery that surrounds the binding (promised lands and blessings and veneration), but to *be present* for it— "in that hour when Abraham raised his eyes and saw Mount Moriah in the distance," the hour when he left behind everything except the knife and the wood he strapped to Isaac's back to feed and fuel the fire, and "went up the mountain alone with Isaac—" to face and feel "the shudder of the idea" (FT 9).

In Genesis 22, Isaac turns to Abraham as they ascend the mountain and asks his father: where is the sheep they will slaughter in sacrifice on the alter? Abraham responds unhesitatingly, *God will provide*, and, when they arrive to Mount Moriah, builds the alter and piles onto it the wood for the fire. Then he ties up Isaac and puts him atop it. He takes out the knife and moves to slit his son's throat. Before the blade breaks Isaac's skin, God intervenes by angelic medium, staying Abraham's hand and speaking, instructing him to stop, to neither lay a hand on Isaac nor harm him in any way; to rest assured he has passed the test, proved his faith, and therefore will be blessed abundantly and made the father of countless descendants.

This is the pivotal biblical event reimagined in the Exordium. Let us turn our attention now to its four stories, exploring each in its turn, with emphasis on the weaning story that punctuates it.

You will recall, as outlined in the introduction above, the key to our interpretation of these stories is this: God/Abraham/Isaac = Mother/breast/child. This equation acts as shorthand for our theory that, if we wish to move towards a deeper understanding of the weaning stories, which typically have been ignored in analyses of *Fear and Trembling*, we must move beyond the dyad—that is, the dyadic relational structure, parent/child— and towards a triad by re-evaluating and coming to see the breast as a central figure or object in the weaning, which gives rise to the tripartite relational structure: Mother/breast/child. This tripartite relational

structure, we assert, is analogous to the tripartite relational structure featured in the Exordium stories: God/Abraham/Isaac.

To anticipate the analysis to follow and more fully flesh out our position, we add here that, in the weaning stories, the four weaning periods depicted are analogues and commentaries that complement or contrast the four corresponding faith-trials depicted in the Exordium stories. As the Exordium stories are concerned with the events of the faith-trial, and with important details of how they unfold, the respective weaning stories are concerned with the events of the weaning period, and with important details of how they unfold. The nutritive sustenance provided (or withheld) the child in the weaning stories is analogous to the spiritual sustenance provided (or withheld) Isaac in the Exordium stories. When we speak of God in our analysis of the Exordium stories, we mean not only the God of the Hebrew Bible but *the relationship with God* occasioned by the particular events of a given faith-trial and binding and by the role played therein by Abraham. Thus, at points in our analysis, we hold that the mother is representative of God *by way of or qua Abraham* (A). Indeed, during the faith-trial, God is known to Isaac primarily by way of or qua Abraham who acts as an intermediary between the deity and his son, just as during the weaning period, the mother is known to the child primarily by way of or qua the breast which acts as an intermediary. The breast *in the capacity of its role in the weaning* is representative of Abraham *in the capacity of his role in the trial and binding* (B). Finally, the child is representative of Isaac, especially in the sense that alike each is enduring a challenging time, a formative developmental moment, which s/he cannot fully comprehend but which nevertheless will effect a transformation and redefine important relationships (C). The challenging time is incomprehensible in both the weaning and Exordium stories in the sense that it cannot be communicated in language, disclosed in discourse, or explained in conversation.

For the infant child, whose preverbal state renders impossible linguistic explanation of the weaning, the boundary between Mother and breast is indistinct and cannot be clarified via acts of speech. For Isaac, the reasons for the impossibilities and incomprehensibilities (of his situation during the faith-trial and binding) are more complicated. *De Silentio* explores these reasons throughout *Fear and Trembling* and asserts, essentially, that the faith-trial is not an augur decried as in a Greek tragedy, but rather a personal matter between God and Abraham which is incomprehensible to all outside of it and which cannot possibly be made comprehensible by communication.

