

**ARNOŠT KRAUS ON A. G. MEISSNER  
AND KIERKEGAARD'S *FEAR AND TREMBLING***

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**ABSTRACT**

The article deals with the question of a potential connection between August Gottlieb Meißner's short story "Mord aus Schwärmerey" (Murder out of Zealotry), also known as "Die geopfert Kinder" (The Sacrificed Children), and Søren Kierkegaard's work *Frygt og Bæven* (*Fear and Trembling*). In 1938 the Czech scholar of German and Scandinavian studies Arnošt Kraus put forward in the journal *Danske studier* the hypothesis that Kierkegaard might have been influenced by Meißner's story. The present article explicates Kraus's argumentation and assesses its possible validity.

**Keywords:** Arnošt Kraus; August Gottlieb Meissner; Søren Kierkegaard; *Frygt og Bæven*; *Fear and Trembling*; German literature; Danish literature; Danish philosophy; crime story; crime fiction

Arnošt Kraus (1859–1943) was not only one of the greatest Czech scholars in German Studies, but also a very important Scandinavianist. He published several books and many articles and essays on Scandinavian topics. Most of these texts are written in Czech. However, on certain occasions he would make an exception and write such a contribution in Danish. In this article I will deal with one such significant exception: the article "Et Abrahams Offer" (Abraham's Sacrifice) which was published in Danish in the journal *Danske Studier* in 1938. It seems that Kraus had thought he had made an important discovery concerning Søren Kierkegaard and that it was worth sharing with other readers than only those who were able to read the Czech language.<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge, however, Kraus's publication did not attract any attention in Denmark or elsewhere, despite its interesting thesis. My article will explicate Kraus's argumentation and assess its possible validity.

At the beginning of "Et Abrahams Offer" Kraus shortly introduces a passage from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (*Frygt og Bæven*, 1843) as one about sleeplessness and

<sup>1</sup> In fact, the main thesis of "Et Abrahams Offer" was already introduced in a footnote on p. 435 in the article "Sören [sic] Kierkegaard" which Kraus published in Czech in 1900. See my footnote nr. 8.

inattentiveness of people “listening” to a sermon, and then he immediately quotes it as follows (the sentences in square brackets are by Kraus):

Traf det sig imidlertid [naar Prækenen handlede om Abrahams Offer] saa, at der blandt Tilhørerne var en Mand, der leed af Søvnløshed, da ligger den forfærdeligste, den dybeste, tragiske og comiske Misforstaaelse meget nær. Han gik hjem, han vilde gjøre ligesom Abraham; thi Sønnen er jo det Bedste. Hvis hiin Taler fik det at vide, da gik han maaskee til ham, han samlede al sin geistlige Værdighed og raabte: „afskyelige Menneske, Udskud af Samfundet, hvilken Djævel har saaledes besat Dig, at Du vil myrde din Søn.“

[Han anvender saaledes al sin Veltalenhed paa at gendrive sine egne Ord i Prækenen]. Hvis Synderen ... ikke blev overbeviist, saa er hans Situation tragisk nok. Han blev da formodentlig henrettet eller sendt i Daarekisten, kort, han blev ulykkelig i Forhold til den saakaldte Virkelighed. (Kraus, “Et Abrahams Offer” 169)<sup>2</sup>

But just suppose [when the sermon deals with Abraham’s sacrifice] that someone listening is a man who suffers from sleeplessness – then the most terrifying, the most profound, tragic, and comic misunderstanding is very close at hand. He goes home, he wants to do just as Abraham did, for the son, after all, is the best. If the preacher found out about it, he perhaps would go to the man, he would muster all his ecclesiastical dignity and shout, “You despicable man, you scum of society, what devil has so possessed you that you want to murder your son.”

