

On food, faith, and psychoanalysis: Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*.

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***'Something has happened to the bread and the wine.....They are something else now'.
Mary Oliver (2006).***

Abstract.

Isak Dinesen's 1958 novella *Babette's Feast* tells the story of how a small, quarrelsome Lutheran community in Norway comes to be transformed by the arrival of a stranger, the French cook Babette. In her deceptively simple tale, Dinesen adopts explicitly Eucharistic language and imagery to convey the connection between eating and faith, exploring via rich use of metaphor the way in which we come to be inhabited and nourished by the other. In this paper, I follow Dinesen's sacramental perspective by offering the Catholic notion of transubstantiation as a model for furthering psychoanalytic theorising about the presence of the other within. Following an outline of Dinesen's story, I draw on Freud (1921), Abraham and Torok (1994) and Kristeva (1990) to explore differing notions of unconscious identification, incorporation and the metaphorical basis of subjectivity. I develop these ideas through a discussion of the central celebratory dinner given by Babette and conclude by considering some of the implications of the story for psychoanalytic practice.

Introduction

Having reached the age of reason at seven years old, it was time, my mother said, for me to make my First Holy Communion. The nuns who were teaching me at the small Catholic convent girls' school in London where I grew up were excited. 'You are very lucky children', Mother Gabriel announced to the class, her black eyes shining beneath her cream-coloured wimple. 'You are going to receive a gift. The best gift in the world. It's the body of Christ!' I nodded solemnly, along with my friends. I knew all about communion. Every week for years, I had watched my mother queue during mass to receive a small wafer from the priest in her outstretched hands. She would stand there, put it in her mouth, cross herself and return back to the pew where I was waiting. Respectfully, I would shift my knees awkwardly to one side to allow her room to pass by and kneel down; and there she would stay, on her knees, freshly holy, for the next quarter of an hour or so while I sat, hungry, fidgeting and impatient, waiting for the priest to conclude mass.

The practice session held at school was, truth to tell, a bit of a disappointment. We all trooped down importantly to the little chapel off the hall, to walk slowly, one by one, up to a gimlet-eyed Reverend Mother standing by the altar holding a silver cup filled with unblessed communion hosts ('quite all right to use these, girls, they haven't yet been turned into the Lord's body'). When my turn came, I shut my eyes tightly, and proceeded cautiously towards the altar with one hand cupped on top of the other as if playing an ecclesiastical

version of Grandmother's Footsteps. I stopped as soon as I heard the words: 'the body of Christ', obediently repeating what Mother Gabriel had told me to say: 'amen'. I felt a firm pressure in my palm. When I opened my eyes, I saw a small, light, paper-coloured disc in my hand which I gingerly picked up (so light! was that all?) and put in my mouth. To my dismay, it promptly and firmly stuck to the roof of my mouth; and whilst my tongue, at first apologetically, then more urgently and finally with distinct alarm attempted to dislodge it, it dissolved and disappeared before I could get back to my seat. Guiltily, I sat down, taking sidelong glances at my friends who all appeared to be self-consciously chewing and swallowing Jesus, sitting back with satisfied smiles on their faces. Clearly, I needed more practice and I resolved to do better next time.

The problem was, as I decided later, it didn't look like a body. Actually, it didn't really look like bread either, resembling more the rice-paper that clung to the bottom of the coconut macaroons I was rather fond of. If, as I had been told, it was really the body of Christ - His Real Presence - how could I eat it? Didn't that make me a cannibal? And anyway, what happened once the wafer was in my tummy? How long did it last there? Of course, I knew that I had to fast before taking communion, but what would happen afterwards, when I had my Zing bar during break? It seemed vaguely sacrilegious to eat chocolate on top of the Body of Christ; and besides, there was the complicated and delicate matter of digestion. These were perhaps not quite the sacred mysteries that I was supposed to be contemplating, but they were deeply important matters to my confused seven year old self. Alas, there wasn't time for me to work out the answers before the great First Holy Communion Day arrived, and what with the glamour, flowers and crowds at school, the photographs, the proud parents and the delighted nuns, the vexed issue of exactly how what appeared to be bread could also, at one and the same time be something divine, faded into the background.

