



October 1997

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Recommended Citation

Schuler, Jean (1997) "Kierkegaard at Babette's Feast: The Return to the Finite," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol1/iss2/3>

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Kierkegaard at Babette's Feast: The Return to the Finite

Abstract

Babette's Feast achieves what Kierkegaard treated as impossible: to make the hidden movements of faith visible. A film about goodness threatens to bore its audience; a film about holiness that manages to get it right would seem to be as impossible as roses blooming in December or sitting down to a banquet fit for kings in a Jutland cottage. The usual ways of analyzing character and plot don't size up the elderly sisters who move with such grace through the quiet grays and browns of the village. A modern critic might insist: these daughters were controlled by a powerful father fixation. What a waste to have never experienced romantic love or the flowering of their talents! To try on a psychological analysis is to realize somewhat ruefully that it doesn't quite fit. Freedom, sorrow, and also joy hang together in this delicate balance. This wisdom does not belong to the stoic who trims desires to match the situation and remains tranquil at all costs. Here desire, like fine sauce, bubbles loudly; we aren't about to quench desire or diminish its searing effects in our lives. In Babette's kitchen, we hesitantly sit down to feast holding close to the promise of Psalm 85 quoted throughout the film: "Mercy and truth shall meet. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss."

Before heading for supper with the dwindling followers of the long deceased minister, the General wagers with his younger self, whose image sprawls before him on the bedroom chair: did I make the right choice years ago to leave this village and my hopeless love for the minister's daughter to pursue a brilliant career that took me to the highest circles within the royal court? Was it the right choice? Tonight in her presence, I'll know. The older self has grown weary of the trappings of power and the vanities of ambition. He is resigned to the fearful disclosure that indeed he had taken the wrong turn: how a life replete with victories could be swallowed by defeat. But supper never happens. Instead, the General and his elderly aunt sit down to such an exquisite banquet that he is overwhelmed. Impossible but true. In this desolate outpost of melancholy rustics, how he should taste such delicacies as are virtually unknown outside the most fashionable restaurant of Paris? The sheer dimensions of this incongruity defied all accounting. But who wins the wager? Which was the right path to follow? Standing for a toast in the midst of this unfathomable event, the General gives thanks to that great mercy which stretches further than all our efforts--whether commonplace or heroic. In the presence of God's amazing mercy we discover that nothing has been lost. I have been with you every day, he tells Martine in parting, and I will sit down to dine with you every night for as long as I live. I have learned that all things are possible. Is this winning or losing? How can he know until he realizes just what his life has been really about?

Gabriel Axel's beautiful film, *Babette's Feast*, is based on a story by Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen) which was first published in the *Ladies Home Journal* in May 1950. It is not surprising to find the film replete with themes from Kierkegaard, since the author drew inspiration from her native Denmark, and a story situated on the Jutland heath might well evoke that native philosopher who, when visiting his father's home, wrote:

The heaths of Jutland must of all places be suited to develop the spirit powerfully; here everything lies naked and uncovered before God, and there is no room for the many distractions, the many little crevices where consciousness can hide and where seriousness has such difficulty in running down one's scattered thoughts. Here consciousness must firmly and scrupulously close itself around itself. And on the heaths one may say with truth: "Whither shall I flee from thy presence?"

The parallels between Kierkegaard's life and Blixen's story are striking. Like the General, Kierkegaard had spent a wayward youth, gambling and disappointing his father. Like the General, Kierkegaard traveled to the Jutland to stay with his aunt, and like the General returned to become engaged in the conventional manner of settling down. Only, unlike the General, Kierkegaard broke off the engagement and turned to writing in the peculiar religious and philosophical modes for which he is known. Most importantly, both the General and Kierkegaard discover that the great love which had seemed futile in youth was given back in the end.

The recovery of what is lost - epitomized for Kierkegaard in the story of Abraham and Isaac - is described as the "return to the finite." In Kierkegaard's

three stages of life, faith contrasts with the aesthetic and the ethical in a trust that God will restore what we have sacrificed. Somehow - reason never figures it out - our happiness will be complete. What we have given up - child, art, fame, wealth, career, marriage - will somehow be ours again. As the sisters thank Babette for her spectacular performance in the kitchen, Philippe murmurs the words which provided her own consolation: "How you will someday delight the angels."