The impossibilities and incomprehensibilities make for a quite complicated trial, indeed; yet *de Silentio* is straightforward in his conception of the proper way the events of the trial are to unfold—namely, in accordance with the knight-of-faith standards set out in Genesis 22: Abraham is to proceed through the trial with unwavering confidence; his outward actions are to be matched with an unhesitating and unflinching inner faith; he must be prepared to sacrifice Isaac yet certain Isaac will not be lost; and he must not try to explain this to anyone,

though it may be fitting that he speak at pivotal points in such a way that does not address the trial directly.⁵⁵

At the risk of alienating women and sounding foolish, we are not inclined to speak of the proper unfolding of the events of any weaning period. Proper parenting theories are a dime a dozen; and the supposed experts in these matters never reach a consensus on a single thing. The weaning stories depict or illustrate some ways in which a weaning period may unfold, some nearly universal personal experiences which resonate with readers across time, and some parenting techniques that speak to Kierkegaard's times. While it is reasonable to speak of a proper unfolding of the faith-trial (in accordance with the standards set out by *de Silentio*), we prefer to speak of a *good-enough* unfolding of the weaning period (to borrow a phrase from English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott).

The important point is this: in both cases, what is at stake is a *transformation of relationships*. In the weaning stories, it is primarily a transformation of the mother/child relationship by way of the breast. In the Exordium stories, it is a transformation of Isaac's relationship with God by way of Abraham. That the transformation will take place (by way of the respective formative moments) is inescapable and inevitable. The question is: what is the nature of the transformation(s)?

Regarding the faith-trial, the ideal outcome is clear: Events unfold such that the relationship between God and Abraham is strengthened (by faith), and this occasions a new relationship between God and Isaac (based in faith) which provides Isaac a greater spiritual sustenance than his earthly father alone can provide. Regarding the weaning period, there is no outcome that is universally accepted as ideal. The Exordium suggests, at least, that the child be kept close and weaned by a mother who has at hand more solid food, that is, stronger sustenance, and by means that are not too terrible. This stronger nutritive sustenance is analogous to the greater spiritual sustenance that Isaac finds by way of a faithful relationship with God (if and when the faith-trial unfolds properly). We might note additionally of the weaning period that ideally it would unfold in a way such that: (1) the mother and her breasts are able to navigate their relationship so that it is redefined lovingly (i.e., so that, post-weaning, the mother is able to find and love her breasts anew—and the breasts are able to find and love the mother anew); (2) the breasts do not endure infection, breakdown or pain too great to bear; and (3) the child is able to sustain a relationship with its mother and her breasts that is good enough that the child can go on in life to develop and sustain nonviolent relationships with other people and with female bodies long after the weaning.

These assertions seem simple and compose a neat analogy to a faith-trial in which Abraham passes the test and thus renews his faithful relationship with God (1 and 2) which, in turn, occasions many amazing possibilities with respect to Isaac's faithful relationship with God (3). And yet, these seemingly simple assertions leave many questions standing as they (the

⁵⁵ See FT 118-19, on ironic statements spoken in strange tongues that uphold truth and express faith while saying nothing.

assertions) open onto quite-complex lines of inquiry; notably, is it reasonable to recognize that breasts have agency? How are we to define violence in interpersonal relationships? What does it mean to be faithful? If we are to keep with our gender-conscious present times, are we to speak of mother-figures or mothering-ones even in the context of weaning? And so forth. Let us not belabour such questions; they are not pertinent for the purposes of our broader analysis of the Exordium. Let us turn our attention to it now and explore the significance of the weaning stories therein.