Perhaps now, as a psychotherapist, it is not surprising that I find myself absorbed by the question of what it might mean for the presence of another to cross the bounds of flesh and take up residence within. By what means does a loved one come to inhabit and inspire us? How does the lost, absent or dead other continue to evoke a sense of loving relationship inside us? How might we come to trust, or have faith in this inner presence over time? In psychoanalysis, these are questions that have largely been addressed in terms of identification, that central psychic mechanism through which we unconsciously absorb or incorporate aspects of each other. Theorists from Freud to Laplanche have argued that our subjectivity seems to be predicated on a kind of psychological permeability in which we find ourselves open to the other who lodges within, imprinting upon us a sense of their inner presence. But this extraordinary and constitutive process of psychic ingestion remains to me an essentially a mysterious one, and something in this paper I have chosen to explore via a work of fiction. Isak Dinesen's novella 'Babette's Feast' is one of several short stories she wrote in a collection called 'Anecdotes of Destiny', published at the end of her life in 1958. In a deceptively simple tale, Dinesen adopts explicitly Eucharistic discourse and imagery to

convey the connection between eating and faith, exploring via rich use of metaphor the way in which we come to be inhabited and nourished by the other. Indeed, for Dinesen, transubstantiation – that mystical transformation of one substance into another, of bread into the Body of Christ, of food into faith – may be taken as exemplar of what might be called a sacramental imagination, one in which the material world is viewed as both participant in and mediator of the divine.

From the outset, however, I think it is important in this paper to distinguish the term ‘sacramental imagination’ from the sacraments of ecclesiology, though these may be included within its overall framework. Whilst according to the Catholic Church ‘*A Sacrament is a visible sign of invisible grace, instituted for our justification*’ (Catechism of the Council of Trent, 143), implying belief in a God of metaphysical dogma, sacramental imagination is a wider concept that has recently been associated with Kearney’s (2009) notion of anatheism or the ‘*the retrieval of the sacred in the everyday*’ (p. 56). Anatheism is a concept that seeks to reposition our understanding of faith in both secular and spiritual terms, moving beyond traditional religious frameworks by suggesting that faith is ‘*a matter of reception and interpretation, rather than a teleological choice*’ (Soultouki, 2010, p. 446). Such a perspective argues for a faith that moves beyond any particular metaphysical or doctrinal dispute and instead, as Kearney (2009) suggests, seeks the ‘*divine potential inherent in the everyday secular life of action and suffering, of attention and service to others*’ (p. 63). The sacramental imagination thus invites us to be attentive to signs of the divine in the world, experiencing the transcendent in the immanent, the infinite in the finite and the sacred in the mundane.

In this paper, I want to follow Dinesen’s sacramental imagination by exploring how transubstantiation opens up a space in which the passage or assimilation of the other into the self may be illuminated. I suggest that Dinesen’s use of food as metaphor persuasively links transubstantiation with the psychoanalytic project by revealing the different ways in which we may receive – or eat - the other, and what these differences might entail for the work of memory and mourning. I approach this topic with not a little trepidation, recognising that my subject matter may overflow the bounds of what is possible in any one paper. Nonetheless, I will risk approaching these ideas by drawing on work by Freud (1921), Abraham and Torok (1994) and Kristeva (1990) in order to analyse and elaborate on some of Dinesen’s main themes. Along the way, it will be clear to readers that, like Dinesen, my focus lies further afield than theological argument and dispute. Perhaps I am more interested in responding to her tale as a kind of parable, as indexed by her use of simple, spare language, lack of distracting detail and most of all, her directions to the reader to be aware of a more profound significance to the story. Unlike the allegory that reflects a specific reading or meaning of a text, the parable merely hints, alludes or gestures towards something. It indicates, rather than designates; its meaning is open, not closed. It invites and provokes curiosity, wonder, thought. The reader is to be teased into making his or her own meaning from it and living accordingly. As Ricoeur (1974) suggests, a parable ‘*is a*