The connections between Blixen's story, Axel's film, and Kierkegaard's thought are complex. The film evokes Kierkegaardian themes while in the end suggesting a view of religion and art at odds with his. In the film, the faithful were tempted to miss the fullness of life and sink into fractious, petty quarrels unless interrupted by the artistry in their midst. Babette's creation--one luscious sensation after the next - coaxed the hidebound Puritans into experiencing the reconciliation which burst forth from their hymns but not their hearts. At this Last Supper - where twelve gathered to remember their master, who they were, and what they were to be about - it was the artist who called forth the spirit of joy. What had worried them for so long - am I truly forgiven? - was realized afresh as the bounty poured from the kitchen. The food was the visible sign of the abundance that they had dared not believe in: how could God ever forgive that sin? Who could ever really know me and still love me? Their faith was ruled by a scarcity akin to the rocky shore, the treeless land, the harsh winds, the muted colors, the stale bread,

the unsalted fish-soup that filled their bowls. How could one scabble for mere existence for so long and yet believe that there was more than enough of anything to go around? As long as Jerusalem was postponed to another world well after death, the conundrum of faith could be disguised. Of course, this abundance exists, but only in heaven where indeed our prayers are answered. What was scarcely to be tolerated was the possibility that this abundance was already in our midst. What the hymns and gentle words of the sisters could not accomplish was made manifest in Babette's gift.

The return to the finite is part of the double movement of faith that Kierkegaard describes in *Fear and Trembling*. There he ponders the problem of identifying a true person of faith, since the signs are hidden in the heart. This knight of faith, he complains, may well resemble the Philistine who walks the earth with no worthier concern than his next meal. In a passage that might have inspired Blixen's tale, Kierkegaard describes the man of faith:

The moment I set eyes on him I instantly push him from me, I myself leap backwards, I clasp my hands and say half aloud, "Good Lord, is this the man? ... Why, he looks like a tax-collector!" I draw closer to him ... to see whether there might not be visible...a note of sadness, a smile, which betrayed the infinite ... No! I examine his figure from top to toe to see if there might not be a cranny through which the infinite was peeping. No. He is solid through and through ... He belongs entirely to the world, no Philistine more so. One can discover nothing of that aloof and superior nature ... He takes delight in everything, and whenever one sees him taking part in a particular pleasure, he does it with the persistence which is the mark of the earthly man whose soul is absorbed in such things ...

Toward evening he walks home, his gait is as indefatigable as that of the postman. On his way he reflects that his wife has surely a special little warm dish prepared for him, e.g., a calf's head roasted, garnished with vegetables. If he were to meet a man like-minded, he could continue as far as East Gate to discourse with him about that dish, with a passion befitting a hotel chef. As it happens, he hasn't four pence to his name, and yet he fully and firmly believes that his wife has that dainty dish for him. If she had it, it would then be an invidious sight for superior people and an inspiring one for the plain man, to see him eat; for his appetite is greater than Esau's. His wife hasn't it - strangely enough, it is quite the same to him.

In Babettes kitchen swarming with the fixings of a splendid French dinner, quail and sea turtle await their fate alongside the head of a calf. Only the devout sisters aren't delighted by the rich fare; they are horrified by these signs of a witches' sabbath and call a secret meeting of the faithful where all, trembling, vow to consume the food without tasting it: an ordeal of the spirit to be endured in silence. Perhaps some qualms in the face of exuberant pleasure are prudent. But it is their initial refusal to taste Babettes gift, not the calf's head, which reveals a wayward faith.

For all the talk about religion, observes Kierkegaard, few pay much attention to faith. The usual attitude finds faith full of rules and demands to live with absolute purity. This view of faith, Kierkegaard points out, has confused two forms of human greatness: faith and ethical life. The ethical hero commands the will with enough authority to win the battle between duty and happiness; when tested, he will rise to the height of great sacrifice to do what is right. The ethical

hero can be picked out of a line-up; fortitude leaves lines and crevices missing from the elusive visage of faith. Faith follows a double movement while this action on behalf of the universal - whether the call of conscience, God, or the ethical community - completes only the first movement. This movement, made entirely by our own strength, is the leap to the infinite or the transcendent.

Like great moral deeds, artistic creation absorbs our entire energies.

