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The Work and the "Boundary of Meaning"

Paul Claudel wrote in his *Journal* from 1910 that it is important to always possess a strong feeling of reality and hard facts. This statement could be referred to assorted life situations. But Claudel was thinking of a special state of affairs: the stand assumed by the artist and his task. The word "reality" must at this stage bring to mind yet another note made by the poet four years earlier, when he wrote that he had been thinking not of a reality accessible to our senses but a "total reality of things visible and invisible", the base of truly universal poetry.

Claudel returned to this reflection upon many occasions, i.a. in *Positions et propositions*, published in 1928, when he announced that the matter of poetry are not dreams, illusions or thoughts but sacred reality, in which we are enrooted for always: a universe of the visible to which Faith grants a universe of the invisible, all that gazes at us and which we contemplate. All is the work of God, lauded by the songs and poems of the greatest poets as well as the songs of the most modest of birds. *Poesis perennis* does not devise its themes but incessantly returns to those suggested by Creation, in the manner of our liturgy, of which we never tire just as we do not grow weary of the seasons of the year. The purpose of poetry is not, as Baudelaire maintained, to reach the bottom of Infinity in order to discover novelty but, on the contrary, to attain the bottom of the finite so as to arrive at that, which is inexhaustible. In a travesty of Jesus: *He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth* (Matthew 12,30; Luke 11,23) Claudel added that only truth links and connects all, while all that, which is not truth, disperses.

We accept that an authentic work of art discloses or at least intends to reveal or render closer that, which in a domain other than reflection on art is described as the boundary of meaning. This term comes from the philosophy of religion or, to put it as extensively as possible, the study of religion. *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology* by Gerardus van der Leeuw disseminated this term, borrowing it from a today already less known work, namely, *Types of Men* by Eduard Springer (published in 1914), who wrote that the religious meaning of things is the one beyond which no further or more profound meaning may hide. This is the sense of entirety, the last word. Such meaning, however, will be never comprehended and such a word will be never uttered. They shall always remain above us. Ultimate sense is an ever-revealed mystery that, however, keeps on being concealed. It denotes a path leading to the ultimate boundary where only one thing is comprehended: all understanding remains "on the other side". Ultimate sense is thus the very limit of meaning.

Karen Blixen died in 1962. Immediately before she said in an interview given on Danish Radio, i. a. that inspiration is composed predominantly of all experiences comprising a unity thanks to which that, which we usually find so difficult to understand suddenly becomes lucid and appears to have been bestowed upon us in the manner of a gift.

An excellent commentary to this statement is a fragment from a biography by the writer Judith Thurman, who noted: the sentence "I understood everything" or "suddenly, I comprehended everything" appears in the writings of Karen Blixen almost as a liturgical formula. It signifies an awareness of the great mystery that each one of us carries within, buried in the past and now suddenly discovered, describing moments that disclose the very skeleton of our identity.

This sketch is an outcome of attempts at commenting on *Babette's Feast (Babette's gaestebud,* 1987), Gabriel Axel's film adaptation of a novel written by Karen Blixen in English in 1950. The novel was included in *Anecdotes of Destiny*, a collection issued in 1953.

Babette's Feast occupies an exceptional place in the *oeuvre* of Karen Blixen: it is her masterpiece or belongs to a group of her most complete works. Axel's film, a faithful transposition of the original, attains the same extremely high level, so rare in cinematographic art. It is and will undoubtedly remain one of the masterpieces of film. Nonetheless, due to the fact that as befits a masterpiece it is known to a rather narrow audience it seems necessary to propose at the very onset the simplest possible and, unfortunately, rather abridged introduction at least to its theme.

In the story the plot takes place in the small Norwegian port town of Berlevaag. The film transferred it to Denmark and a seacoast village in the northern part of a peninsula. Here, probably at the beginning of the 1920s, lived a pastor who in time gathered disciples or believers from among simple fishermen and sailors. Certain features of this congregation could point to the impact of Swedenborg. At this stage, however, it suffices to add that the movement aimed at a revival of religious life, initiated by the pastor, spread across the country, gaining followers among the high strata of the nobility and at the royal court.

The pastor married late and soon became a widower. Alone, he brought up two daughters, Martina and Philippa, christened after Luther and Melanchton. Their upbringing must have been stern; moreover, the pastor did not want the girls to leave home, declaring that their assistance would be always indispensable in view of his vocation. The daughters did not protest, but upon two occasions the extraordinary beauty and enchanting voice of the younger one disturbed the unruffled course of their life.