fiction capable of redescribing life, where the whole text is *'the bearer of metaphors'*, whose *'ultimate point.....is not the reign of God, but the whole of human reality'*. (p. 338). It is in this light that I have enjoyed Dinesen's tale, and it is in this light too that I hope to provoke the reader to find something of his or her own within the ideas presented in this paper.

Let me start with a summary of the story.

Babette's Feast

Dinesen's tale is set in the bleak territory of Jutland in Norway, in the village of Berlevaag where two elderly sisters are living out a simple life in a small Lutheran community. They are helped in the house by a Parisian maid, Babette, and neighbours assume that it is the sisters' *'piety and kindness of heart'* that led them to employ her. We learn that Babette was indeed taken in by the sisters when she arrived in Berlevaag, hungry and frightened some twelve years previously, a fugitive from the Paris Communard uprisings of 1871 in which her husband and son were both killed. But the reason for Babette's presence in the house of the two sisters was to be found, Dinesen tells us, *'further back in time and deeper down in the domain of human hearts'*.

The reader learns that these two sisters, Martine and Philippa, have been brought up by a strict, puritanical father, the Dean of an ecclesiastical sect who leads his flock in their lives of austere simplicity. Any sign of luxury, worldly comfort or fleshly satisfaction is condemned. Food is sparse, clothes are simple; life consists in good deeds and works of charity. The Dean exerts a strict and uncompromising control over the girls' lives and they in turn are imbued with *'an ideal of heavenly love'*. They reject the young men of the village rather than allow themselves *'to be touched by the flames of this world'*.

Into this bleak, puritanical community Dinesen introduces three strangers. The first is Lorens Loewenhielm, a young officer whose spendthrift ways have resulted in his parents sending him to live with his elderly aunt in Berlevaag for a few weeks. He sees and falls in love with Martine. She reminds him of the *'huldre'*, a mysterious Norwegian mountain spirit, *'who is so fair that the air round her shines and quivers'*. He tries but fails to communicate his feelings and in the end despairs of ever removing her from the monastic life the Dean insists upon. He leaves, telling Martine that he has learned that *'fate is hard, and that in this world there are things which are impossible!'* He returns the world to focus on his career, marries a lady-in-waiting to the Queen, and moves *'with grace and ease'* in high circles.

The second stranger is the exotic French opera singer, Achille Papin. Hearing Philippa sing in church, he realises that she has the voice of a great diva and offers to teach her singing. The Dean, reluctant at first to allow this Catholic man access to his daughter, eventually agrees and singing lessons begin. However, one day, when they are singing Mozart's seduction

duet from Don Giovanni, Papin gets carried away by the *'heavenly music'* and kisses Philippa. *'Surprised and frightened by something in her own nature'* she returns to her father saying that she no longer wishes to learn singing and asks him to dismiss Papin, who makes a precipitate departure from Berlevaag.

Fifteen years later, the Dean is dead and Martine and Philippa have remained at home, continuing their lives of abstemious piety. One stormy night, a knock at the door reveals a wet, famished Babette Hersant, seeking refuge from a shipwreck. She brings with her a letter from Achille Papin, who tells them that Babette has fled her home Paris, fearing arrest for her role as a *'petroleuse'* revolutionary in the Paris Commune uprisings. *'Babette can cook'* is the laconic footnote provided at the end of the letter in which Papin pleads for the sisters to take Babette in.

Although the sisters cannot afford to pay Babette, they agree to look after her; and so, finally, it is the third stranger who is the one accepted into the community. For twelve years Babette looks after the home of Martine and Philippa. Alarmed at possibility of introducing any French luxury and extravagance - and hopeful of converting Babette to the good Lutheran life - the sisters train her in the ascetic ways of the household, teaching her to cook *'split cod and an ale-and-bread soup as well as anybody born or bred in Berlevaag'*. During these years, we hear how the sisters find themselves presiding over their father's dwindling flock where *'sad little schisms'* increasingly reveal that the Dean's strict moral teachings have failed to engender moral enlightenment in the community. Although the faithful still meet together *'to read and interpret the word'*, ancient sins and transgressions are recalled with deep resentment and bitterness, and quarrels flare up which the worried sisters find themselves unable to calm.

But chance intervenes on the occasion of the Dean's hundredth anniversary. Babette, whose friend in Paris has been renewing a lottery ticket every year for her, receives a letter telling her that she has won the *grand prix* of 10,000 francs. As the news gets out, the sisters and the Dean's flock all sadly assume that Babette's riches will mean she will want to return home to Paris. But Babette comes to the sisters with the first request she has ever made in her twelve years of service: she wants provide a French celebration dinner for the Dean's flock on the occasion of his anniversary. Whilst the sisters protest, Babette insists that she would like to spend her own money on this meal for the sisters and the Dean's followers; and whilst the sisters at first refuse, shocked at the prospect of anything more than *'a very plain supper with a cup of coffee'*, she persuades them to grant her wish.

Babette swiftly organises her nephew to travel to France to collect the things that she will need for the meal. By the time these arrive and preparations are under way, the sisters realise uneasily that something extraordinary is going on. *'...Babette, like the bottled demon of the fairy tale, had swelled and grown to such dimensions that her mistresses felt small before her'*. Bottles of wine, even a live turtle are brought to the home, and this last is so terrifying, so alien, that Philippa hastily convenes a meeting of the faithful fearing their

ascetic ways are about to be violated. After some sympathetic discussion, the brethren agree that on the day of the meal, they will not discuss the food and drink at all. Indeed, they promise they will not even taste anything, in order to preserve themselves for higher things.

The evening arrives, and old Mrs Loewenhielm is invited to the dinner along with the few remaining brethren. By chance, General Loewenheilm, her nephew, is visiting for the first time in thirty years, and, remembering him, the sisters are delighted to invite him to the meal along with his aunt. World weary after a successfully military career and a busy time with his wife at Court, we learn that General Loewenhielm now finds himself in low spirits. Pondering whether the world is *'not a moral, but a mystic concern'*, he muses over his choices in life as he prepares for dinner, and questions whether his younger self who left Martine in Berlevaag all those years ago did the right thing.

Arriving at the house, the visitors and the Dean's flock sit down to a beautifully decorated dinner table. As the wine is served, the brethren remember their vow not to speak about or taste the food. But General Loewenhielm who has been expecting the simple fare he was served on his last visit, is immediately surprised at the *'finest Amontillado I have ever tasted'*, as well as the magnificent turtle soup. A succession of extraordinary dishes is served – *'Incredible!.....it is Blinis Demidoff'* – and the General, a man of the world, is increasingly amazed at the quality of the food that is being presented. In the unfolding of a gently comic scene, he cannot understand how his fellow diners are *'all quietly eating their Blinis Demidoff without any sign of either surprise or approval, as if they had been doing so every day for thirty years'*.

During the meal the guests find themselves gradually opening themselves up to receiving and enjoying the food that Babette provides for them. Despite their vows to the contrary, the ascetic philosophy to which they are supposed to adhere is all but dismissed: *'It was, they realized, when man has not only altogether forgotten but has firmly renounced all ideas of food and drink that he eats and drinks in the right spirit'*. The transformative process occurring during this rapturous eating is beautifully conveyed not only by the way the sophisticated General speaks to the other guests *'in a manner so new to himself and so strangely moving he had to make pause'*, but also by the inexperienced Brethren's surrender to the hitherto unsuspected delights of haute cuisine: *'this time the Brothers and Sisters knew that what they were given to drink was not wine, for it sparkled. It must be some kind of lemonade. The lemonade agreed with their exalted state of mind and seemed to lift them off the ground, into a higher and purer sphere'*.