2.1. First Exordium

In the first Exordium story, we find Abraham preparing for his journey to Moriah and departing for it in much the same way as he does in Genesis 22. On the morning of the fourth day, Abraham raises his eyes and sees the Mount but he does not speak a word. Then something shifts in him as he is overtaken with a need to explain everything to Isaac. He decides he will “not hide from Isaac where this walk is taking him.” Abraham is overwhelmed by his fatherly love, his “face epitomized fatherliness;” and he tries three times, with gentle words of comfort and admonition, to make Isaac understand. “But Isaac could not understand him” and begs for his young life with an anguish that stirs in Abraham all of the joy and pain of this life. Then Abraham’s character switches, his face changes to a murderous mask, and he finally succeeds in making Isaac understand something—not the truth of God’s trial, but a terrifying lie. In an effort to save Isaac’s faith in God, Abraham assumes a dark, deceptive guise, and he tells his son that it is his own desire to kill him, not God’s command that Isaac be made a burnt offering (FT 10).

Here is reproduced in full the weaning story which corresponds to this first Exordium story:

When the child is to be weaned, the mother blackens her breast. It would be hard to have the breast look inviting when the child must not have it. So the child believes that the breast has changed, but the mother—she is still the same, her gaze is tender and loving as ever. How fortunate the one who did not need more terrible means to wean the child! (FT 11)

In this weaning story, the breast is blackened in an endeavour to preserve, unchanged, the child’s relationship with the mother as a tender and loving figure. This corresponds by way of a clear echo, a direct thematic parallel, with the scenario depicted in the first Exordium story. Therein, Abraham’s character is darkened as he is transformed into a murderous madman in a deceptive effort to preserve unchanged Isaac’s faith in God as a merciful and benevolent saviour.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ We acknowledge here there is a question around intentionality or agency regarding the weaning stories, in the argument we have put forth in this article. As we argue God in the Exordium stories is analogous to the mother in the weaning stories, this first weaning story seems to suggest that God “blackened” Abraham, when in the first Exordium story Abraham apparently “blackens” himself. Admittedly, we cannot easily explain away this issue, which might render our argument less persuasive in the eyes of some readers. We have considered a number of ways to resolve the issue. For instance, we could say: Perhaps God in His omniscience saw that He had elected an inadequate exemplar of faith,

Discerning the tripartite relational structures and analogy here is easy as the narrative of the first weaning story parallels and echoes the narrative of the first Exordium story. The matter of the moral of these first stories, however, is less directly clear as things may not be what they appear. The first weaning story seems to conclude that the blackening of the breast is a good way to handle things; the child is fortunate who was not weaned by more terrible means; and by this means the mother/child bond remains as strong as ever. Likewise, the first Exordium story appears to conclude that deceiving Isaac was a good way for Abraham to handle his trial by God because it drives Isaac to turn towards God in the moment of crisis, and, as Abraham exclaims, “Lord God in heaven, I thank you; it is better that he believes me a monster than that he should lose faith in you” (FT 11).

The question that stands in *Fear and Trembling* is this: What is the nature of the faith that Isaac retains in this Exordium story? It is a faith with origins in his father’s deception and lies. Some readers may be able to separate the ends from the means, to maintain that Isaac was not a deceiver and his faith may be strong despite the fact that he has lost his father as an exemplary figure of faith. To the contrary, other readers might insist: Deception is not a firm foundation of faith; a faith based upon deception is not true. Putting aside questions concerning the nature of true faith, it is reasonable to conclude that we can only imagine what might happen in the ‘ever-after’ of the first weaning story and the first Exordium story. Isaac appears to keep the faith in this Exordium story; however, his relationship to God may be damaged by Abraham’s lies and deception, by Abraham’s apparent mismanagement of the trial, and Isaac might ultimately lose the faith. Analogously, we might find the 1843 child of the first weaning story on the psychoanalyst’s couch around middle age at the end of the century, trying to work through the psychological damage done to it by the blackened breast, unable to trust its mother because of that deceptive breast, which irrevocably damaged in the long term a relationship that initially seemed to be preserved perfect and unchanged. (And as to the breast itself, let’s hope it's blackening does not give rise to a life-long fetish or fear in our imagined analysand.) So perhaps deception by darkening is not the harmless, problem-free way of handling the weaning/trial that it appears to be. Indeed, as this weaning and Exordium story alike show: appearances can be deceptive.