First there appeared at the pastor's house Lorens Loewenhielm, a young officer from a well-born family, in love with Martina. He had gained access thanks to a pious aunt, a long-time supporter of the pastor's activity whose country residence was located nearby. The young man, however, soon understood that he would be unable to win over the girl and after telling her that he found out for the first time that fate is cruel and that there are certain impossible things in the world, he left for always – or so it seemed at the time.

Next there arrived on a sightseeing tour a brilliant French singer, Achille Papin, who had just performed at the Royal Opera in Stockholm. Having seen Philippa and heard her astonishing voice in church he decided to share his life and career with her. He succeeded only insofar as the pastor permitted him to give the young girl several singing lessons. Philippa, however, resigned from them, evidently uncertain about her feelings for the teacher.

Many years later, Achille wrote a letter to the sisters requesting that they would take the person delivering it, a certain Babette Hersant, under their care. At the time of the Paris Commune Babette had lost her husband and son and was forced to flee from France. Her nephew, working on a ship belonging to the Scandinavian fleet, could take her along. Achille Papin recalled the pastor's home and presented her with a letter of recommendation informing that Babette was an excellent cook. The two sisters, living very modestly (their father had passed away a long time ago), devoted all their funds to charity and thus concluded that they could not afford a housekeeper. Babette pleaded to permit her to stay and work free of charge, claiming that this was the last chance in her life. The sisters were compelled to relent.

Upon a certain occasion Babette mentioned that the only bond with her homeland was a lottery ticket purchased a long time ago and renewed yearly by one of her Parisian friends. More than ten years after having settled down in her new place of residence she received the news that she had won the first prize: 10 000 franks. This event coincided with the hundredth anniversary of the pastor's birth, which his daughters intended to celebrate. Babette convinced them to allow her to cook a French-style dinner on that day, for which she would pay with her winnings. Having overcome their doubts, Martina and Philippa consented, especially considering that this was Babette's first request and, they believed, the last one before her now likely departure for France. Babette had become rich and, in their opinion, the cost of a single reception would not affect her resources.

Despite considerable anxiety caused by the scale and type of purchases preceding the dinner, the evening was a success. Even more so since it especially impressed, and was appreciated by a totally unexpected guest announced almost at the last moment. This was Lorens Loewenhielm, now a retired general, who had enjoyed an imposing career and for years represented his country at the court of St. Petersburg and Paris.

The striking features of both the novel and the film are unusually concise narration and the simplicity of all applied means. This simplicity and aptness serve, already on the outside, the essential expressive effect of the whole dramatic construction, basically identical in both works and granting the illusion of reality to things and events that are by no means obvious but puzzling and uncommon. That which should be regarded as openly improbable is rendered credible in assorted ways, one of them being the precisely defined historical quality of facts. We know, for instance, that the closing and, at the same time, main link of the plot takes place on 15 December 1885 and thus that the pastor was born in 1785. We also learn that Martina was born in 1836 and Philippa – in 1837, that Lorens paid his first visit to the pastor's house in 1854, and that Achille Papin came a year later, that Babette arrived in 1871, etc.

This whole network of dates, given directly or easily recreated, aims, first and foremost, at rendering real all those unlikely coincidences that bring to mind an intervention of supernatural forces and that in a rational order should be regarded either as confabulation or a challenge to faith.

On the other hand, fate or Providence reveals its power through an improbable symmetry of events. All the sequences aim at a single point designated by the dinner given by Babette. Unfulfilled feelings and crossed plans are realized, disclosing their concealed order and meaning, becoming ultimately the reason for an explanation of the central event and finding their elucidation within it. In this manner, the despotic nature of the pastor and his egocentrism, only ostensibly justified by noble vocation, are as if overcome and vanquished, but actually reveal themselves in the unexpected truth of their essential effects. The love of Lorens for Martina and of Achille for Philippa, timidly reciprocated but instantly stifled, now triumphs at a totally different level. Thanks to the singer Babette found herself at the home of the pastor's daughters. Owing to the general's seemingly accidental but necessary presence at the dinner table and the experiences that he pursued owing to failed love the greatness of

Babette's feast can be duly appreciated, since the meal is a great work of art and Babette - a remarkable artist. This is the way in which cards dealt by fate are shown. Suddenly, we decipher the heretofore-concealed plan and discover the essence of the game. The impact of grace can ultimately come to the fore *via* the artwork and in a place created by the latter.

