Henrik Jøker Bjerre

The Actual Author of This Dissertation

Groucho Marx once told an audience that before he would begin to speak, he had something important to say. On the face of it, this declaration describes rather precisely what it means to write a preface: You state some introductory or clarifying remarks before moving on to the actual subject at hand. Groucho's expression has a certain comical effect, however, because it also postulates a rather paradoxical ability: being able to "say" something before, and thus without, "speaking", as if there is a saying that is somehow qualitatively different from speaking. But how can you say anything without speaking? By miming it? And what does it mean for that which follows? Is speaking somehow less than saying something, or, on the contrary, the only case where anything really gets across at all?

A preface contains a similarly asymmetric relation to the text it introduces. It states something that is not really part of the text itself, but has to be stated before the actual writing begins. Sometimes, a preface can solemnly summarize a work's world-historical significance, like when Wittgenstein in the preface of the *Tractatus* claimed to have "solved the problems of philosophy and shown how little was thereby

accomplished"[1]. At other times, it is the preface which is profane or immaterial, giving only dull information about the bureaucratic conditions of the appearance of the text.

In any case, the expression "before I speak, I have something important to say" shows something about an urgency of getting the opening right, of approaching the text in the right manner. The preface often exhibits something about the kind of work, and the kind of author, you are about to read, as well as how you are meant to receive it. The preface is a genre of its own, and one that has been interpreted differently by different authors. In this article, I want to approach the way this genre has been interpreted in philosophy and more specifically, how it was used by Søren Kierkegaard. The first point to notice is that Kierkegaard's prefaces are different from most of the prefaces met with in philosophy. This difference is not merely trivial. The second point is that the prefaces tell a particular story about Kierkegaard's authorship – one which gives a slightly different twist on the "therapeutic" or "midwife" status, it is often attributed. Kierkegaard's writing represents a kind of labour that must be worked through by both the author and the reader, and his prefaces are a crucial element in the staging and development of this labour throughout the authorship. But before I start speaking about that, I want to say a little bit more about prefaces in general.

MY LOVING AND PATIENT WIFE

Most prefaces in academic writing today clearly separate themselves from the body of the text they introduce. They represent a kind of mapping of the work, placing it in space and time, by for example describing the generous institutions that have hosted the author during his or her work; acknowledging the invaluable assistance of colleagues and students; thanking sponsors – and, not least, the family of the author ("my loving and patient wife, without whom this would never have been possible"). On some occasions, they also include a mapping of the context of the work itself, in terms of e.g. what inspired the author to take up this particular topic, where current research has left some questions unanswered, etc. Most of this rhetoric, I think, could be described as an elaborate form of fake modesty: By thanking and acknowledging certain institutions and individuals, I simultaneously show myself as the one, who is placed right in the middle of this formidable network of relations. It is the heroism of the university

discourse, to use the Lacanian term. The gesture of disavowing the status of a lonely Master or a genius simultaneously elevates the author as a little prince or princess in the field of knowledge; someone who "could not have made it" without all the help of the surroundings, but who, by emphasizing this, precisely underscores that he or she *has indeed made it*. The work itself, on the other hand, after such an introduction, can stand for itself. It is a finished piece of scholarship that will be inserted into the chain of science, having been objectively verified by its very publication (in a journal or at a publishing house that automatically grants value, even economic value, to the work).

In a classic work of philosophy prefaces would often have almost the opposite characteristics: a complete lack of modesty in the sense of claiming to be addressing the truth of the matter directly and no, or very limited, efforts to situate oneself within the current social and academic structures. Nonetheless, a classic preface might contain another, and maybe even more genuine form of modesty: I, the author, am humbly expressing, what I believe to be "the eternal laws of thought", but others may come, who will surpass my insights and ability to express them. In the preface to his *Theodicy*, for example, Leibniz speaks unapologetically of true piety, the intentions of Jesus Christ, freedom and evil, among other things, but then closes by saying that

> If, moreover, any error has crept into the ideas expressed, the author will be the first to correct it, once he has been better informed: he has given elsewhere such indications of his love of truth that he hopes this declaration will not be regarded as merely an empty phrase[2].

Kant opens the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* by describing how human reason has the peculiar destiny to be "burdened with questions, which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason"[3]. Mapping "the nature of reason itself" is certainly no small task, humble as the author may be. Hegel's preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* famously, or infamously, concerns the very beginning of philosophy, and it is really a preface about the impossibility of writing a preface, as Mladen Dolar has described it: Stating in a few, general sentences what one wishes to achieve in the work ahead is meaningless, because such statements

are empty and abstract, without the actual content of that which they are promising. Hegel writes:

> For the real issue is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the results together with the process through which it came about. The aim by itself is a lifeless universal, just as the guiding tendency is a mere drive that as yet lacks an actual existence; and the bare result is the corpse which has left the guiding tendency behind it[4].

Although one could therefore argue that Hegel writes a preface to deconstruct the very idea of a preface (including such written by Leibniz and Kant), he does in fact still earnestly write a preface about (nothing less than) the nature of philosophy, and he still remains within the classic frames of approaching truth boldly and unapologetically; if anything, even more so than his predecessors. The question is not how he, the unsalaried professor from Jena, could contribute to the sciences, but how philosophy itself could come about its own actualisation.

If anything characterizes Søren Kierkegaard as a philosopher, it could certainly be said to be his blatant disrespect for such solemn declarations of the aims of philosophy or an author's contribution to the advance of science. Instead, the prefaces, which Kierkegaard wrote, often concern the relation between the author and the text, or between the author and the reader, often creating an ironic twist to the status of the text itself: How should we read this, as the position of whom? And on which authority does the text really rely?

Kierkegaard's keen interest in the genre of the preface is emphatically displayed by the fact that he wrote an entire book containing only prefaces – and entitled "*Forord*" (which in Danish could be read as both the singular and the plural of "preface"). The book was published in 1844 under the pseudonym of Nicolaus Notabene and contains a collection of prefaces written by Notabene, who had become an author exclusively of prefaces, because of a compromise he had allegedly reached with his wife. She had forbidden him to become an author, since being a writer, to her, constituted "downright unfaithfulness"

in violation of the vows of marriage (Kierkegaard 2009: 10)[i]. As a consolation, instead of writing full-length volumes, Notabene would be allowed to write prefaces of books that he could then envision as figments of his imagination. The irony, one among many in this work, being of course that in this way he actually managed to write a whole book, consisting entirely of prefaces. The topics of the prefaces vary, but it would be fair to say that they deconstruct the very idea of a "preface to philosophy" in a much more straightforward sense than Hegel's preface to the *Phenomenology*. For example: The first of Notabene's prefaces (apart from the preface to *Prefaces*), is a mockery of J. L. Heiberg and contemporary Danish Hegelianism. In it, the author promises to realize a plan that has been developed over 30 years and deliver a system, the publication of which will mean that the succeeding generations will not even have to learn how to write; "because there will be nothing more to write, but only to read – the system"[5].

Apart from containing several such parodies of real and imagined figures, the book, and especially its preface, excels in a range of lively and satirical metaphors for the very endeavour of writing a preface:

> Writing a preface is like sharpening a scythe, like tuning a guitar, like talking with a child, like spitting out of the window. [...] Writing a preface is like ringing someone's doorbell to trick him, like walking by a young Lady's window and gazing at the paving stones; it is like swinging one's cane in the air to hit the wind, like doffing one's hat although one is greeting nobody[6].