as Abraham would not be able to pass the test, and so did “blacken” him (or move him to blacken himself) as a means to handle the botched trial, to try to save Isaac’s faith. We might also try to resolve the issue by recourse to the emphasis on the blurred boundaries between the mother and the breast in the eyes of the child during the weaning period, which might be taken to represent the blurred boundaries between God and Abraham in the eyes of Isaac during the faith-trial and binding. During the weaning period/faith-trial, the child/Isaac knows the mother/God primarily by way of the breast/Abraham. It is by way of the weaning/trial that the relationship between the mother, breast, and child/God, Abraham, Isaac is transformed and redefined. Therefore, we might say, in the eyes of the child/Isaac, it matters less who did the blackening than that darkness came to dominate the situation. We welcome any suggestions our readers might like to present regarding possible resolutions of the issue here addressed. Also, we address the issue again in footnote 37, as it presents itself again in the third weaning story.

2.2. Second Exordium

The second Exordium story opens with an idyllic picture of domestic bliss—a bliss like a salve to ease the pain of the many preceding years of sorrow and disgrace—an affectionate husband, a hopeful wife, and a son, his parents' pride and joy. This picture gives way to a retelling of the binding in which silence is the central theme: Isaac does not ask his father about the conspicuously absent sheep and, without this prompt, there is no affirmation of faith that God will provide on the father's part. Abraham is *silent* on the journey to Mount Moriah, *silent* as he arranges the firewood and binds Isaac, and, finally, *silent* as he draws the knife. Evidently, God too is silent in this Exordium story, as *de Silentio's* make-believe man jumps from the knife to the ram with no pause for a breath never mind divine conversation, writing, “silently he drew the knife—then he saw the ram that God had selected. This he sacrificed and went home.”

It appears that, in this Exordium story, Abraham keeps quiet and keeps the faith during the binding, as he draws the knife. But, while “Isaac flourished as before,” Abraham suffers immensely in the aftermath of Mount Moriah: he cannot forget what God had asked of him and he cannot reconcile himself to it. “From that day henceforth, Abraham [is] old” (12); his eyes darken and see joy no more. It was Abraham's faith that had kept him, aged one-hundred plus years, joyful and youthful. Thus, Abraham loses his faith after the binding.

Many things in this story remain unsaid. Abraham's silence is not in itself problematical; indeed, it meets a criterion of *de Silentio's* knight of faith. But the matter is less clear when it comes to *de Silentio's* silence regarding God's angelic speech act of intervention, which is the pivotal event on the biblical Mount that prevents the sacrifice of Isaac. There are two ways in which we might understand this. The first way, which is the one preferred by John Lippitt, would have the events of the binding unfold in the second Exordium story in “basically the same” way as they do in the first Exordium story,⁵⁷ and would hold that, as *de Silentio* proceeds through the four binding retellings, he takes increasing liberty to not reiterate details which we, as readers, can take for granted. On this understanding, we infer that God does intervene and speak angelically and thus cannot be implicated as a causal factor in Abraham's subsequent loss of faith. The second way to understand the second Exordium story would have us read it as it is written, not for omissions, while making inferences. On this understanding, *de Silentio's* silence on the matter of God's angelic speech indicates that God Himself remained silent during the events of the binding. If we conclude that God failed to intervene with an angelic message that prevents the sacrifice and preserves His covenant with Abraham, we must imagine that, when Abraham “saw the ram” he must have mutely intuited that “God had provided it” to be sacrificed in place of Isaac. In this case, the accomplishment of the binding is less clear, and God's silence may be connected to Abraham's loss of faith.

For some reason, Abraham loses the faith after he performs the binding silently; but his silence itself cannot be the cause of the loss. This matter is significant because it raises the

57 See Lippitt, 2003: 24.

possibility that God's action or inaction on the Mount impacted Abraham's faith in the aftermath of the binding. The matter of Abraham's faith has a profound impact, in turn, on Isaac's faith and fate. This raises questions which are pressing for our present purposes—namely, was Abraham's faith in God during the trial sufficient to preserve Isaac's faith in God? Can the seemingly proper events of the binding (alone) occasion a faithful relationship of Isaac to God? Or does the trial consist of more, extend beyond the binding itself? And is it possible that Isaac truly flourishes (and flourishes *in his faith*) as his father loses the faith and grows increasingly depressed and weary?