General Loewenhielm rises to say a single sentence: *But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite*.

In this fashion we discover the topic of *Babette's Feast*, its theme and most profound contents. This is a story about a work of art and the revelation of grace – something that might be described as *coup de grâce*, if this expression were to be freed of its idiomatic meaning

Let us repeat: according to *Babette's Feast* a work of art describes and as if discloses the place that is to be struck by the "bolt of grace".

Each of the two motifs ("religious" and "artistic") of the story and, naturally, the film, can be separated more clearly only at an analytical level, possesses to a certain extent separate sigs of recognition, and contrasts with the other.

The text of *Babette's Feast* is full of open or concealed - at times travestied – Biblical quotations. Members of the pastor's congregation at times speak in the words of the Bible (e.g. the story about the cluster of grapes comes from *The Book of Numbers*, and about the treacherous nature of language - from *The Epistle of St. James*). The theme from Psalm 85: *Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other* recurs several times. One of the hymns sung by the congregation and composed, as we learn, by the pastor alludes to sentences repeated by St. Matthew (7, 9-10) and St. Luke (11, 11): *Or what man is there of you, whom if his son asks bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?* It is said that Babette was the dark Martha in the house of two fair Marys. The feast is associated with two New Testament events - the Wedding at Cana and the Pentecost, the second being recalled as follows: *Of what happened later in the evening, nothing definite here can be stated. None of the guests later on had any clear remembrance of it. They only knew that the rooms had been filled with a heavenly light, as if a number of small halos had blended into one glorious radiance. Taciturn old people received the gift of tongues; ears that for years had been almost deaf were opened to it. Time itself had merged into eternity. Long after midnight, the windows of the house shone like gold, and golden song flowed out into the winter air*.

At the onset Babette and the theme of artistic creativity are defined by a sombre ambiance. Karen Blixen (as well as Axel and the brilliant Stephane Audran playing the part of Babette) masterfully outlines a portrait of the protagonist: simple and obvious, puzzling and undefined, full of unexpected possibilities incessantly revealed and realised. Into the world formed by the pastor Babette introduced multi-faceted outlandishness derived from her biography, customs, language and religion. She does not demonstrate this trait but also does not reject it. At the same time, she enters a totally new environment and almost blends with it while remaining essentially mysterious and unknown. When the circumstances allow her to disclose that what she regards as most important – her vocation and talent, there emerges also something that defines her strangeness to the very end: some sort of a pagan feature containing the idea and form of an offering.

The originally blurred outlines of this form give rise to fear and outrage among everyone. In a single moment, the whole trust that had been bestowed upon Babette for the past fourteen years disappears and someone even proposes to ignore her suspicious and undoubtedly sinful gift and to treat it with silence and indifference. At that particular moment no one, and up to the end almost no one infers an offering in the French women's caprice or is capable of assessing its dimensions.

In contrast to the obvious grace suffusing the contents of the life of the pastor's daughters Babette's offering is - not only ostensibly - dark, impenetrable, violent and cruel. Regardless of the sophistication that ultimately comes to the fore in its outcome, its sources contain something primeval. First and foremost, it is again due to this trait that the offering is "pagan". At this stage, the film by Gabriel Axel adds something to that, which Karen Blixen merely suggested and which at first glance appears to be fleeting. The sequence of preparations for the feast shows mounds of slaughtered animals; next, we watch many other first-hand testimonies of unrestrained extravagance, the end result being an image of frenzied wastage and destruction, a "potlatch" in which, as it turns out at the end, the sum of 10 000 franks, enormous at the time, simply vanishes.

This "pagan" character of the feast, which, as has been mentioned, became apparent rather prior to the feast than in its course, compels us to regard Babette's offering in religious categories. In this context, "pagan" means primarily "cult", "religious" and belonging to a different religious order than the one universally prevalent in the given environment.

