

# A Preface to the ‘Preface’ of *Prefaces*

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*Prefaces* was published as an independent little book on June 17, 1844, the very same day as *The Concept of Anxiety*, four days after *Philosophical Fragments*, and nine days after *Three Upbuilding Discourses*. This fact illustrates not only the productivity and the breadth of Kierkegaard’s activities but also the close temporal and logical connection between some of the acknowledged psychological, philosophical, and theological works and that little, apparently modest, book *Prefaces*. One could obviously choose to describe the book as “that little problem-free labour of love which makes fun of the literary world of its time” and “a rest-cure in between the important works”<sup>1</sup> as is done in the notes to the third Danish edition of Kierkegaard’s *Collected Works*, but the following will show that this book desires and succeeds in doing more than entertaining the reader and serving as therapy for its author.

It is strange indeed that, in the study of Kierkegaard’s works, there are only two critical texts dealing in depth with *Prefaces*. The first one is the overview and commentary by Sylviane Agacinski, *Aparté: conceptions et morts de Søren Kierkegaard* (Aubier-Flammarion 1977);<sup>2</sup> the second one is by Finn Frandsen: “Forord: Kierkegaards paratekst” in *Denne slyngelagtige eftertid* bd. II (Århus 1995).<sup>3</sup> Both of these fine overviews contain good points and perspectives, and they will serve as the points of departure for my own analysis which, as a close reading, will hopefully begin to fill in certain gaps. A *literary* reading will be presented in which the reader’s attention will be directed to the literary strategies found in the text itself. The focus will be on the text’s staging – its inner “logic”, its composition, its genre affiliations, its styles, and its eroticized and transgressive discourse.

## The Preface and the Paraliterary

The historic forefathers of paraliterature are all those about whom we must check their labels: Philosopher? Author? Critic? Scientist? Writer! (Rousseau, Friedrich Schlegel, Kierkegaard, Walter Benjamin, Sartre, etc.).<sup>4</sup>

But the subjective thinker is not a poet, though he may also be a poet; he is not an ethicist, though he may also be an ethicist; he is not a dialectician, though he may also be a dialectician. He is essentially an existing individual, while the existence of the poet is non-essential in relation to the poem, the existence of the ethicist in relation to his doctrine, the existence of the dialectician in relation to his thought. The subjective thinker is not a man of science, but an artist.<sup>5</sup>

The Greek prefix “para-” means “by the side of” and indicates that we are dealing with a special “type” of text, which is closely connected to other texts. A paratext is found in the border regions, on the margin of another, the essential, text. Clearly, this is the general position of a preface.

Sylviane Agacinski’s book, as already mentioned bears the title *Aparté*, an example of a word which carries a number of meanings and connotations related to those mentioned above. One part of this multiplicity of meanings is found in the Danish word “*aparte*” which literally means “a little bit off” (in the sense of “a bit strange”). This is the fashion in which Agacinski sums up her own work on *Prefaces*:

If, for example, we were to call ‘preface’ a redundant and superfluous form of writing, always capable of showing up all alone, of starting up all over again, of putting itself into question, of illustrating itself, spilling out over itself and over the book, all the books of K. and his pseudonyms could be considered prefaces.<sup>6</sup>

Finn Frandsen dwells briefly upon this section of Agacinski’s book in both his article on *Prefaces in Denne slyngelagtige eftertid* (1995) and in an article in *Kierkegaard-pseudonymitet* (Kbh. 1993).<sup>7</sup> Frandsen feels it necessary to distance himself from what he perceives as being a very radical interpretation of Kierkegaard. He writes, in response to the passage cited above, that “the problem with Agacinski’s reading, which follows classical deconstruction, is that it thus results in an overthrowing of [all] dis-

inction, and thus also of the play between paratext and text *within* Kierkegaard's own authorship".<sup>8</sup> And this points out an essential problem: Agacinski's reading is seemingly open to an almost absolute relativism, in which the possibility for the presence of "pure and distinct" genres and the conceptual thinking of philosophy in Kierkegaard's work seems to be completely eliminated. If this is the case, then the new [literary] figure, the paraliterary, is also rent in the maelstrom and loses its explanatory power. It makes no sense to talk about a paratext if there is no text to be found beside which the paratext can place itself: a paratext exists only as a parasite.

For me, Agacinski's text does not stand for such a radical relativization and levelling. Rather, Frandsen seemingly overlooks the subjunctive form which Agacinski employs in this quote. The text actually says, "*If, for example, we were to call 'preface'...*"; no less than three subjunctive forms appear side by side. This use of language indicates that Agacinski's comments are a proposal, an experimental attempt to advance understanding – and thus not an attempt to advance a theory.<sup>9</sup> Further reading of Agacinski's text reveals more of the same in the form of a "but" followed by an even more precise description of the underlying thought process:

But then a good many other "genres" that remain on the internal or external edge of the book (parasitical, parallel, para-literary, as well as para-philosophical) would constitute the body of this work; from the prolegomena or paralipomena, to the postscripts, to the notes and pieces, to the diapsalmata, to the actual or fictional journal, to the letters, to the fragments, to the remarks, and to all those para-discourses delivered by book-binders, editors, and discoverers of manuscripts who thus pile up several layers of prefaces and forewords.<sup>10</sup>

Here the text which could be called paratextual from among Kierkegaard's works are singled out, and it is clear that altogether those texts would quantitatively compose a very *small* portion of the collected amount of text. The above-mentioned categories include no whole works, but rather the small texts which are found on the fringes or in the neighborhoods of various works – omitted passages, notes, letters, fragments, and so on. Thus, the only "work" which can, in its entirety, be said to be paratextual is, in fact, *Prefaces*, an observation which has been the leading thought of the following analysis. It is something else

entirely that other works, particularly *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, could be said to be *paraphilosophical*, in the sense that they are written in explicit opposition to Hegelian philosophy. But these texts do not, as does *Prefaces*, altogether renounce philosophical argumentation and methods.