Perhaps the weaning story which punctuates the second Exordium story can shed light on these mysteries:

When the child has grown big and is to be weaned, the mother virginally conceals her breast, and then the child no longer has a mother. How fortunate the child who has not lost his mother in some other way!

In this weaning story, the events of the weaning period unfold by way of a strategy of concealment. The concealment of the breast is analogous to Abraham's silence in the second Exordium story. When the weaning is performed via the concealment of the breast, this has a quite complicated outcome: apparently, the child both loses and does not lose his mother. Clearly, the child loses his mother, as *de Silentio* states, "the child no longer has a mother," however, the child is apparently fortunate to have lost his mother in this way and not "in some other way," which leads us to conclude, the mother is not really or entirely lost to the child weaned by way of concealment of the breast. How are we to understand this?

One way we might understand this is by keeping in mind the temporality of the weaning period and of the processual nature of mother/child relations. This would allow us to see that the child loses the breast as a source of nutritive sustenance during the weaning period and perhaps thus experiences a felt-loss of the mother (qua breast) for this period. Again, it is important to remember that, for the child, during the weaning period, the breast/mother boundary is blurred. After the weaning period, the mother/child relation is redefined and, of course, the child (fortunately!) has not actually lost its mother in any more serious, harmful or enduring way. If we adopt this understanding, it would indicate that, in the second Exordium story, Isaac loses his father by way of the binding and may or not regain him afterwards. That is to say, Isaac loses his father not only as their familiar, familial, 'this-worldly' bond is suspended but also as Abraham's role changes such that he no longer acts as the intermediary in Isaac's relationship with God (and this parallels the situation in a weaning period as the role of the breast changes such that it no longer acts as the intermediary in the mother/child relationship). Certainly, after the binding in the second Exordium story, Isaac loses and does not regain Abraham as the exemplary father of faith because Abraham loses his faith. But can Isaac regain his father in a more mundane way after Mount Moriah? Well, Abraham loses himself, here, as the joyful, youthful man he was before the binding, so if Isaac were to regain his father it would be as a sad shell of his former self.

This leaves us with the question of Isaac's relationship to God. If we take it to echo or parallel the second Exordium story, this weaning story seems to suggest that, fortunately, Isaac is able to found or preserve a faithful relationship with God—as the mother is not *really*, in any harmful or enduring sense lost to her child and so the weaning will not preclude the possibility that she and the child may have a good relationship—and seems, in turn, to suggest that the events of the binding in this story have unfolded properly such that Isaac's faith can be saved. On the other hand, if we (with Lippett) take the second weaning story to *contrast* the second Exordium story, this weaning story seems to suggest that, unfortunately, Isaac will lose his faith in God by way of the binding and/or its aftermath—for whatever reason; perhaps because Abraham fails Isaac as an example of faith, and thus fails to pass the test, even if he did faithfully perform the binding; perhaps because God fails to speak angelically on Mount Moriah. This point is open to interpretation and you, my reader, must choose for yourself: do you hear an echo or an opposite, see a parallel or a juxtaposition, regarding this second set of stories? We discern an echo and a parallel on this point, perhaps because we prefer to believe Isaac's faith may be saved.

2.3. Third Exordium

The third Exordium story presents a rather truncated retelling of the binding that requires us to deduce details which have been omitted. So, we surmise, Abraham ascended to Mount Moriah with Isaac and kept the faith as he proceeded through the binding, as “he drew the knife.” There is no mention of a speech act of intervention by God or a ram or anything about the trial after the knife is drawn and so, there is no way to know for certain if the events of the binding unfolded properly in this story.