Although such witty and suggestive prose does indicate a well-known anti-systematic, if not outright anti-philosophical stance in Kierkegaard, his fascination with prefaces, I think, does not restrict itself to satire or poking fun at traditional philosophy. The preface is a genre of its own that is explored in Kierkegaard's writings, and it takes on a number of different functions, not only in the book *Prefaces*, but throughout his authorship. Kierkegaard was "ringing the reader's doorbell", if you will, sometimes indeed to leave a package without any trace of its origin, sometimes just to let the reader see a shadow

i I rely on the English translation of *Prefaces*, as well as of *The Concept of Anxiety*. Other references to Kierkegaard's works are to the standard edition from the Kierkegaard Research Center (SKS), in my own translation.

disappear around the corner, and sometimes in disguise, but sometimes also simply with a well meant apology for the interference and best wishes for the reader's engagement with the questions that the book would address.

PREFACES OTHER THAN *PREFACES*

The prefaces in Kierkegaard's work are almost always witty, but although they might sometimes seem like mere ironic gestures, they do serve functions that relate to the very idea of authorship and the aim of Kierkegaard's writing. Although they separate themselves from the work and often undermine the expectation of a unified and unproblematic authorial voice, they also stich the work together, stage it, and even create liaisons to other authors and other works in Kierkegaard's oeuvre.

Some deconstructive readings of Kierkegaard tend to overemphasize the ironic gestures and subversive mirroring of other positions to such a degree that they end up rejecting any bit of "constructive" reading, i.e. readings that try to extract philosophical points and questions from the text. Paradoxically, such insistence on the subversive, polyphonic, ironic, etc. gestures in Kierkegaard, at times end up celebrating the ingenious masterplan of the biographical author, Søren Kierkegaard – the shrewd plan to deconstruct and undermine any coherent position in philosophy. *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard's university dissertation, for example, is read by Roger Poole as the "opportunity he needed to subvert the literary forms of the tyrants who would be his examiners"[7], while *The Concept of Anxiety* is not really about anxiety at all, but rather: "the whole thing is likely to be a disrespectful ironic joke"[8]. Stuart Dalton, who is a keen reader of Kierkegaard's prefaces, has made a clear and strong point in showing how there are always both too many entrances and too many exits to Kierkegaard's writing to claim that there is one unified position that he meant to defend (there is the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, but also *The Point of View of My Work as an Author* and *My Activity as a Writer*, both of which have separate supplements that might be considered as concluding postscripts in their own right): "By writing more than one beginning and ending for his indirect communication, and by writing his beginnings and endings in a very particular way, Kierkegaard anticipated the demand that the present age (both his and ours) would make for a systematic, totalized, conveniently packaged and easily digestible version

of his unruly and ill-behaved texts, and he derailed that helpful undertaking before it even got started"[9]. Although this is certainly a valid point, Dalton too ends up celebrating Kierkegaard's unambiguous intentions in an almost complete mirroring of the monological and theological readings that he opposes. The little text *My Activity as a Writer* contains the statement often adhered to by theological readers of Kierkegaard, that the purpose of the whole authorship was religious from beginning to end[10]. Instead of reading this and other parts of the text carefully for the insights they may contain, however, Dalton celebrates the text as the ultimate proof of the opposite of what it says: "By publishing *My Activity as a Writer* in his lifetime he tapped into all the traditional expectations that the public has concerning writers and their relationship to their work, and he used this massive body of stereotypes to create a new personage: a pseudonym named 'Søren Kierkegaard'. This was the last and best defence available to Kierkegaard both to protect his own independence, the independence of the text, and the independence of the reader – all of which were crucial to him"[11].

Deconstructive readings of Kierkegaard sometimes tend towards the hysterical, again in the sense of Lacan's four discourses, since they read any sign as evidence for the defamation of the master or "traditional philosophy". No wonder that the truth of this position is the enjoyment of exposing the inconsistencies in any supposedly coherent position. The hysteric, however, secretly wants the master to remain master, (in order to be able to sustain the hysteric's enjoyment) and this could maybe be part of the explanation of the deconstructive celebration of Kierkegaard, the genius author. Kierkegaard, himself, certainly had his hysterical moments as well, but what I want to suggest is that his work might more productively be read in terms of the discourse of the analyst: Someone working to articulate that which does not make itself easily available; which is not preconfigured in any readymade speech or set of beliefs; and which can only be brought forward through a patient and diverse approach of experimentation and deliberation. The work to be done is to bring something into view, which is not immediately clear – or to make it possible to make the text "look back" at the reader and ask questions, rather than giving answers. This certainly does include a critical and ironic approach, when compared to traditional philosophy, but it nonetheless contains certain clearly philosophical points and directions.