[He consequently uses all of his eloquence to rebut his own words from the sermon]. [I]f the sinner remains unconvinced, his situation is really tragic. Then he probably will be executed or sent to the madhouse. In short, in relation to so-called reality, he became unhappy [...]. (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 28–30)<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, this quote might confuse the reader, because Kraus’s single-sentence introduction provides it with almost no context, and his mention of “sleeplessness” confuses things even further. It is thus necessary to clarify the context here. The narrator Johannes de Silentio, that is, the fictional author of *Fear and Trembling*, is convinced that the absolute majority of churchgoers do not really pay attention to what the pastor says; in this sense, or also in the literal sense of the word, they “sleep” while listening to sermons. The narrator also uses the expression “sleeplessness” to describe a state of being undisturbed by a story that, in his opinion, should be deeply disquieting: the story of Abraham who is determined to sacrifice his son:

Der var talløse Slægter, der vidste Ord til andet udenad Fortællingen om Abraham, hvor Mange gjorde den søvnløs? [...] Man taler til Abrahams Ære, men hvorledes? Man giver det Hele et ganske almindeligt Udtryk: »det var det Store, at han elskede Gud saaledes, at han vilde offre ham det Bedste.« [...] Man identificerer i Tankens og Mundens Løb ganske trygt Isaak og det Bedste, og den Mediterende kan godt ryge sin Pibe under Meditationen, og den Hørende kan godt strække Benene mageligt ud fra sig. (Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* 124)

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<sup>2</sup> Kraus’s Danish quote corresponds with the critical edition of *Frygt og Bæven* in *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vol. 4, 124–125. The passage comes from the part which is called “Foreløbig Expectoration” [“Preliminary Expectoration”].

<sup>3</sup> Here and below I use the Hong’s translation of *Fear and Trembling*, published by Princeton University Press in 1983. All other translations in this article are mine.

There were countless generations who knew the story of Abraham by heart, word for word, but how many did it render sleepless? [...] We glorify Abraham, but how? We recite the whole story in clichés: “The great thing was that he loved God in such a way that he was willing to offer him the best.” [...] Mentally and orally we homologize Isaac and the best, and the contemplator can very well smoke his pipe while cogitating, and the listener may very well stretch out his legs comfortably. (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 28)

Then, after such passages, come the sentences quoted by Kraus, that is, sentences which give an example of what could happen if one of the people in church actually did pay attention to the sermon and became disturbed by the story: potentially, such a churchgoer might go home and want to sacrifice his son just like Abraham. Johannes de Silentio (and Kierkegaard) seems to revel in the paradox that the pastor in his sermon praises Abraham for the very same thing for which he would castigate this concrete churchgoer as a murderer. This is, in fact, one of the typical strategies that Kierkegaard uses in his pseudonymous works: he often chooses extreme examples in order to disturb his contemporaries in their alleged religious lethargy and to force them to take a personal stance toward the described issue. *Fear and Trembling* is meant to be a provocation of all people who consider themselves (Christian) believers: the text revolves around the question whether the biblical Abraham is really a commendable man of faith or whether he is a murderer. *Fear and Trembling* does not provide the reader with one clear answer, but with a dilemma that each reader has to resolve for him/herself: either religious faith is something which totally exceeds the ethical demands of human life, or Abraham can be called a murderer, because he, after all, was ready to take his son's life all the way until God stopped him from doing so.<sup>4</sup> At the same time *Fear and Trembling* forces the reader to think about possible analogous events in human history: why is only Abraham lauded for his willingness to sacrifice his son while any other person who decides to sacrifice his child/children due to an alleged calling from God would probably be regarded as a madman and/or murderer?

The main point Kraus makes in his article is that Kierkegaard was probably inspired by a short story by August Gottlieb Meißner (1753–1807). Meißner was a German writer who worked for twenty years as a professor at Prague University. As a writer he is more or less forgotten now, but he was very successful in his days, especially thanks to his crime stories. If he is at all mentioned in today's literary scholarship, it is usually in the context of crime fiction: he is considered to be a pioneer in this genre in German literature.<sup>5</sup> Meißner often claimed that his crime stories were based on real events and that he avoided too much aesthetic embellishment for the sake of authenticity.<sup>6</sup> Whether all of his short stories are based on real events is difficult to ascertain, although in some cases scholars have been able to prove it.<sup>7</sup> Kraus certainly believes that the short story that

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<sup>4</sup> One of Johannes de Silentio's most succinct formulations of this dilemma reads as follows: “Enten kan den Enkelte som den Enkelte staae i et absolut Forhold til det Absolute, og saa er det Ethiske ikke det Høieste, eller Abraham er tabt [...]” (*Frygt og Bæven* 201) [“Either the single individual as the single individual can stand in an absolute relation to the absolute, and consequently the ethical is not the highest, or Abraham is lost [...]” (*Fear and Trembling* 113)].