Abraham suffers a crisis of faith in the aftermath of Mount Moriah in this Exordium story. Of this much we can be certain. Another early-morning picture of domestic bliss gives way to a portrait of Abraham mired in confused rumination and overwhelmed by a sense of incomprehension. Abraham feels himself very much alone in his trial by God and on the course of action to which it has led him. In vain he seeks peace while trying to make sense of it all, to come to terms with the impossibly painful situation and his own actions and decisions. Peace eludes Abraham along with the answers to his questions concerning sin, love, sacrifice, and forgiveness. As the third Exordium story comes to an end, Abraham is still questioning, unable to comprehend the multiple dimensions and logical impossibilities of his situation.

Let us turn our attention to the third weaning story:

When the child is to be weaned, the mother, too, is not without sorrow, because she and the child are more and more to be separated, because the child who first lay under her heart and later rested upon her breast will never again be so close. So they grieve together the brief sorrow. How fortunate the one who kept the child so close and did not need to grieve any more! (FT 13)⁵⁸

⁵⁸ We return here to the issue acknowledged above in footnote 35. We can read this weaning story in at least two ways. On the one hand, it might indicate that God is not a sadistic or sociopathic God who takes pleasure in violent trials of His adherents. On the other hand, it might indicate some slippage on

As each Exordium story grows more complex, problematic, and rife with uncertainty or a lack of clarity than the last, in turn each of the weaning stories seems, contrarily or alternatively, to be more idealistic and trouble-free. But this seeming appearance of freedom and idealism is made possible by the blind-eye that is turned toward the actual period of weaning. The centrality of the breast to the story seems too to be diminishing, increasingly falling from view; indeed, the breast is not mentioned at all in the last weaning story.

Let us not get ahead of ourselves. Regarding the third weaning story, the sorrow depicted arises because of the transformation of relations that occurs therein. It is a transformation which may feel like a separation. But the felt sense of separation along with the sorrow by which it is accompanied is brief. While the child will never again be so close to the breast as it was when the breast was a source of nutritive sustenance, the breast remains a part of the mother to whom the child, after the relatively brief period of weaning, forms a new and enduring relationship of closeness. In this sense, the child need not grieve anymore as it is fortunate to be kept so close to the mother.

In the absence of requisite details regarding the corresponding Exordium story, let us imagine that Abraham keeps the faith as he proceeds through his trial by God. The moment in which the knife is drawn evokes vivid emotions comparable to sorrow as the familial bond of this world is suspended and, in that moment, Isaac loses his father like the child loses the breast during the period of weaning. (Perhaps Isaac also feels fallen from grace, alienated, or separated from God, faithless, as Abraham draws the knife.) Only briefly. As the breast is a part of the mother to whom the child develops a new and enduring closeness after a good-enough weaning period, Abraham's proof of his own unwavering faith should serve as the foundation of Isaac's faith and give rise to a new relationship of father and son in the faith. But in this story, after Mount Moriah, Abraham suffers a crisis of faith and thus, very much like he is as the third Exordium story comes to close, we are left questioning: what might come, then, of Isaac's faith?

And, here, again, it comes down to a matter of interpretation and you, my reader, are welcome to your own. We like to believe that the outcome of the third weaning story—that is, a mother and child in a close relationship after the challenge of the weaning—indicates the possibility that Isaac will remain in a close relationship of faith in God after the challenge of the binding in the third Exordium story.

2.4. Fourth Exordium

In the fourth Exordium story, the early morning arrives and Abraham is ready. Neither caught up in domestic bliss nor mired in rumination, he proceeds alongside Isaac on the journey to Moriah 'harmoniously' and on the Mount prepares for the sacrifice "calmly and gently." Everything is going perfectly, "but when he turned away and drew the knife, Isaac saw that

Kierkegaard's part as he muddles his own analogies in his obsessive drive to indirectly speak to his broken engagement with Regine.

Abraham's left hand was clenched in despair, that a shudder when through his whole body—but Abraham drew the knife."