To that end, let us have a more careful look at some of the prefaces to Kierkegaard's (other) works. In the very first work from 1838 (*From the Papers of One still Living*), which was published even before his dissertation, Kierkegaard added a short preface with a rather remarkable content. The book is published in his own name, albeit "against his will", as the subtitle reads, and from the first sentence of the preface, an alter ego is introduced, to whom Kierkegaard refers as the "actual author of this dissertation". This other character is a "double" much like those found in novels or dramas in various forms. The relation between Kierkegaard and the actual author is thusly described: "we are often opposed to each other like magnets, but strictly inseparable, although our common acquaintances have only rarely, maybe not at all, seen us together, even if some of them may have wondered how, just as they have left one of us, almost simultaneously run into the other"[12]. The two are like "two souls in one body" and opposed also in the sense that the "actual author" is very much at unease in this world, while Søren Kierkegaard, the publisher, seems to be a more pragmatic and less pedantic writer. Indeed, according to the preface, once the book had finally been finished, the actual author wanted to retract it and cancel the whole thing, which was avoided only by a firm decision by his friend to take command and declare: "Straight ahead. Marche. The parole is: What I wrote, I wrote"[13]. So, from the very beginning of the authorship, some other, a friend, an alter ego, is speaking through Kierkegaard, who sees himself as the medium for the materialization of the discourse of this Other and who can only claim a formal responsibility for the publication of the text as it appears in the end. This relationship between the "actual author" and Kierkegaard echoes throughout the oeuvre, even if it undergoes a transformation, including in fact in the short text on *My Activity as a Writer* from 1849, which was mentioned before, where the emphasis on the Christian aim of the authorship is qualified by the addition that Kierkegaard himself was "without authority" in this endeavour: "That I was 'without authority', I have made clear and repeated from the first moment; I rather consider myself as a reader of the books, not as their author"[14].

In *Either-Or*, the figure of the double is replaced by a more elaborate construction, which does not include the same explicit split between Kierkegaard himself and the "actual author(s)", but rather leaves Kierkegaard out of the picture altogether. The texts that constitute the body of the work are written by characters that are not only others

to Kierkegaard, but also to a publisher, who is himself a pseudonym – one Victor Eremita, who is also the author of the preface. In it, Eremita tells the story about how he found the manuscripts inside a desk that he had bought second hand, and he tells the reader of his lifelong occupation with the investigation of the "known philosophical proposition" that the inner and the outer are the same. (A sentence, which seems to refer to Hegel's *Philosophy of History*.) Eremita is of the clear conviction that the two are not the same, and he finds corroboration for this thesis in the manuscripts of the book, just as he has found it in talking to people he met, always curious to find out, whether what they disclose about themselves when talking matches how they appear on the outside. Eremita is a listener, silently accompanying the text that ensues in the body of the work. He hears what A. and B. have to say, and he is confirmed in his general impression that people tend not to cohere entirely with what they show "on the outside". It is almost as if Kierkegaard is installing an analyst; someone who receives the discourse of the (very talkative) protagonists in the book, while Kierkegaard himself is set at a distance, one step further away, from the words that he inscribes in the papers.