Agacinski does not advance any set conclusion to the problems surrounding paraliterature's relationship to the more unambiguously philosophical or theological works. Instead, her text, which admittedly is very radical, opens up new ways in which Kierkegaard's work can be viewed. Reflection is kept in motion, thus the relatively new "generic" distinction, paraliterature, should be prevented from freezing into formalization, thus merely becoming another concept. Frandsen's reading "does [not] have the same need to 'deconstruct' and mix genres"<sup>11</sup>; moreover, he designates paratext a "concept", a move which seems to denote a certain skepticism. In my opinion, a reading strategy like that of Agacinski is not an expression of the wish for the fulfillment of a particular "need", but rather an attempt to keep an interpretation of Kierkegaard's texts just as open – and as radical – as the texts themselves often are.

## The Composition

Merely from the title, one can see that *Prefaces* is a rare bird, for although many of the pseudonymous writings have striking or original titles, this certainly is one of the most weird and mystifying. What is immediately striking is that nothing comes "after" and these prefaces, these *forewords*, stand by and for themselves. As a matter of fact, the book was published as a separate work with no text preceding or following it.

## The Subtitle

"Light reading for certain classes as the occasion may require"<sup>12</sup> is first of all a distinction of genre: this book belongs to a lighter, carefree literature, but not, however, to merely popular literature, since the book directs itself to "certain classes".<sup>13</sup> "Certain" should be understood as a reference to the fact that a certain basic level of culture and knowledge would be required in order to get something out of these texts, a type of culture to which only a very few had access in Kierkegaard's time. Basically, it was only the bourgeoisie, the aristocracy, and the clergy who had

the possibility of entering into the age's religious, literary, or philosophical discussions – a knowledge of which was (and is) necessary in order to fully understand these texts.

### The Pseudonym

Nicolaus means “the victorious people”; Nico- comes from *nike*, victory; -laus from *laos*, the people – and notabene, as is well known, means “note well” or, please note, here follows a concise critical note or notice in relation to a larger text, often a letter. In this sense, the pseudonym connotes a certain authoritative weight, and it signals that “the victorious people requests that one should note well this text”. This signal, though, is contradicted by the acronym “N.N.”, which is short for *nomen nescio*: “I do not know the name”. This contradiction throws doubt on whether the author is to be understood as an authority or rather as a self effacing anonymous figure. In this sense, the name Nicolaus Notabene in a subtle way implicitly alludes to its own annihilation.

It is striking that the title is repeated in the first section of the text. If one thought that there was something strange going on with the title, one can in turn also puzzle over the fact that the book begins in a completely ordinary fashion: with a preface, which is then followed by eight sections of varying lengths topped off with a postscript. In this text, the repetition of the title does not, as it does in *Repetition, On The Concept of Irony, and The Concept of Anxiety*, serve to emphasize the fact that we are now finally getting to the question at hand after the requisite introductory manoeuvres. In *Prefaces*, the subject is precisely those very introductory manoeuvres, and the title and its repetition have the function here of drawing attention to the fact that a textual convention, the preface, is the theme, and that one encounters already at the text's very edges that which is essential.

The subtitle, along with the postscript, creates a frame for the text, not only in terms of composition, but also as an attempt to lead the reading in a particular direction. The subtitle evokes the carefree; that the following pages should not be taken too seriously. The postscript, on the other hand, says that if one would actually think about taking the written word literally, and relate oneself to it in a deeper sense – indeed, then it would ensue that one must struggle with nothing less than “all experiences and concepts” (99). This built-in potential for evoking a ma-

for existential and philosophical crisis must imply that the texts, when read in a certain way, are in fact very meaningful. Everywhere this doubleness between the meaningful and the meaningless, between gravity and lightness, is to be found, but it is foisted upon the reader to find out where and how meaningfulness hides itself.

## The Parody

This book can just as uneasily as the majority of Kierkegaard's other writings be unambiguously thrust under some traditional genre rubric; there are, however, certain distinguishing traits which make it relevant to attempt a kind of classification.

The first trait is that the various texts use elements from real-world language, in the form of references to factually existing persons, places, books, periodicals, and events. A second trait is the fact that there are many elements which are clearly fictive: imaginary authors, periodicals, journals, and societies. These factual and fictive elements are intermingled throughout the text, and partake in this way of the same truth value *within* the text. To differentiate between fact and fiction presumes a certain knowledge of the context, especially the literary and philosophical currents of Kierkegaard's day. Within the texts themselves, it obviously does not create a problem that the fictive figure of Nicolaus Notabene should meditate upon Hegel's philosophy, and that he can, in a completely factual fashion, have something plausible and essential to say about it.<sup>14</sup>

For many reasons it makes sense to consider the book as having parody as its overarching genre. Generally speaking, the parody is first and foremost defined as a work directed specifically against textual conventions. And this is precisely the case with the texts found in *Prefaces*, as they form a commentary on, and a criticism of, the conventional relationship between a book and its preface. Add to this the fact that the etymological meanings of "foreword" and "parody" lend themselves to a justification of that genre label known as "parody". This last word comes from the Greek *para-odi*, "beside the ode", where the essential point in this case is that the ode is an example of a strongly delineated literary genre and thus a relatively well-defined entity. "Foreword" corresponds to the Greek *pro-logos*, where *pro-* is etymologically related to *para-*, and both prefixes indicate that something stands beside, before, against some-

thing else (logically, spatially, temporally).<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is also implied that the “something else” must be more substantially and more unambiguously definable.