Preparing a great feast or singing an aria by Mozart removes us from the range of the ordinary and makes reentry, in the words of Walker Percy, an urgent human problem. Percy renames "reentry" what Kierkegaard calls the second movement, the return to the finite. After the great discharge of the all-consuming deed, how do we resume the ordinary tasks of life without scorn for the smallness at hand? In *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy seems to assume that faith's trek back to the finite is no longer much of an option. His account of the modern alternatives to faith is bleak indeed.

But what is not generally recognized is that the successful launch of self into the orbit of transcendence is necessarily attended by problems of reentry. What goes up must come down. The best film of the year ends at nine o'clock. What to do at ten? What did Faulkner do after writing the last sentence of *Light in August*? Get drunk for a week. What did Dostoevsky do after finishing *The Idiot*?

Spend three days and nights at the roulette table. What does the reader do after finishing either book? How long does his exaltation last?

Ordinary life can't help but disappoint the one who soars amidst the wonders of transcendence. No wonder, remarks Percy, that artists sink into neurosis, alcoholism, drug addiction, promiscuity, depression, and suicide to escape their estrangement from the everyday world. One who spends herself completely in ascending to the transcendent has no energy left to complete the leap back to earth. God isn't much of an option for the autonomous self of modern culture, yet it was only faith, in Kierkegaard's telling, that makes the return to the finite possible. In this passage, the "absurd" refers to the faith that exceeds the reckoning of human intelligence. The knight of faith succeeds where Percy's artist fails in returning to the finite:

He lives as carefree as a ne'er-do-well, and yet he buys up the acceptable time at the dearest price, for he does not do the least thing except by virtue of the absurd. And yet, and yet I could become furious over it--for envy, if for no other reason - because the man has made and every instant is making the movements of infinity. With infinite resignation he has drained the cup of life's profound sadness, he knows the bliss of the infinite, he senses the pain of renouncing everything, the dearest things he possesses in the world, and yet finiteness tastes to him just as good as to one who never knew anything higher ... And yet, and yet the whole earthly form he exhibits is a new creation by virtue of the absurd. He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd.

In the sweet taste of the finite we find the power of God more so than in the infinite exertion that removes us far from the ordinary. We can muster the heroic

apart from a relationship to God, but what is it about life as a creature that proves so difficult? In Percy's cantankerous view, modern substitutes for faith by and large can handle the heroic but shatter under the weight of the creaturely. "It is difficult for gods to walk the earth without taking the form of beasts ... Two gods in the Cosmos is one too many."

By our own strength, we can make the all-consuming sacrifice - artistic, moral, religious - but it exceeds our own strength to live with joy in the aftermath of catastrophe, loss, or simply the emptiness that follows the creative storm. Coming back to our smallness after it seemed for a moment that we have left it behind is as unsettling as a gift without strings. Philosophers often write as if the problem of evil were the big obstacle to a relationship to God. *Babette's Feast* suggests that evil can be accommodated without much bother; what confounds our ordinary bookkeeping is goodness or love. The villagers were not surprised by harshness, regrets, and crabbed routine. It was the gift freely given that disturbs them. Babette's feast was as unsettling to the villagers as the religious doctrine of forgiveness. This ethical life operates within the economy of scarcity and sacrifice. A greater courage is required to trust that love runs deeper than the losses which are so palpable. At the end of his journey to the Jutland, Kierkegaard writes: "It requires moral courage to grieve; it requires religious courage to

rejoice." If eventually such a gift is accepted, it might move stiff and pinched limbs to dance.

Babettes Feast achieves what Kierkegaard treated as impossible: to make the hidden movements of faith visible. A film about goodness threatens to bore its audience; a film about holiness that manages to get it right would seem to be as impossible as roses blooming in December or sitting down to a banquet fit for kings in a Jutland cottage. The usual ways of analyzing character and plot don't size up the elderly sisters who move with such grace through the quiet grays and browns of the village. A modern critic might insist: these daughters were controlled by a powerful father fixation. What a waste to have never experienced romantic love or the flowering of their talents! To try on a psychological analysis is to realize somewhat ruefully that it doesn't quite fit. Freedom, sorrow, and also joy hang together in this delicate balance. This wisdom does not belong to the stoic who trims desires to match the situation and remains tranquil at all costs. Here desire, like fine sauce, bubbles loudly; we aren't about to quench desire or diminish its searing effects in our lives. In Babettes kitchen, we hesitantly sit down to feast holding close to the promise of Psalm 85 quoted throughout the film: "Mercy and truth shall meet. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss."