

## THE PREFACES OF NIKOS KACHTITSIS

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Cet article est une communication faite le 4 juin 1983 à un panel sur "La préface en tant que genre littéraire" au congrès annuel de l'Association Canadienne de Littérature Comparée, à l'Université de la Colombie Britannique, à Vancouver. Nikos Kachtitsis, un auteur Grec parmi les plus représentatifs de la période d'après guerre, écrivit toute son oeuvre de la maturité à Montréal, où il vécut de 1956 à 1970, année de sa mort. Une grande partie de son oeuvre a été publiée en Grèce. Ses écrits en anglais - une courte nouvelle et quelques poèmes - ont été traduits en grec et publiés en édition bilingue, avec trente lettres qu'il avait adressées à l'auteur de l'article. Le volume intitulé *O Lepidhopterologhos tis Agonias*, Nikos Kachtitsis, Athina, Editions Nefeli, 1981, comprend aussi un essai d'introduction ainsi qu'une bibliographie et des photos.

A roman à clef is a form where facts are disguised as fiction(2). At the other end of the spectrum, there are many ways in which a writer can disguise his fiction as fact, give a ring of historicity to his product of imagination. The motives may vary. In Frankenstein Mary Schelley was probably sincere in her efforts to make her fearsome story more acceptable to bourgeois readers. Several letters supposedly written by a seaman, R. Walton, addressed to his sister in England, bracket and cushion the thriller, a story supposedly heard by Walton from a

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mysterious guest on his ship. All this is preceded by a preface explaining what started the writer on her work and containing references to Darwin as well as Homer, Shakespeare and Milton.

Similarly, the nineteenth century Greek writer Emmanuel Royides attached to his witty medieval romance Pope Joan(3) two long, learned essays in an effort to convince his readers about the veracity of his story which involves a female pope. Royides fictionalized and obscured legend which he found in both the small print of the official history of the Vatican and in popular tradition.

Horatio Gilbert Parker also relied somewhat on older material that came into his hands when he wrote his best-selling novel The Seats of the Mighty, subtitled "Being the Memoirs of a Captain Robert Moray, Sometime an Officer in the Virginia Regiment, and Afterwards of Amherst's Regiment."(4) In his brief prefatory note, Parker took pains to explain why his "piece of fiction" was not "out of harmony with fact".

The tradition of such prefaces seems to reappear in some writers of the twentieth century but mostly as parodies of the genre. Beneath the playfulness of such prefaces, however, one can detect serious intent. On the whole, they are ambiguous. On the one hand, the preface sets or pretends to set the record straight. On the other hand, the preface is itself fiction, or meant to be appreciated as fiction. The preface may, on occasion, rival the main work, besides exciting interest in it.

The prefaces of the novella O Exostis (The Terrace)(5) and of the novel O Iroas tis Ghandhis (The Hero of Ghent)(6) by the Greek Canadian writer Nikos Kachtitsis (1926-1970) fall into this category of "old-fashioned" prefaces. The preface of The Terrace is, like Parker's preface of The Seats of the Mighty, brief and most effective in arousing interest in the story that follows. I am quoting the whole preface in translation:

I found the pages that follow, moulding with a tropical must, together with a lot of useless papers food for burning, in the basement of a bookstore where I was working once as a classifier. They are the chronicle of someone who has to give an accounting of his actions.

Before I deliver them, in the form of a book, to the attention of readers, I feel obligated also to thank publicly, with these plain lines, the former

nurse and present officer of the Salvation Army in a foreign land, Mr. Réal Deslauriers, for the help which he gave me with the translation from the Flemish, the original language of the manuscript. Here and there, wherever I considered it necessary, I made slight amendments, or added or deleted things.

Lastly, I should note that my efforts, in the course of many years, and my contacts with a certain colonial power, as well as with another state of Northern Europe, to uncover the real name of the writer, have remained fruitless. It seems that he will remain forever anonymous. I am saving also other papers by the same author for publication, which lie, unsorted, in my drawers.

The preface of The Hero of Ghent is much longer and elaborate. The "editor" Kachtitsis argues that his initial inability to identify the diarist of The Terrace, whom he has only known from his initials, S.P., and the imperfect state of other papers which he has in his disposal, have been rectified. An elderly gentleman, who happened to read the previous book, has sent him some material relating to the younger days of S.P. together with a letter of explanation. These he publishes under the ironic title The Hero of Ghent.

Kachtitsis could have stopped here, but instead, he goes on to describe, in several pages, the appearance and the state of the envelope which he received from the elderly gentleman as well as the contents of the envelope, inferring from these the personality of the sender:

We regret having to point out, as well, that our correspondent, being obviously too conscious of what he was writing (and of the manner in which he was writing), had allowed his writing style to grow worse, rather than what he had wished, to grow better. Thus, apart from the fact that his script was not even, a wave of letters sloped toward the east, another toward the west, one this way and another that way, so that the manuscript gave us, on first view, the impression of grass swept by a mad carnival wind.