Both parody and prologue presume an actually existing, or as is the case with these prefaces, an imaginary text before, beside, and against which to write. Still, “parody” remains a difficult, unwieldy generic denomination, as the title of Bertel Pedersen’s book on the subject aptly demonstrates. The book is called *The Theory of Parody (The Parody of Theory)*.<sup>16</sup> Parody is a child of irony, and irony is, according to Pedersen, that which “does not need to be confined to the literary, but has a much greater sphere of activity”.<sup>17</sup> Parody can be defined as an overarching concept for all the other subversive writing strategies which are brought into play in these texts: first and foremost, *satire*, the witty dressing-down of persons or positions, and *sarcasm* or *persiflage*, a more direct form of scorn – disparaging, snide, and bitter.

Directly below, texts I-VIII will be briefly discussed; thereafter, the reader’s attention will be focused exclusively on the ‘Preface’, as that is the most interesting of the texts, since, among other reasons, it does not seem to be so tightly linked to a distinct temporal context as do the others.

### Texts I - VIII

What happens in these texts is characteristic of parody: comic content is set out in a solemn form. In addition, there are directly satirical tirades in the shape of the ridiculing of actual people – and, occasionally, whole groups of people. One major recurring figure of contradiction is one where surface, superficiality, and the immediate relationship between the individual and his surroundings is opposed to depth, inwardness, and the individual as mainly relating to his self. The outer and visible is praised at the expense of content and feeling, and this is done in such an insistent, redundant, and exaggerated manner that parody thereby arises. Since the texts for the most part are very consistent in their attitudes and styles, the paradoxical effect is to a large extent contextually conditioned, arising as a result of the reader’s acquaintanceship with those parts of Kierkegaard’s authorship which are concerned with corresponding topics and similar personalities.<sup>18</sup>

These short texts can be seen as linguistic, stylistic experiments undertaken with material that is to a large extent thoroughly concrete and

temporally determined. The rhetoric ranges from the cloyingly sycophantic to the condemnatory and disparaging. Many of the texts nonetheless retain, despite their extreme context dependence, a certain timeless entertainment value, thus emphasizing the aspect of “light reading”. For, on one level, these are texts which have been freed from all obligations, since they are forewords leading to nothing, literally having no *sequelæ* apart from other “forewords”. Therefore, these texts do not necessarily “begin strife and dispute”,<sup>19</sup> but, on the other hand, it is, as always with Kierkegaard, very difficult to distinguish the airy and frivolous from the profoundly essential and melancholic and the passion, which flashes forth from text VIII in particular, reveals that there are, on occasion, exceedingly essential things in play.<sup>20</sup>

## ‘Preface’

The analysis of the text, as found in the McDonald translation, will be worked out under the following divisions, which are consistent with the essential shifts in the text’s own topical divisions, shifts which, in each case, are followed by a shift in style – most marked in the transition to and from the second section. In the short text itself, there are no divisions as such.

- 1st section: Theoretical discussion of the preface as such (pp. 17-19).
- 2nd section: A lyrical presentation of the preface and the one who writes prefaces (pp. 19-21).
- 3rd section: The author and his wife (pp. 21-26).
- 4th section: The conclusion (pp. 26-28).

## Genres

In continuation of the more general genre descriptions that were given earlier, the following is a short characterization of those genres that play a role in the ‘Preface’.

**Parody.** In this text, parody is found particularly in the description of philosophy and its prefaces given in the first section. Furthermore, the reference to Horace indicates a link to the satirical, since he wrote two satirical books. Possibly, this satirical tradition reached Kierkegaard through Holberg, the author whom Kierkegaard quotes the most.<sup>21</sup>



**Literary history and philosophy.** In the first section, the text moves predominantly within a literary historical or philosophical discourse. “Greek naïveté” (18) is mentioned in an allusion to Greek philosophy, and “modern Scholarship” (18) is also referenced. In other words, one of the foundational figures of the entire Kierkegaard authorship is being evoked here: the apposition of Greek philosophy, most often represented by Socrates, and the “newest Scholarly method” (18); most often synonymous with Hegel and the Danish Hegelians, with whom Nicolaus Notabene obviously was intimately acquainted. The text only hints that it might very well be fruitful to consider “Greek naïveté” in relation to a hypothetical treatment of the history of prefaces. The implicit point is that in the texts of antiquity, there was no specific preface; introductory remarks were not sharply delineated from the main text which followed, in contrast to what was the case in Notabene’s time.

**Poetry.** The second section of the text is strongly influenced by Romantic lyrical poetry. The experience of nature is central; the style is marked by flowery metaphors and a rhythmical and flowing language characterized by paratactic sentences. Rhetorical techniques, such as suggestive repetitions – of the words “desire” and “like” – and an abundance of alliterations – for example, “the soul’s sweet unease” – predominate. By reading aloud such beautifully written passages, the author’s sense for allowing the text to be driven forward by its own rhythm, which requires a distinct cadence in reading, is revealed.

**Prose and Epic.** The third section, especially, is characterized by what could be described as a short story mode, a mode which is known by the following hallmarks: *one narrator*, who has a general knowledge of events, portrays and comments upon them from a removed position, and yet is nonetheless at the same time strongly involved in them. Furthermore there is *one conflict*, a hallmark of the short story, the treatment of which is concluded with a compromise between Nicolaus and his wife. But there is no univocal conclusion; it is difficult to say who has won, and whether the conflict has really been completely resolved. A *character sketch* of sorts is also carried out, although in a very abstract fashion. For example, one never really gets a clear impression of the woman figure, the description of her temperament is quite detailed, yet nothing is communicated about how she looks, how old she is, or even her name. The author himself is mainly portrayed in an indirect fashion through (his description of) his relationship to his wife, but there is no mention made of his job, his appearance, or his age. The portrayal of their circumstances is,

for the most part, omitted; nothing is written about where or how they live, and no additional figures are introduced into the story. As a fragment of a *narrative development*, there is a presentiment of a climax (“a promise and an obligation” (21)) and the dramatic unfolding of it. A certain mood is gradually built up, “she listened (...) lay her arm intimately around my neck (...) I am beside [*ude af*] myself” (23), and then it is suddenly destroyed by a very theatrical effect: the manuscript is set on fire. In this, the third section of the text, the techniques of *melodrama* are also drawn upon as the characters’ movements upon “the stage” are described, and the dialogue is exaggeratedly ingenious. For example: “‘Your thought,’ she said, ‘belongs to me; it must belong to me. Your attentiveness is my daily bread; your approval, your smile...’” (24).

The effect, in such a short text, of this rather comprehensive genre-blending is not as confusing as one might think, since Nicolaus Notabene is the narrator and central character throughout the story.

### A gesture for nothing

The irony in *Prefaces* is most often found in the form of the inner contradictions of the texts where a text’s apparently unequivocal assertion of its own purpose is contradicted by its narrative development and language use, in the same way that we saw such contradictions written into the pseudonym, the postscript, and in the relationship between the pseudonym and the subtitle. In the following, some related contradictions within the body of the text will be pursued, and the emphasis will be placed on the first and second sections.

An experience often proved true is that through something insignificant, a trifle, a heedless remark, an unguarded outburst, a chance facial expression, an involuntary gesture, one has been given the opportunity to steal into a person and discover what had eluded more careful observation. However, lest this insignificant remark become distorted and self-important, I renounce at once its further pursuit and hasten nearer my project (17).

So go the first two sentences of the text itself. Already there an opposition emblematic to the structure of the text as a whole is established.

In the first sentence, it is described how something essential about a

person can be revealed in an off-the-cuff remark, in what is an apparently unessential and spontaneous outburst or a physical and wordless gesture. And this is indeed a revelation of a meaning or significance which cannot be discovered by "careful observation". In other words, two separate modes of understanding or recognition are indicated as grounds for two different types of attention. These modes can be distinguished as, on the one hand, *observation* or that which searches for something definite: recognizable patterns, substances, or repetitions, and, on the other hand an attention toward movements or gestures which are isolated, stand out of the general context, and are not immediately decodable. This implies that what this latter kind of attention may grasp is what is otherwise elusive, i.e. that which cannot be precisely distinguished or articulated by way of positive terms.

If one applies these modes on the reading situation, this implies that the reader's attention by the very first sentence is directed toward the text's *how* as an indispensable supplement to the attention on the text's *what*, i.e. its literal meaning. This means that a thorough-going study of the textual details is not sufficient, and that the product of the individual parts, as an analysis focused solely on content might determine, is not equal to the text as a whole.

The second sentence of the text immediately relieves the first sentence of its meaning if one interprets "this insignificant remark" as a reference to the already written. Understood thus, the second sentence is a disclaimer of the "no, that was not what I meant – *now* let me tell you..." kind. Then again, "this insignificant remark" can be read as pertaining to the *topic* of the previous sentence, and thus the sentence becomes screechingly ironic, by encouraging a swift progression to the concrete project: the "careful observations." As such, this is an indication of the fact that the following text must necessarily be read with a doubled gaze; a gaze, which is both penetrating, analytical, and in a sense violent, and yet at the same time wide-eyed and out of focus.

At this juncture in the text, we do not know with any certainty what the "project" consists of, but this is revealed immediately afterwards, in the third sentence: the topic is the preface (itself). It is argued that even though this topic appears to be rather marginal, it does not imply that a study would be superfluous, since the discussion of the preface soon discloses far-reaching perspectives. These promptly put in their appearance, as Nicolaus Notabene ponders over that fact that never before have the roles and effects, the "how far and in what way" (18) of the preface, been reflected upon. He also emphasizes how paradoxical it

is that a work which is rather revolutionary, a work which “defies the time” (17), can nonetheless be so typical of its time where the form and content of its preface is concerned. The work in question is Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, specifically its introduction, and this famous philosophical preface will be discussed shortly.

But for now we will concentrate on the contrasting counterpart to this type of foreword, namely “the emancipated preface” (19), of which *Prefaces* provides us nine examples. Such a preface, I would like to designate as a **gesture for nothing**. Such a designation, apart from the fact that the word “gesture” is to be found in the text’s first sentence, is grounded in the following citation:

But now, if without this [having “a subject”], one can also have the inclination to write a preface, it is easily seen that it must not deal with a subject, for otherwise the preface itself would become a book, and the question of preface and book would revert. The preface as such, the emancipated preface, must then have no subject to discuss but must deal with nothing, and as far as it is thought to deal with something, this must be an appearance and a feigned movement, (19).

On a certain level, the logic is clear enough: whenever the preface no longer begins a book, but is nonetheless referred to as ‘preface’, then it relates to the nothing which has taken over that space customarily occupied by “the book”. This argument requires that the reader accepts the premiss that it is still somehow permissible to call such a text a preface and, additionally, that the reader will not, at least for a moment, be affected by the absurd consequences which such a logic involves, especially when these consequences might very well be part and parcel of the already-mentioned struggle with “all experience and concepts” (99) about which the postscript threatens the reader.