But when *Cailles en sarcophages*, an exotic dish of quails in pastry is served, the General at once recognises the signature dish of the chef at the Café Anglais in Paris, where he used to go with his military friends. He remembers that this chef, *'known all over Paris as the greatest culinary genius of the age'* was a woman, and one whom his friend claimed turned *'dinner at the Café Anglais into a kind of love affair....in which one no longer distinguishes*

between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety'. Indeed, by the end of the meal, not only have the frugal Brethren come to acquire an appreciation of the sensual, worldly pleasures they have previously rejected, but General Loewenheim himself has arrived at an understanding of the spiritual meaning that has hitherto evaded him in life. The joyous reconciliation of the Brethren with each other and the physical world is matched by General Loewenheim's peaceful reconciliation with the spiritual dimension in himself. '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'.

General Loewenheim realises that his choices in life, have, after all, been made good. He leaves Martine saying *'Every evening I shall sit down, if not in the flesh, which means nothing, but in spirit which is all, to dine with you.....For tonight I have learned, dear sister, that in the world, anything is possible'*. The community, too, realises that the *'infinite grace of which General Loewenheim had spoken had been allotted to them'*, and finally, when *'long after midnight the windows of the house shone like gold'* they stagger off hand in hand, all bitterness and quarrels forgotten, laughing and singing all the way back home.

In the aftermath of the feast, the sisters return to the kitchen to thank Babette, only to realise that it was she who was the chef at the Café Anglais. The sisters assume that Babette will now be going back to Paris and are horrified to hear that she has no more money: she has spent her entire fortune of 10,000 francs on the dinner. Philippa sees Babette's generosity as an act of self-sacrifice, but Babette responds with a *'strange glance. Was there not pity, even scorn, at the bottom of it?'* saying that she has done it for her own sake: creating the dinner was necessary in order to fulfil her destiny as an artist.

Discussion

Dinesen, whilst raised a Unitarian, never claimed to be a Christian, and throughout her life was deeply suspicious of what she regarded as Christian dualism. Nevertheless, whilst she was writing *Babette's Feast*, Dinesen was heavily immersed in a study of Christian theology and hosted several 'theological dinners' to which she invited a Roman Catholic priest, a Lutheran pastor and other Christian church authorities. Lane (1999) suggests that Dinesen *'was obviously influenced by the conversation, especially that of the sacramentalist Catholic priest'* (p. 22) and indeed various critics and writers have offered a convincing allegorical reading of *Babette's Feast* (eg Beck, 1998; Mullins, 2009; Wright, 1997) viewing elements of the story such as Babette's sacrifice, the twelve dinner guests and the transformative effects of the sacrificial meal on the community as a reflection of the Last Supper and Christ's crucifixion.

However, Dinesen's interest in Catholic imagery and aesthetics go far beyond the merely allegorical. She introduces us to the enigmatic stranger, the servant, who comes to town