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Košenina 129 and Weitzel 132.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Košenina 129 and Weitzel 136, 139.

<sup>7</sup> This includes, in fact, the story in question here; see Košenina 134.

allegedly inspired Kierkegaard, originates in a historical event. In Kraus's words, Kierkegaard's fictional speculation "havde engang været Virkelighed, det gruelige var sket, og han [Kierkegaard] vidste efter al Sandsynlighed Besked derom" ["had once been reality, the horrible did happen, and he (Kierkegaard) in all likelihood knew about it"].<sup>8</sup>

According to Kraus, this horrible real event is described in Meißner's short story "Die geopfert Kinder" (The Sacrificed Children) and he enumerates several editions of Meißner's works in which it appears (170). What Kraus does not mention is that Meißner's story was also published as "Mord aus Schwärmerey" (Murder out of Zealotry) and that this was actually the original title.<sup>9</sup> Kraus introduces his retelling of the story by the words "[den] lyder omtrent saaledes" (170) ["it reads approximately like this"], and then, despite the expression "approximately", he actually retells the entire short story word for word in (presumably) his own translation from German into Danish.<sup>10</sup>

The short story begins as follows: "[I] Neumark i Brandenburg levede for nogle Aar siden en Faarehyrde, som nød det fortjente Ry at være ærlig, stiltfærdig, from, maaske altfor stiltfærdig, ti han var Herrnhuter" (Kraus, "Et Abrahams Offer" 170)<sup>11</sup> [In the Neumark in Brandenburg there lived some years ago a shepherd who had the well-deserved reputation of being honest, quiet, pious, perhaps too quiet, because he was a *Herrnhuter*.]<sup>12</sup> One day when he tends his sheep, his friend and fellow believer, the village schoolmaster ("hans Ven og Trosfælle, Landsbyens Skolemester" [170]) joins him and they speak of spiritual matters. The schoolmaster complains to him that "vor nuværende Tro er [...] næppe saadan som Fædrenes. [...] Patriarkernes Tro, Abrahams Tro, der ofrede Gud sin eneste Søn, hvem kan nutildags haabe at naa den?" ["our present faith is hardly that of our forefathers. The faith of the patriarchs, the faith of Abraham, who sacrificed his only son to God, who can hope to reach it nowadays?"] The shepherd loses his peace of mind and becomes sleepless ("søvnløs" 170). He rereads the story of Abraham and Isak in the Bible many times and prays to God so that He would bless him with Abraham's faith, too ("[han ber] Gud om ogsaa at velsigne ham med Abrahams Tro" 170). Eventually he decides to sacrifice his three little sons. He kills them with an axe and is put into prison. The short story ends with the following words: "Det tjener hans Dommere til Ære, at de ikke dømte ham til Døden, men til livsvarig Tugthusstraf. Da Kong Frederik skulde underskrive Dommen, slettede han Ordet *Tugthus* og satte *Galehus* i Stedet" (171). ["It does his judges honor that they did not sentence him to death, but to life imprisonment.

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, Kraus assumes that the cases of people wanting to kill their children in order to imitate Abraham have happened repeatedly throughout history: "To se snad dosti často stalo; případ takový vypravuje A. G. Meissner [sic] ve svých Skizzen, dost možná, že Kierkegaardovi tanul na mysl!" (Kraus, "Sören Kierkegaard" 435) ["This perhaps used to happen quite often. A. G. Meißner tells of such a case in his *Sketches*. It is quite possible that Kierkegaard recollected it in his mind."]

<sup>9</sup> See Košenina 130 and his note on "Mord aus Schwärmerey" on p. 88 in Meißner's *Ausgewählte Kriminalgeschichten*.