The emancipated preface is characterized (as a matter of principle) by never being able to “get to the point,” (since it has no subject) – yet it seems, nevertheless, to have a cognitive value, as hinted at above. Within the text, a complicated figure of self-mirroring is drawn. In the on-going movement of the text, the topic of the text comes to light, and there does not seem to be any urge to relate directly to a reality beyond that of the text. The text is folded in upon itself – and it is in this sense that it is a gesture for nothing. The emancipated preface deals with nothing, and the ‘Preface’ deals with prefaces. The realization of this fact leads to a

dizziness, which cannot be stilled once and for all. Thus, the reading is made into a balancing act, or a series of necessary repressions of the certainty that it, the reading itself, when all is said and done, might also be ridiculed and parodied.<sup>23</sup>

Kierkegaard's dissertation on irony also describes the problem of maintaining a scholarly relationship to irony: "for just as every development in universality ends with parodying itself, such a parody is an assurance of the fact that such a development has outlived itself."<sup>24</sup> What I call "repression" could also be described as the more or less conscious suppression – as in this article to a footnote – of an all-subverting loss of meaning, which is the alpha and omega of irony. It is clear that this suppression is necessary in order to be able to write about texts of parody and irony at all.

Such passionate literary writing activity stands in bold opposition to the more philosophical approach which has very different and apparently more serious ambitions. A definition of the project of a philosopher – or, in any case, the phenomenologically-oriented philosopher's project – can be found in the introduction to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is the text that the 'Preface' relates to most closely, and turns against.<sup>25</sup>

Culture and its laborious emergence from the immediacy of substantial life must always begin by getting acquainted with *general* principles and points of view, so as at first to work up to a *general conception [Gedanke] of the real issue* (...). From its very beginning, culture must leave room for the earnestness of life in its concrete richness; this leads the way to an *experience of the real issue*.<sup>26</sup>

The opposition between the philosophical self-understanding presented here and Notabene's self-understanding is decisive. The author of the 'Preface' is aware of the fact that it is difficult to write without having a subject, to write about something that is not *graspable*. Therefore, it is permitted to let on as if there were a subject, thus carrying out "an appearance and a feigned movement" (19), as long as one maintains that the text, in a philosophical sense, has no topic. There is no way that the text can be said to be a development or delineation of concepts, when its subversive writer attacks all forms of formal logic, such as the logic of argumentation.

The "more careful observation" which can now be more accurately defined as the philosophical approach must be supplemented with an-

other reading mode in order to comprehend a text which is a gesture for nothing. A phenomenological philosophical approach is unable to agree to the conditions of a text, which both explicitly and implicitly avoids univocity and logical consistency. It will become clear in the following that one particular discourse, or rather one particular *style*, in which a gesture for nothing can unfold itself and be employed, is a poetic or lyrical language.

But such poetic language is not the only mode of discourse by which a preface can be described. A preface can also be defined as the place where “the Incommensurable,” that which itself eludes precise definition, is to be found.<sup>27</sup> Etymologically, “incommensurable” means “that which cannot be measured”, or more accurate: that it cannot be measured by the same measure as something else, something *known*. A preface, then, deals with that which cannot be known or recognized, and possibly even with that to which, in principle, one cannot acquire access.<sup>28</sup> A preface is not a matter of clear, meaningful speech, but rather it is a “*leves sub noctem susurri*” [quiet whisperings when night falls] (19). This is a thought which is found as early as 1839 in Kierkegaard’s journals: “a Horatian *sussuratio* [low whisper] in the evening hours; for the preface always ought to be conceived in twilight, which also is undeniably the most beautiful”.<sup>29</sup> The meaning of a preface is not to be revealed in the cold clear light of day, a light which, in regard to *Prefaces*, can be understood as a metaphor for the philosopher’s wish to see everything, to control everything. On the other hand, neither does a preface belong to the darkness and night, which can correspondingly be connected with a loss of meaning, impenetrability, and incomprehensibility. Instead, a preface unfolds in the dusk, in the twilight, the region between the clearly delineated and illuminated and the obscured and murky. Such a region is obviously not a clearly delimited sphere, but rather a perpetual *movement* between the extremes, which in the above were designated as “something” (i.e., “the subject”, the real issue) and “nothing”. In other words, the emancipated preface writes itself into irony’s territory and irony’s transgressive movement.

### Eroticized writing

In the second section of the text, flowery metaphors attract a great deal of attention. “Metaphors” should here be understood in the widest sense

as “pictures” or “images”, as attempts to describe an experience or a thought through imagery rather than conceptually. Many of these metaphors depict the pleasure found in letting the writing empty itself purposelessly, which Notabene deals with in the first section. It is pleasure for pleasure’s own sake. Thus, it is no wonder that many of the images that describe what it is like to write a preface, are strongly erotically charged. They are images for a masculine/manly sexuality or, perhaps more rightly said, a masculine autoeroticism, which catches the eye with expressions such as “sharpening a scythe” (19) and “spitting out of the window” (19) which is followed by the observation that one “does not know how it happens, the desire comes upon one...” (19). And, a little later, “it is like lashing with one’s stick in the air” (19), “like tipping one’s hat though one greets no one” (19). They can all be read as metaphors for male masturbation, and it is important that the pleasure not be shared with anyone but that it is exclusively the subject’s own pleasure. Since the whole passage is an attempt to describe what it is like to write a preface, the metaphors imply that this type of writing must be considered as an extremely pleasurable self-mirroring in the text produced.

The progress of the text illustrates the poetic and erotic movement by working itself up to a climax in which the heavens open, the post-horn sounds, and the whip snaps. Then comes the relaxing rest after the sensual satisfaction (the picnic in Nature/the orgasm/the discharge of poetic tension). The text’s enfolded subject can, after just such a discharge, snuggle down in “the cozy room (...) sitting in the armchair, filling one’s pipe, lighting it” (20) and relax. At the same time, there is a *diminuendo* of the text’s cadence, and the pulse slows down after a hectic tour through changing interieurs and exterieurs.