In the novel the image of the feast is humbler than in the film and apart from the story about the gigantic turtle, which appears in the kitchen and terrifies Martha, it says little about the backstage preparations. The general recognises and admires the brands and vintage of the wines. He also knows the particular dishes: turtle soup, blinis *Demidoff* and *cailles en sarcophage*, the latter being the trademark of Babette Hersant and her artistry at the Parisian "Café Anglais" restaurant famous for her cuisine. In the story Lorens Loewenhielm reminisces but does not exteriorise his recollections. In the film, on the other hand, he speaks but his remarks do not

produce any sort of reaction or understanding among the listeners. In both cases, therefore, data that would make it possible to finally unveil the mystery of the feast, i.e. to identify Babette, are not associated. The general never saw her in Paris nor will he see her here. He recognizes the work, which he once admired but does not attempt to deduce by what miracle it had made its way to the pastor's home. In a certain sense his reaction is correct: he distrusts sensual evidence and succumbs to that, which he regards as improbable and thus cannot be considered "real" according to commonly observed rigours. In doing so, he accepts the order into which he had been introduced, although he is unable to explain it.

General Loewenhielm stopped eating and sat immovable. Once more he was carried back to that dinner in Paris of which he had thought in the sledge. An incredibly recherche and palatable dish had been served there; he had asked its name from his fellow diner, Colonel Galliffet, and the Colonel had smilingly told him that it was named "Cailles en Sarcophage". He further told him that the dish had been invented by the chef off the very café in which they were dining, a person known all over Paris as the greatest culinary genius of the age and – most surprisingly – a woman! "And indeed", said Colonel Galliffet, "this woman is now turning a dinner at the Café Anglais *into a kind of love affair – inot a love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety!*

The term "romantic" used here is by all means justified. The cited dialogue should be situated somewhere at the turn of the fifth decade of the nineteenth century. Romanticism, devised as an artistic current, was still alive and although its tide was declining and becoming dispersed it grew increasingly universal. Mentioning *cailles en sarcophage* Karen Blixen described the stylistic features of Babette's work and evoked the historical-archaeological predilections of the period as well as its macabre-grotesque inclination towards "creating an atmosphere". The name of the dish contains all: from subjection to fashion to the use in culinary art of inspirations stemming from the great spiritual discoveries of the epoch. Moreover, let us add, it again suggests some sort of a cult ceremony, a ritual and an offering.

The speech given by General Loewenhielm disclosing the moral and religious meaning of Babette's feast is preceded by a brief comment on the impact of wine. Once more we come across an echo of *The Acts of the Apostles*. The miracle of glossolalia that occurred on the day of the Pentecost was commented in two ways by those gathered around the supper table (2,12-13): *And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this? Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine.*

The novel similarly justifies and appears to use rational arguments to hide the general's irrational behaviour. For all practical purposes, we may perceive the influence of some sort of inspiration stemming from unidentified sources. But, as we had already mentioned, the narrator prefers to remain firmly on the ground: *Then the General felt that the time had come to make a speech. He rose and stood up very straight. Nobody else at the dinner table had stood up to speak. The old people lifted their eyes to the face above them in high, happy expectation. They were used to seeing sailors and vagabonds dead drunk with the crass gin of the country, but they did not recognize in a warrior and courtier the intoxication brought about by the noblest wine of the world. "Mercy and truth, my friends, have met together," said the General. "Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another".*

He spoke in a clear voice, which had been trained in drill grounds and had echoed sweetly in royal halls, and yet he was speaking in a manner so new to himself and so strangely moving that after his first sentence he had to make a pause. For he was in the habit of forming his speeches with care, conscious of his purpose, but here, in the midst of the Dean's simple congregation, it was as if the whole figure of General Loewenhielm, his breast covered with decorations, were but a mouthpiece for a message which meant to be brought forth.

"Man, my friends," said General Loewenhielm, "is frail and foolish. We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and short-sightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite. For this reason we tremble …" Never till now had the General stated that he trembled; he was genuinely surprised and even shocked at hearing his own voice proclaim the fact. "We tremble before making our choice in life, and after having made it again tremble in fear of having chosen wrong. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. See! that which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another".

This moment of illumination in which everything that the general had experienced in his life appeared as a "logical whole" now suddenly assumes meaning, reveals its deep sense and comes into being thanks to Babette's work. The feast, an artistic creation, delineates, as has been said, space that makes possible perception, experience and comprehension totally different from their "ordinary", common or pragmatic counterparts. A feast conceived as a work of art places its participants *vis a vis* complete reality revealing all its dimensions.