<sup>10</sup> I have compared Kraus's retelling with "Mord aus Schwärmerey" in Meißner's *Ausgewählte Kriminalgeschichten*, and the differences are truly minimal.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the German version: "In der Neumark lebte vor einigen Jahren ein Schäfer; ein Mann, der bei allen, die ihn kanten, den Ruf eines ehrlichen, stillen, frommen Mannes hatte, und ihn auch wirklich verdiente; vielleicht ein wenig alzustill, alzufromm, denn er war ein Herrnhuter" (Meißner, "Mord aus Schwärmerey" 30).

<sup>12</sup> In English the more common designation of the "Herrnhuter" is "the Moravian Brethren".

When King Friedrich was to sign the sentence, he erased the word *prison* and wrote *madhouse* instead.”]

To support his claim that Kierkegaard was probably influenced by reading this story, Kraus offers the following arguments. Meißner was “[e]n av de mest overfladiske, men mest læste Belletrister i Slutningen af det 18. Aarh” (169). [“(one of the most superficial, but most read fiction writers at the end of the 18th century)”] and, according to Kraus, widely read and translated in Scandinavia as well:

Meissners [sic] Skrifter var meget udbredte og læste, ikke mindst i Danmark. En stor Del af dem blev oversat til Dansk (bl. a. af Tode). I min Afhandling om ham læser jeg denne Anmærkning: “Næsten alle hans Skrifter blev oversat paa Dansk”, hvilket jeg nu efter et halvt Aarhundrede ikke kan kontrolere. (170)

[Meißner’s writings were very widespread and much read, not least in Denmark. A great number of them was translated into Danish (by Tode, among others). In my treatise on him I am reading this remark: “Almost all of his writings were translated into Danish”, something which I now after half a century cannot check.]<sup>13</sup>

Kraus thus reaches the following conclusion: “Saa kendte som Meissners [sic] Fortællinger var, er der al Rimelighed for, at Kierkegaard har kendt denne, og at den har ligget bag ved hans Betragtninger i ‘Frygt og Bæven’” (171). [“As known as Meißner’s stories were, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that Kierkegaard knew this one and that it was behind his reflections in ‘Fear and Trembling.’”]

How can one assess this hypothesis from today’s perspective? As far as I have been able to ascertain by checking various resources on Kierkegaard scholarship, no one has as yet followed Kraus’s suggestion. It seems to me that one should approach the question on two different levels of discussion. On the one hand, it seems rather unlikely that Meißner’s short story would incite Kierkegaard to write *Fear and Trembling* as a whole. After all, the story of Abraham and Isaac had been discussed and interpreted by theologians and philosophers for centuries, so Kierkegaard could certainly have read many other texts that might have given him the impetus for writing the book. On the other hand, Kraus’s hypothesis is more plausible in the case of the concrete passage in *Fear and Trembling* concerning the story of a man who decides to sacrifice his children after the pastor’s sermon about the extraordinary faith of Abraham. In this regard the two stories are quite similar; it makes a little difference whether it is the schoolmaster in Meißner’s text or the pastor in Kierkegaard’s text who triggers the man’s desire to act as Abraham did. In both cases, the “sleeplessness” seems to be a major motif, too. It is therefore not difficult to imagine that Kierkegaard might have been inspired by Meißner’s short story to write this concrete passage in *Fear and Trembling*. Unfortunately, this is one of the cases where

<sup>13</sup> Here Kraus refers to his long article “August Gottlieb Meissner [sic]” which he published in Czech in the journal *Atheneum* in 1888. The passage he has in mind is most certainly this: “Skoro všechny [Meißnerovy] spisy byly přeloženy do dánštiny; výbor, zvláště ze skizz, vyšel švédsky r. 1800 (Valda skrifter), téhož roku skizy rusky” (153n22). [“Almost all of (Meißner’s) writings were translated into Danish; a selection, especially from *Sketches*, was published in Swedish in 1800 (Selected Writings), and *Sketches* came out in Russian in the same year.”] According to Weitzel, Meißner’s stories were soon after their success in German-speaking countries translated into French, Danish, Dutch, Swedish and Russian (132).

literary scholarship can only work with conjectures and suppositions without definite proof. Nevertheless, the hypothesis presented in the article “Et Abrahams Offer” is yet another proof of the fact that Arnošt Kraus was an erudite scholar with broad horizons, as well as a very attentive reader.<sup>14</sup>

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