A reading of this course of events which emphasizes its eroticizing use of language is not the only one possible, but such a reading does create continuity along the long chain of metaphors. However, contradictions and paradoxes are not completely avoided: All these juxtaposed images which are given as illustrations of what it is like to write a preface cannot be brought together into just one common image or meaning, but rather emphasize the undefinable, the “Incommensurable”. And this is the very thing which sexuality must be whenever it is represented in language.

The sexual difference within the “I” itself, or rather between the writing subject and the text, becomes the ideal sexual encounter, as seen from a purely erotic-aesthetic standpoint. It is a completely unalloyed

pleasure, utterly lacking in any form of commitment to another, in the moment of fulfillment, at any rate.<sup>30</sup> Further on in the third section, the author is about to write a book of some kind and has carried out the preliminary manoeuvres and has his “pen so to speak dipped” (21), his wife provokes a veritable *coitus interruptus*: “then one day she took me by surprise and forced from me the official admission that I was on the point of wanting to be an author” (21). It sounds just as if she has discovered that he is being unfaithful to her. This system of metaphor is adhered to later in the course of the text, where it is written that “my production is constantly stifled at birth” (22). For should conception and growth, of life or meaning, have taken place after all, the result is destroyed before anyone is allowed to see it.

In other words, the erotic passion of the author is not directed toward his wife, but has been displaced into what may be called a symbolization process: the writing process. This passion soon comes to appear like a kind of perversion of the sensual, physical side of the erotic, where perversion (from the Latin: *per-* *-vers*, meaning turning away or turning around) does not necessarily imply something negative, but rather indicates a displacement of sexual desire. This displacement is rather problematic for the wife in our story, as it results in the author’s relationship to her being marked by a certain distance. For example, there is not a single instance which indicates a sexual attraction on his side. Nor is any particular mention made of the woman’s looks, and she seems, on the whole, to be of an elusive, ethereal nature; she is considered “charming” (24) and “loveable (...) delectable” (24).

It seems striking that this woman does not hold greater attraction for the author, given that she otherwise seems to be close to perfection in his eyes – he even describes himself as “happily married as few are”, yet even he as a newlywed writes:

Several months had gone by since the wedding. I had gradually been tolerably trained in the method of married life, when little by little a desire that I have always entertained awoke again, that in all innocence I thought I might indulge: the pursuit of some sort of literary work (21).

Not much passion in this relationship on his side: “tolerably trained in the method of married life” indeed! Although he loves his wife, an element of pleasure in the broad sense is significantly absent from his expe-



rience of marriage. It is not some *specific* pleasure that drives him to write; writing has nothing to do with something specific – quite the contrary. It is pleasure as *such*, the wish to “indulge” himself which he seeks in writing; he just wants to do “some sort of literary work”. Writing is a necessary supplement to his co-existence with the wife, not a manifestation of a quest for knowledge or of a practical need. The essential thing in writing is not self-reflection but pure, unreflected enjoyment.

### The Writing and The Ecstasy

What caught my attention during my first cursory reading of the text was that there seemed to be something essential at play in this particular passage:

She stepped up to the desk at which I sat, lay her arm intimately around my neck, asked me to read a passage once more. I begin to read, holding the manuscript high enough for her eye to follow me, Splendid. *I am beside [ude af] myself but still not quite beyond [ude af] that passage, when suddenly the manuscript is aflame.* Without my having noticed it she had thrust one of the candles in under the manuscript. The fire prevailed; there was nothing to save; my introductory paragraph went up in flames’ (23, italics mine).

Here is to be found, in concentrated form, some of the aspects which have already been commented upon concerning the relationship between the author and his wife. Here we are presented to his preoccupation with himself and his writing and her uncompromising disapproval of his writing in full consciousness of the fact that this is where he invests his sensual energies. A second aspect which becomes visible here is the destructive side of that desire which is enfolded into itself. This destructiveness is symbolized by the (all-)consuming fire just as it was previously mirrored in the description of the preface-writer as a completely asocial being. What the fire particularly consumes is the written text in which desire has been invested and from which it can again be released in the reading, driving the subject out into ecstasy: “I am beside [*ude af*] myself”. Here, ecstasy means a standing out into the text, and here, as previously in the text, the subject is interrupted in mid-rapture: “but still not quite beyond [*ude af*] that passage”. Once again, it is the wife who is

to be blamed for this coitus *interruptus*, and this obviously comes about because Notabene's ecstatic movement, besides being a cancelling of the subject's ethical and social duties, also stands in the way of his desire being directed toward her.

In ecstasy, the subject loses itself, and "feelings" or "reflections" (words which are here inadequate) are beyond good and evil. In this case, moreover, the ecstasy is called forth by a text which the subject himself has written, in solitude. The potential destructiveness of writing and the text can hardly be better illustrated.

One of the first translators of Kierkegaard into French, Georges Bataille, has made several contributions to this inquiry into the relationship between creation and destruction, including *L'expérience intérieure*, from which the following citation is taken:

In oblivion, ecstasy, indifference, I infinitely overstep myself (...). I am *opened*, a gaping breach, to the unintelligible [*sic*] heaven and everything in me falls down, harmonized in a last disharmony (...). And above all *plus d'objet*. Ecstasy is not love: love is possession of that which is necessarily the object, at times possessing the subject, possessed by it. There is no more subject/object, but a "gaping breach" between the one and the other and, within the breach, the subject, the object are dissolved, there is a passage, communication, but not from the one to the other: *the one* and *the other* have lost distinct existence (...). Ecstasy has no sense for itself (...). There exists an irreducible disharmony between the subject seeking ecstasy and ecstasy itself.<sup>31</sup>