tasked with introducing life, faith and change into the ageing, fractious, Lutheran community. Perhaps, as Levinas (1969) has intimated, the encounter with the figure of the Stranger is always sacred in that he or she embodies something more, something different, something surplus to that which we can contain within ourselves. It is our response to the Stranger, the hospitality we are willing to extend to the foreigner, the Other, that determines our ability to host and house the divine within ourselves. Babette, the bottled demon of the fairy tale, the genie who arrives on the sisters' doorstep and stays for twelve years not only introduces something new, Catholic and Southern into the cold, bleak Protestant North, she has come to introduce the sisters and the community to something strange and new within their own natures. In this way, Babette's enigmatic presence may be seen as a wider parable for how we come to receive or incorporate the divine Other within ourselves: how we can allow it to inhabit us in ways that are creative or transformative, in ways that might make good our losses. Dinesen uses the rich metaphor of food in order to convey the difference between a dogmatic faith that, like the sisters' tasteless split cod and ale-and-bread-soup, is swallowed whole, intact and undigested by the Dean's flock who consistently refuse to acknowledge the presence of the divine in '*the pleasures of the world*'; and a sacramental view of life that instead grasps the divine in each moment, a faith that is 'chewed over', and savoured like the famous dish of *Cailles en Sarcophage* that Babette presents to her amazed dinner guests. Indeed, the centre-piece celebratory meal is one that places loss at the heart of the story; for this is a community that has in every sense lost its way, mired in '*querulous and quarrelsome*' relationships since the loss of their beloved founding father the Dean. This constitutes the backdrop to the grief with which the main characters are struggling: the regret that is experienced by the General at his youthful decision to leave Martine; Philippa who is wistful at the loss of her promising singing career; and, most of all, Babette's unspoken grief at being forced to leave her home, her murdered husband and son and her artistic vocation as a chef. These heartaches and losses sponsor Babette's culinary artistry as she seeks to heal the community by cooking and serving a meal of which she herself is the main ingredient.

Dinesen's emphasis on eating and loss returns me to our more familiar psychoanalytic concepts of identification, introjection and mourning, and I now want to briefly consider some theoretical ideas of Freud, Abraham and Torok and Kristeva before developing my ideas on Dinesen's themes of transformation and transubstantiation.

Eating and psychoanalysis.

Eating, of course, has always occupied a privileged place in psychoanalytic theory. From the ferocity of Freud's oral drives, through Klein's dark infantile fantasies of licking, biting, sucking and spitting to Winnicott's more benign cycles of appetite, greed, destruction and concern, psychoanalysis has always invoked the metaphor of consumption to articulate the various ways in which we attempt to assimilate, internalise or otherwise take in something from outside and install it within the self. We seem to be born strangely porous, with a

capacity to receive, ingest and somehow retain the presence of those we love within. As Meghan O'Rourke (2012) says in her biography 'The Long Goodbye': *'The people we most love do become a physical part of us, ingrained in our synapses in the pathways where memories are created'*.

Freud was very interested in the mysterious way in which the other becomes installed within the self, incarnate within the psyche. In 1917, he had suggested how, in melancholia, the ego identifies with the lost object, subsuming it within the ego as a means of refusing to mourn its loss. By 1923, however, he saw this psychic absorption of the other into the ego as a more central feature of personality development: *'the character of the ego'*, he writes, *'is a precipitate of abandoned object cathexes and...it contains the history of those object choices'* (p. 29). Similarly, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen (1988), following Freud, argues that the self is a copy, an incarnation of the other, by which means we devour his or her identity and then forget, suppress, violently exclude their otherness, leaving us with a legacy of desire for identification, a desire to be a subject as the other is a subject. In these consummatory versions of personality development, then, identification seems to be a means of ensuring a kind of inner fidelity indexing the ego's allegiance to the presence of the lost, loved other within.

Following Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, Abraham and Torok (1994) argue that the fantasy of introducing all or part of the love object into the body as a means of retaining it is a way of effecting psychic transformation *'through magic'* (p. 126). *'So in order not to have to 'swallow' a loss'* they write, *'we fantasize swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost, as if it were some kind of thing'* (p. 126). Incorporation thus attempts a magical cure for loss by ingesting the lost object as if it were food. In this moment of psychic absorption, *'we refuse to mourn and...we shun the consequences of mourning even though our psyche is fully bereaved'* (p. 127). The loss is thus buried alive, they suggest, concealed in a kind of *'intrapsychic crypt'* within the ego that protects the loss from ever being assimilated and spoken. In this way, a loss can itself go missing, hidden within an absence in which the individual may insist that, to all intents and purposes, he or she had lost nothing. In this situation, *'...one feels justified'*, says Freud (1917), *'in maintaining the belief that a loss... has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either'* (p. 245).