In the major pseudonymous works following after *Either-Or*, the preface is generally written by the same author as the work itself (except *Repetition*, which does not have a preface). These prefaces do resemble those of classical philosophical works more, but the authors all seem to take care in denouncing themselves as philosophers, learned people or true believers, and rather emphasize their humble attempts at expressing thoughts that are almost beyond their grasp (this is most clearly the case with *Fear and Trembling*, where Johannes de Silentio is struggling to make sense of the story about Abraham and Isaac). Vigilius Haufniensis, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, makes use of the preface to declare his readiness to take on a much less presumptuous name ("Christian Madsen", for example), in case anyone would be offended by the Latin one that he carries. For his own part, he seems to care very little for outward signs of dignity or authority, mockingly stating that: "When it comes to human authority, I am a fetish worshipper and will worship anyone with equal piety, but with one proviso, that it be made sufficiently clear by a beating of drums that he is the one I must worship and that it is he who is the authority and *Imprimatur* for the current year. The decision is beyond my understanding, whether it takes place by lottery or balloting, or whether the honor is

passed around so that each individual has his turn as authority, like a representation of the burghers on the board of arbitration ["ligesom en Borger-Repræsentant sidder i Forligelses-Commissionen"]..[15]. In *Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus admits that his work could in some sense have been written by a common student, but in another sense, it might not have been possible by just any professor (probably because professors precisely tend to let their status and authority get in the way of expressing themselves clearly to the point). In various ways, the pseudonymous authors stand by the words of their treatises, but they deny themselves (or indeed anybody) a privileged position in relation to the matter at hand. They almost annul themselves in order for the text itself to speak to its reader.

In other words: In the early works something seemed to announce itself in Kierkegaard's writing, which almost went ahead of the author or required him to stage the writing in an elaborate way to find the appropriate form of its articulation, whereas in the bulk of the pseudonymous works, the staging found a more stable form that made it possible to let the pen flow and let "it" speak without too much interruption by the publisher or the "legally responsible". After 1846, when the pseudonymous work was completed (or so it is described in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* from that year, although pseudonyms are still employed in the following years), a period with more ambiguity again emerges, but this time with less focus on how the author conceived the text, than on how it is to be received by the reader.

LISTEN TO YOURSELF!

It is a curious biographical fact that Kierkegaard was very keen on reading his text aloud, even several times, before he would accept its formulation. Almost as if the text was first of all supposed to be heard before it could be said to have been formulated aright. In this sense, the examination of that voice or address, which accompanied Kierkegaard throughout his work, bears an almost literal resemblance to psychoanalysis: You need to hear your voice reflected through the medium of an Other, before you can relate to it again, or maybe even relate to it for the first time. Writing, to Kierkegaard, was not a matter of inscribing knowledge into the great chain of science, nor certainly to teach his readers how to live a good, Christian life, but much more a way of articulating thoughts, letting them undergo the labour of language, in order to explicate them and investigate them – to hear what

was in them as it were. Most of Kierkegaard's philosophical work is mediated through the pseudonym, who would be the transmitter and catalyst of that which was to be thought. Like reading aloud, such a constellation makes it possible to apprehend one's own words as *spoken* by… Eremita, de Silentio, Haufniensis, etc. Kierkegaard, in other words, was creating an analytical setting, which made it possible for the author to turn into a reader of his own thoughts. This setting was continuously experimented with, and it found a number of different forms throughout the oeuvre. If there is a plan or a point of view of such an authorship, it must clearly be one that makes itself apparent, as the work proceeds, much rather than one, which is preconceived or clear to the author from the beginning. As Kierkegaard says in *My Activity as a Writer*, after having declared that the aim of the entire authorship was religious: "That is how I understand it all *now*; from the beginning I have not been able to overview, what has also been my own development"[16].

Similarly, Kierkegaard also thought that the best way for the reader to receive the text would be to actually read it aloud. In this way, the reader would repeat the active gesture of the author, literally giving the text his or her own voice, but s/he would thereby simultaneously be repeating the gesture of externalization or even alienation that comes along with such a reading out loud. Receiving the text thus does not mean passively acquiring knowledge or insight from its author, but rather participating in the riddle or wonder that the text produces. Kierkegaard himself was a reader of his own work in this sense – precisely when the text succeeded in producing something, which the author could not have anticipated, or which would continue to demand reflection, even if it could be stated seemingly simply.