As much for Bataille as for Kierkegaard, the rejection of the idea that the subject should be thought of as potentially indistinguishable from the object is closely connected to rebellion against Hegel, but the disagreement resulted in extremely different consequences for the two thinkers. They both share the view, though, that writing, reading, and the written are modes in which ecstasy can take place. This train of thought is not, in Kierkegaard's case, driven to its extreme conclusion, since the text, and the reflection that can occur through it, are always seen as controlled by a kind of "governance", a God. This does not always, however, prevent a certain madness [*forrykthed*] from making its appearance, as, for example, with Johannes Climacus who, as an imaginary author, is closely related to Nicolaus Notabene. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Climacus writes:

But the genuine subjective existing thinker is always just as negative as he is positive and vice versa: (...) He is cognizant of the negativity of the infinite in existence [*Tilværelsen*]; he always keeps open the wound of negativity, which at times is a saving factor (the others let the wound close and become positive deceived);<sup>32</sup>

When the subject turns away from the world around him and abandons himself to the text, he is now in the position which, if one were speaking of an actual person, would be called psychotic. In psychosis, the subject is lost – also to himself – and can be found only as a linguistic entity, as a pronoun that has lost its person. But here, where we are speaking about a fictive subject placed within a narrative structure, it makes sense to say that the subject is lost to the text. In the 'Preface' such an absolute loss of the "I" occurs only momentarily, in that very passage where Notabene's wife sets his manuscript on fire. Moreover, in the poetical *passus* in the second section, there is a relatively unstable subject on the loose: a subject very close to imploding, cutting off from every connection to the surrounding world.

If one were to draw the resemblance further, one sees that it is possible to discover a kind of relatedness between the psychotic person's language, both in the spoken and written word, and the discourse in *Prefaces*.<sup>33</sup> The language of the psychotic seems to be driven forward by a passion to express himself, similar to that of the writer of the 'Preface'. Moreover, the psychotic's discourse seems to be governed by an underlying earnestness, which often only the writer himself, if indeed anyone, has the possibility of understanding. Yet, neither does he understand that no one else understands him. Now, naturally, I am not saying that Kierkegaard, not to mention his pseudonyms, is psychotic, but rather I am emphasizing the tendency, found in both discourses – that of the psychotic and that of the ironist' – to be hermetically encapsulated within itself. The following citation from *The Concept of Irony* shows with complete clarity what it means to close one's self off from the surrounding world, as the writer of the preface does:

irony also denotes the subjective pleasure as the subject frees himself by means of irony from the restraint in which the continuity of life's conditions holds him – thus the ironist can literally be said to kick over the traces. (...) Irony, however, has no purpose; its purpose is immanent in itself and is a metaphysical purpose. The purpose is nothing other than irony itself.<sup>34</sup>

Several times in the 'Preface', the point of the text comes very close to spontaneously collapsing. Not least when it tries to explain its own main purpose to itself – to emancipate a preface from its book – and in this process paradoxically produces a book exclusively composed of prefaces and a postscript. Both the point of the text and the possibility of producing a somewhat univocal meaning in texts in general, even for "serious" philosophical texts, is being risked, almost coming to the point of being reduced to an absolute loss of meaning: an infinitely absolute negativity which only unconditional faith or death could possibly bring to a halt.

Thus, it can also be said that these texts, and the 'Preface' in particular, point to a certain awareness which is written into Kierkegaard's work as a whole, an awareness of the fact that writing is not necessarily a way to self-unity or inwardness – but rather can force a subject out of itself, and thus render communication impossible: There is no "I" which can talk with a "you", but only an "it" talking to itself in an unintelligible monologue. The experience of such a potential madness [*forrykthed*], which is closely linked to the profoundly meaningful, apparently has the possibility of momentarily showing its grimacing face in a text which is presented as parody or irony. *Prefaces* avoids losing itself in closed self-referentiality, and negates the seriousness which a stricter theological or philosophical discourse must necessarily uphold in order not to subvert itself.

*Translated by Stacey Ake and the Author*

## Notes

1. These quotes are taken from the third edition of Kierkegaard's collected works, *Samlede Værker* (hereafter cited as SV3 with volume and page numbers), where *Prefaces* (*Forord*) is found in volume 5, pp. 195–255. It should also be mentioned that, within the present text, *Prefaces* refers to the book of that name, in its entirety, whereas 'Preface' refers to the first unnumbered foreword found in the book *Prefaces*.
2. In this paper, use will be made of the English translation of Agacinski's book. Agacinski, Sylviane (1988) *Aparté: conceptions and deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, Florida State.
3. Translated as: "Prefaces: Kierkegaard's paratext" in *That Rascally Posterity*, vol. II.
4. Engdahl, Horace in *Stilen och lyckan*, Uddevalla: Bonniers 1992, p. 184.
5. *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton 1963/1941, (David F. Swenson/Walter Lowrie), p. 313.
6. Agacinski 1988, p. 234f.
7. The article in question is "Frater Taciturnus, William Afham..." in *Kierkegaard-pseudonymitet* (1993), Copenhagen, C.A. Reitzel, pp. 116–131.
8. Frandsen 1995, p. 384.
9. This corresponds precisely to the original French edition, to which Frandsen makes reference, for there it says: "*Si par exemple on appelait...*" (Agacinski 1977, p. 228).
10. Agacinski 1988, p. 234f.
11. Frandsen 1995, p. 384.
12. Subtitle to the edition of *Prefaces* (tr. William McDonald) of the "Kierkegaard & Post-Modernism" Series, Florida State University Press, 1989.
13. From the subtitle of the 1989 English translation. NB: The English word "certain" is McDonald's translation of the Danish word "*enkelte*".
14. Concerning the relationship between the fictive author and his real-world counterpart, see George Pattison's 1993 article "'Who' is the Discourse. A Study in Kierkegaard's Religious Literature" in *Kierkegaardiana* 16.
15. Consider, for example, words like paradox, parabase, paranoia, parasite, parataxis, and paralogism.
16. Original title: *Parodiens teori (Teoriens parodi)* by Bertel Pedersen (Copenhagen 1976).
17. Pedersen, p. 99.
18. Obviously, it is not unproblematic to talk about Kierkegaard's works as a whole, as a context, but in the paper at hand it is not possible to discuss further this extremely complex problem.
19. From the "Postscript" of *Prefaces*, McDonald's translation, p. 99. Hereafter, all references to this text will appear in parentheses after the quotation cited.
20. For a more detailed discussion of texts I–VIII, see Agacinski 1977, pp. 218–227.
21. See, for example, pp. 71 and 74 of Jansen's 1981 article on Kierkegaard and Holberg, in which *Prefaces* is briefly mentioned. Jansen points to the fact that Kierkegaard makes particular use of Holberg's comedies as an indefatigable source of comic (e.g., satirical, parodying) words, situations, and characters. On Holberg, Kierkegaard, and pseudonymity, see also Jansen 1993, p. 7ff. In *Prefaces* itself direct reference is made to Holberg and/or his plays on pages 25, 29, 30, 38, 48, 63, 75, and 77.
22. See, for example, Frandsen 1995, p. 369.
23. "But there is this damned nuisance with this method [the developing of clear distinctions and static concepts in literary criticism] that a parodying writing mode has, to begin with, a double-orientation, and that it therefore constantly attempts to oppose and overrun the clear (and logical) borders with which the critic prefers to work. A static conceptual apparatus, which can only be prepared with some difficulty, thus appears, in practice, to be of limited use and worth, in connection with parodies (...), the "logic",