The densification and intensification of the sensual is such that it appears to undergo a crisis of sorts. On a daily basis, the firm cohesion of the visible cracks and ensuing fissures contain invisible perspectives of things, domains of "the invisible".

Such a work is attainable thanks to sacrifice. Each great work possesses something of an offering. It either is an offering or originates from it; similarly to the offering, it does not "communicate" anything to those who come into contact with it or, to put differently, those who find themselves within its range.

The probably most prominent message of *Babette's* Feast is contained in the discovery and process of rendering aware of the work of art both as the concentration and liberation of a certain force and energy that it would be most correct to describe as the force of the truth – such a work takes us into its possession, embraces us, and compels us to participate in it. It is impossible, therefore, to speak about the reception and recipients of that, which has taken place and emerged in the act of creation. *Babette's Feast* shows how regardless of "competence" and even of will, willingness and resolutions the work captivates those who had been drawn into its orbit. And how regardless of experience, knowledge, and even the state of consciousness it allows and forces to see that, which it cannot indicate even indirectly or ostensibly: to see "total reality" and the "sense of the whole", to reach the "boundary of meaning". When Lorens Loewenhielm speaks about grace and Babette admits that if she offered all that she could give then she offered others perfect happiness they are both expressing the same: experiencing an infinite, limitless whole.

That which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us.

Let us repeat: great art is the reason why we become its substance, the "matter" of its works.

The novel and the film end with a conversation containing a unique and artistically important creed. In this case, the text of the novel is much more extensive than the film version of the dialogue.

Martina says: "We will all remember this evening when you have gone back to Paris, Babette".

Babette said: "I am not going back to Paris".

"You are not going back to Paris?" Martine exclaimed.

"No," said Babette. "What will I do in Paris? They have all gone. I have lost them all, Mesdames".

The sisters' thoughts went to Monsieur Hersant and his son, and they said: "Oh, my poor Babette".

"Yes, they have all gone", said Babette. "The Duke of Morny, the Duke of Decazes, Prince Narishkine, General Galliffet, Aurélien Scholl, Paul Daru, the Princes Pauline! All! ".

The strange names and titles of people lost to Babette faintly confused the two ladies, but there was such an infinite perspective of tragedy in her announcement that in their responsive state of mind they felt her losses as their own, and their eyes filled with tears.

At the end of another long silence Babette suddenly smiled slightly at them and said: "And how would I go back to Paris, Mesdames? I have no money".

"No money?" the sisters cried as with one mouth.

"No" said Babette.

"But the ten thousand francs? The sisters asked in a horrified gasp.

"The ten thousand francs have been spent, Mesdames", said Babette. [...]

The ladies still did not find a word to say. The piece of news was incomprehensible to them, but then many things tonight in one way or another had been beyond comprehension [...]

"Dear Babette", she said softly, "you ought not to have given away all you had for our sake".

Babette gave her mistress a deep glance, a strange glance. Was there not pity, even scorn, at the bottom of it?

"For your sake?" she replied. "No. For my own".

She rose from the chopping block and stood up before the two sisters.

"I am a great artist!" she said.

She waited a moment and then repeated: "I am a great artist, Mesdames".

Again for a long time there was deep silence in the kitchen. Then Martine said: "So you will be poor now all your life, Babette?

"Poor?" said Babette. She smiled as if to herself. "No. I shall never be poor. I told you that I am a great artist. A great artist, Mesdames, is never poor. We have something, Mesdames, of which other people know nothing. [...]

"But all those people whom you had mentioned," she said, "those princes and great people of Paris whom you named, Babette? You yourself fought against them. You were a Communard! The general you named had your husband and son short! How can you grieve over them?"

Babette's dark eyes met Philippa's. "Yes", she said, "I was a Communard. [...] *And those people I named, Mesdames, were evil and cruel* [...] *But all the same, Mesdames, I shall not go back to Paris, now that those people of whom I have spoken are no longer there". [...] "You see, Mesdames [...] those people belonged to me, they were mine. They had been brought up and trained, with greater expense than you, my little ladies, could ever imagine or believe, to understand what a great artist I am. I could make them happy. When I did my very best I could make them perfectly happy".* [...] *"It was like that with Monsieur Papin too" [...] "He told me so himself: 'It is terrible and unbearable to an artist,' he said, 'to be encouraged to do, to be applauded for doing, his second best'. He said: 'Through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me leave to do my utmost!".*

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