This made us conjecture that, perhaps, he suffered from arthritis (something which he himself hinted anyway), but always held, from old habit, his little finger stretched on the paper as a firm support for his hand that traced the lines of his words.

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Yet, although he had succeeded writing in somewhat parallel lines, his writing style betrayed hypochondria to the point of madness, someone who held the fountain pen tight (.....) whose shoulders were hunched over. You would think that some whirlpool in the paper was sucking down his face, twisting it into the muzzle of an animal chewing his cud. You could imagine him muttering the words one by one as they were flowing from the tip of his pen, and that his ear, tuned to the place from where the scratching came, felt an intense sensual pleasure on hearing it.

The conjectural portrait of the elderly gentleman becomes the focus of the preface, while S.P., the subject of the novel recedes in the background, at least until we finish reading the preface and start the first chapter, that is, the elderly gentleman's letter. Thus, the preface of The Hero of Ghent can stand on its own. Moreover, in view of the fact that this work by Kachtitsis presents, as a whole, some defects of plot, we can say that the preface rivals the main story.

Kachtitsis loved paradox and appears to have relished drawing, in his preface, the portrait of his elderly correspondent before letting him speak in the main part of the book. But there is a more serious, if subconscious, intent beneath the playful surface of the preface of The Hero of Ghent and, to a lesser degree, of the preface of The Terrace. Being the "editor" of another's manuscript, the writer cannot be held personally responsible for many defects of plot or characterization in the story. Thus the preface is a kind of protective shield which the writer lifts before himself against possible censure of his work.

In the preface of Richard B. Wright's Farthing's Fortunes (7), the reader is openly warned about the "rough" nature of the memoir which he is going to read.

Over the course of the next several months, Mr. Farthing spoke about his life and times into a Klear-Tone 132 tape recorder. What you are about to read are his actual words. We have eschewed fastidious editing in the hope of capturing the texture and color of the man. This has resulted in obvious contradictions, which may trouble some readers.....

Kachtitsis is certainly subtler in his two prefaces. Yet, his dual purpose, to play with the reader (parodying

this type of preface which he had noticed in his readings of older books)(8), and, at the same time, protect himself against possible accusation as to the content or manner of his story, transpires through his lines.

Henry James noted in Partial Portraits (1888)(9) that explanations by a writer of his creative work are most effective when brief. James certainly meant theoretical or learned discussions with which nineteenth century prefaces abounded. But his statement cannot be valid for prefaces, such as Kachtitsis' preface to The Hero of Gheat, which, in the pseudo-documentary character, establish preface as a separate genre.

## NOTES

1. The paper was read, on June 4, 1983, at the panel discussion "Preface as genre", part of the annual meeting of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association, at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Nikos Kachtitsis, one of the most representative Greek writers of prose, of the post-war period, wrote all of his mature work in Montreal, where lived from 1956 to 1970, the year he died prematurely. Most of his works have been published (and some of them reprinted in one volume) in Greece. His English writings -- a short narrative and a series of poems -- were edited, translated into Greek, and published bilingually, together with thirty of his letters to the present writer, an introductory essay as well as bibliographies and photos. In the volume, O Lepidopterologhos tis Aghonias, Nikos Kachtitsis (The Lepidopterist of Anxiety, Nikos Kachtitsis) (Athens: Nefeli, 1981)
2. For instance, James I. Merrill, The (Diblos) Notebook (New York: Atheneum, 1965), a novel which fictionalizes a period in the writer's life spent in Greece, in the company of Kimon Friar and other real characters.
3. Available in paperback in an English translation by Lawrence Durrell (London: Sphere Books Ltd., 1971).
4. The novel first appeared in 1896. There is a fairly recent edition (1971) by McClelland & Stewart.
5. Published in Athens, Greece, by "Proti Ili", in 1964.
6. Published in Montreal, by "Lotofaghos", in 1967.

7. Published in Toronto, by MacMillan, in 1971.
8. Kachtitsis might have also read the Greek novel by Stratis Myrivilis, I Zoi en Tapho (Life in the Tomb), available in an English translation by Peter Bien (University of New England Press, 1977). This is an anti-war Greek classic, in whose preface Myrivilis poses as the editor of a manuscript left behind by a Greek sergeant who had died in the Balkan wars of 1912-1913.
9. In his discussion of Guy de Maupassant. James's words have served as epigraph in the book Anthologie des préfaces de romans français du XIXe siècle. Présentation de Herbert S. Gershman et B. Whitworth, Jr. (Paris: Julliard, 1947).