which expresses itself in literary texts (and, as a special case, in parody), is of a more complicated order than scientific logic, and this implies that the critic must, of necessity, draw upon such artistic structures in his own production," (Pedersen, pp. 30,32).

24. SV3 1 168.
25. Finn Frandsen (1995, p. 370) considers this introduction as the first truly philosophical preface, and thus as the beginning of that particular "genre" which simultaneously contains a repudiation of the legitimacy of the preface's place in philosophy, something which Notabene also touches upon (see p. 18).
26. From *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977), tr. by A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, p. 3. Italics correspond with Hegel's in the original German; boldface reflects the author's own emphasis.
27. See p. 18 of *Prefaces*.
28. This is the role which the lyrical, the poetical, often takes upon itself, especially in modernism. The incommensurable might also be called an allegory of nothing. Or, it may be put as follows "...he [the imagined reader] can understand that understanding is revocation; he can understand that to write a book and revoke it is something else than not writing at all; *that to write a book which does not claim importance for anybody is something else that leaving it unwritten...*" (*Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton 1963/1941 (David F. Swanson/Walter Lowrie) p. 548. Italics are mine.). One might also choose to call this nothing "silence" [*taushed*] which is what P.E. Tøjner does in *Kierkegaards æstetik* (Kbh. 1995, p. 45ff) and in *Kierkegaard-pseudonymitet* (Kbh. 1993, p. 92).  
What A is doing in *Either/Or*, part I, (see, for example, SV3 2,64) is attempting, through linguistic or reflexive means, to conceive that which he perceives as the fundamentally non-linguistic, the ineffable: Mozart's music. He will, with relentless thoroughness, scan the borders of that indescribable land – well knowing that it will be an unending movement of approximation and that the goal cannot be reached.  
And, for a last digression, the problem can also be described using a translation metaphor: "Kierkegaard is preoccupied with the impossibility of translating the nonlanguage conditions of language. Through relentless indirection and countless *apartés*, Kierkegaard struggles to evoke that which language implies but cannot contain" (Mark Taylor in: Agacinski 1988, p. xi).
29. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (1978), trs. Hong & Hong, Indiana UP, Bloomington, vol. 5, p. 132 (no. 5387).
30. This is also how the erotic is for Don Juan, as he is presented in *Either/Or*, in the section dealing with "The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical-Erotic":  
Furthermore, psychical love also has another dialectic in that it is different also according to the relationship with each particular individual who is the object of love. Therein lies its richness, its fullness of content. Such is not the case with Don Juan. For he has no time; for him everything is merely an affair of the moment. In a certain sense it can be said of psychical love that to see her and love her are the same, but this only suggests a beginning. It holds true in a different way in connection with Don Juan. To see her and to love her are the same; this is in the moment. In the same moment everything is over, and the same thing repeats itself indefinitely (*Either/Or I*, Hong & Hong 1987, Princeton UP, p. 66).  
Compare this with the ephemeral existence of the writer of the preface as described on pp. 20-21.
31. Bataille (1986), Gallimard, p. 74ff.  
Dépassement infini dans l'oubli, l'extase, l'indifférence, à moi-même, [a ce livre: je vois, ce que jamais le discours n'atteignit.] Je suis ouvert, brèche béante, a l'inintelligible [*sic*] ciel et tout en moi se précipite, s'accorde dans un désaccord dernier (...).

Et surtout *plus d'objet*. L'extase n'est pas amour: l'amour est possession à laquelle est nécessaire l'objet, à la fois possesseur de sujet, possédé par lui. Il n'y a plus sujet/objet, mais "brèche béante" en l'un et l'autre et dans la brèche, le sujet, l'objet sont dissous, il y a passage, communication, mais non de l'un de l'autre; *l'un* et *l'autre* ont perdu l'existence distincte (...).

L'extase n'a pas de sens pour lui (...).

Il existe un irréductible désaccord de sujet cherchant l'extase et de l'extase elle-même.

32. *KW XXI.1* p. 85.
33. See, for example, Rosenbaum, Bent and Sonne, Harly: *The Language of Psychosis*, London & New York (1986).
34. *KW II* pp. 255-256.