Poor Abraham; our heart aches for him. He gave everything he had and proceeded with all the faith he could muster only to be betrayed by his body. Surely the shudder was involuntary and should not disqualify his display of faith, no? No; it seems the shudder reveals that, while he proceeds properly in his outward actions, his inner state of faith wavers at the pivotal moment on Mount Moriah. God is silent—or *de Silentio* is silent regarding God—in this story, so we can't say for certain if in His eyes Abraham passed the test. Sadly, what is certain and plainly stated is this: Immediately on witnessing the shudder, "Isaac had lost the faith." This shores up the notion that it is possible for Isaac to keep the faith only if he observes his father lead by example in remaining unwavering in his position, keeping and demonstrating his own faith.

This unfortunate Exordium story corresponds with a succinct weaning story:

When the child is to be weaned, the mother has a stronger sustenance at hand so that the child does not perish. How fortunate the one who has this stronger sustenance at hand.

Isaac symbolically stands for the child who will perish. As the binding is bungled—is it fair to say: As the trial is mismanaged?—by Abraham, Isaac loses the faith. This faith is symbolized by more solid food, that is, a stronger sustenance. It is a faith without need of intermediary and a sustenance vital to the nature, quality and health, of this-worldly kin networks and interpersonal relations. It is a faith more nourishing than any transient individual emotion or question. It is the kind of sustenance, ideally, a mother could provide her child.

Concluding Thoughts

If we fear a loss of faith, let us return our gaze to Genesis 22 and find there Abraham, the father of great nations; the revered figure who did not waiver in answering all questions: "God will provide." Are you reassured? If the reassurance comes too easily, without a sense of sickness or a sleepless night or two, you may be the type of Christian Kierkegaard claimed late in his life he had been criticizing all along, in everything he had written.

What about the make-believe man about whom *de Silentio* writes? For his part, he never waivers in his belief, "No one was as great as Abraham." The make-believe man 'pilgrimages to Mount Moriah' frequently and fixedly, if only in his mind, to "ponder this event." But when it comes to comprehension, he sinks down wearily, despairing: "Who is able to understand [Abraham]?" In his endeavour to understand, in each of the four Exordium stories, the make-believe man puts himself in Abraham's position and every time, in each instance, he doubts his actions and decisions. Often, in fact, he agonizes, scrutinizes, thinks and rethinks the situation, with no easy peace of mind resulting. His thoughtful exercises do not succeed in rendering Abraham comprehensible and, so, the make-believe man continues to search in vain for his own capacity of understanding (FT 14).

The search confronts me with the significance and sickness which come with painful situations and (inter)personal/(un)Godly dilemmas for which there are no perfect solutions. The imperfections stand, unresolved, at least as long as we stand with one foot planted in this world, with its ethical dilemmas and transgressions, relationships and responsibilities, betrayals and complexities, joys, sorrows, bonds and beauty.

The Exordium and weaning stories remind and reassure me that amid the imperfections, it is possible of many of our trials and tribulations that we may conduct ourselves properly or in such a way that is good enough to strive towards loving, life-affirming self-growth and relations. We have moved away from the emphasis on dyadic relational structures which thus far has defined all scholarly analysis of the Exordium and weaning stories. In our interpretation of these stories, we have moved towards a theory of tripartite relational structures. The key to our theory is this: God/Abraham/Isaac = Mother/breast/child. Thus we have introduced the breast as a hitherto-overlooked yet central figure or object in the weaning stories, which we contend is analogous to the figure of Abraham in the Exordium stories. This generates a new understanding of the stories and shores up a most-vital moral thereof, namely: *it is better for the child to suffer a separation from the breast (by way of the weaning) in order to keep or renew the connection with the mother who has at hand more solid food, that is, stronger sustenance, just as it is better for Isaac to suffer a separation from Abraham (as their familiar and familial bond is suspended along with the ethical precepts of this world in the binding) if such a difficult rift proves to be an occasion which preserves or founds Isaac's faith in God who can provide him the most necessary sustenance.*

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