In *Practice in Christianity* from 1850, "S.K." makes a short appearance with a preface that introduces to the work, which is authored by Anti-Climacus. Here he, S.K., remarks about the book that the demand of being a Christian, in his opinion, has been forced to its highest ideal by the pseudonymous author, and that he furthermore understands what is being said, as addressed to himself (S.K.). "The demand should be heard; and I understand the stated as stated to me alone"[17]. It is almost as if the thoughts expressed have finally reached their destination: Kierkegaard himself. Whereas Victor Eremita patiently listened to the colourful fragments of A. and the pious declarations of

B. (mostly just to confirm his thesis that nothing is what it appears to be), S.K. now acknowledges a specific address in the later work, even an "ideal", and he sees himself as the addressee.

ANALYST OR ANALYSAND?

What the prefaces show is that Kierkegaard seems to have undergone a change through his authorship. From the "hysterization" of the writer in the beginning to the ability, finally, towards the end, to hear what he himself has written. If Kierkegaard's work should be compared to the process of a psychoanalysis, it seems that it must be the reader who is the analyst. The "singular individual", who is invoked on a number of occasions, seems to be the one to whom the speech is addressed, and who returns it for the speaker himself to hear. Maybe the call to the reader, the plea for his attention, "even if there is only one", is not so much a hope for the social impact (as it is unfortunately called today) that Kierkegaard might achieve, but much rather the reassurance of the minimal structure of address for the discourse to function. The reader is a wall that reflects the voice of the author and makes it possible for him to hear it himself. This does not mean that Kierkegaard was uninterested in his actual reader, certainly not. Indeed, he was intensely occupied by the effect, his text would have. But it means that the effect from the text should not be understood as a transfer of knowledge or insight from the author to the reader. Instead, what the reader was supposed to do, was to read the text, as if it were her own words, preferably aloud, and thereby relate to it with the same kind of distance as its author. If there is a "therapeutic" effect from such an effort, it consists not in having learned anything, but in having heard oneself articulate the human condition and received this articulation back in its true, inverted form.

---

1 Parafrasing Wittgenstein: "Ich bin also der Meinung, die Probleme im Wesentlichen endgültig gelöst zu haben. Und wenn ich mich hierin nicht irre, so besteht nun der Wert dieser Arbeit zweitens darin, dass sie zeigt, wie wenig damit getan ist, dass diese Probleme gelöst sind" (Wittgenstein 1993: 10).

2 Leibniz 1990: 72

3 Kant 1998: 99, A VII.

4 Hegel 1977: 2-3
5 ibid.: 14
6 ibid.: 5
7 Poole 1993: 47
8 ibid.: 89
9 Dalton 2000: 124
10 SKS 13: 12
11 Dalton 2000: 132
12 SKS 1: 9
13 SKS: 1: 12
14 SKS 13: 19
15 Kierkegaard 1980: 8
16 SKS 13: 18
17 SKS 12: 15

LITERATURE:

Dalton; Stuart (2000): "How to avoid writing: Prefaces and points of view in Kierkegaard", *Philosophy Today*, Summer 2000; 44, 2; Research Library.

Hegel, G.W.F. (1977): *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press.

Kant, Immanuel (1998): *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren (1980): *The Concept of Anxiety*, Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren (2009): *Prefaces*, Princeton University Press.

Søren Kierkegaard (SKS 1): *Af en endnu Levendes Papirer*, Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter, 1, Gads Forlag.

Søren Kierkegaard (SKS 12): *Indøvelse i Christendom*, Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter, 12, Gads Forlag.

Søren Kierkegaard (SKS 13): Om min Forfatter-Virksomhed, Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter, 13, Gads Forlag.

Leibniz, G.W. (1990): *Theodicy*, London: Open Court Classics.

Poole, Roger (1993): *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, The University Press of Virginia.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1993): *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, Werkausgabe Band 1, Suhrkamp.