Incorporation means that the subject in fantasy gulps down and swallows all or part of a person, instead of the more laborious, slow and incremental process of feeding on words that might speak to his or her absence. In the long term project of introjection or mourning that Abraham and Torok (1994) argue originates in infancy, *'...words replace the mother's presence....the absence of objects and the empty mouth are transformed into words; at last, even the experiences related to words are converted into other words'* (p. 128). Perhaps our earliest experiences of feeding, handling and physical care mean that we are born into a

kind of faith in the physical presence, the body of the other who underwrites our existence, who guarantees the life of desire. And it is through faith in the presence of the body that we come to have faith in words, symbols that give shape to, and make up for, the loved person's physical absence.

Rashkin (2008) has drawn on Abraham and Torok's (1972) ideas, arguing convincingly that the meal Babette serves starts the process of mourning in the community by converting the community's loss and grief into language through the form of communion with bereaved others. However, in this paper, I want to suggest that the losses to which Rashkin draws attention are emblematic of a yet more profound loss within the community: *'It was as if the fine and lovable vigor of their father's personality had been evaporating,'* says Dinesen of Martine and Philippa, *'the way Hoffmann's anodyne will evaporate when left on the shelf in a bottle without a cork'.* It is surely not co-incidental here that 'Hoffman's anodyne' is otherwise known as compound of ether, a substance that in ancient mythology was considered to be the pure essence breathed by the gods. So Dinesen is perhaps hinting here at a slipping away of divine inspiration or grace that leaves the Brothers and Sisters of Berlevaag *'running astray'* like *'unshepherded sheep'*.

In order to develop my thoughts about the spiritual loss to which Dinesen alludes, I want to turn to the writing of Julia Kristeva whose preoccupation with Catholic symbolism and imagery, in particular her interest in the significance of hosting the Stranger, the foreigner within, aligns her closely – to my mind at least - with Dinesen's sacramental imagination. In her break with Lacan, Kristeva has always sought to emphasise the child's earliest relation to the maternal body, and the importance of the semiotic drives underlying and guaranteeing the Symbolic order, language and the Law of the Father. In amplifying the traditional theories of identification mentioned above, Kristeva (1990) argues that the object that we incorporate in primary narcissism is not simply the fantasy of fusion with the maternal body; it is rather a *metaphorical* object, one that is inclusive of the imaginary father towards whom the child turns in order to separate from the maternal body and become a speaking subject. It is as if, in the moment of identification, the child ingests something else alongside the fantasy of the maternal body: there is a simultaneous identification with Freud's (1921) 'father in individual prehistory' who is the object of the mother's love; a love that is expressed through language and which underpins the not-yet-speaking subject. *'This movement'*, claims O'Grady, (1997) *'is not one of possession or need.... but a movement toward identification with a loved other. It is not a motion to 'have' but a gesture toward 'being like' (etre-comme), that is, a metaphoric identification'* (p. 102). It is this metaphoric identification with the father-in-the-mother – or what is 'other' or different within the maternal body - that allows the child to begin to imaginatively identify with what is 'other' or different within itself. What we might call a logic of identification permits the developing child to have confidence - faith - in the possibility of one thing standing in for another: to believe and take comfort in the capacity of words to name – to 'stand in for' - that which has been lost.



Psychoanalysis and transubstantiation.

The word metaphor means a 'carrying over', etymologically linked to the Greek *meta*, which means over or across and *pherein*, to carry or bear, from which we derive the word 'fertile'. Metaphors, suggests Aristotle in his *Poetics*, rely on our capacity to find similarities between two disparate things. Like words themselves that carry us across the gap to the things they signify, metaphors too ferry us across and between alterity towards something else, something beyond the literal words themselves. Metaphor thus stretches the signifying system in a way that forces it to carry more than it can bear. It is emblematic of the mind's fertility: language at its most generative and creative. Alain Robbe-Grillet (1958) predicts, suggestively, that '*If you begin by believing in metaphor, you will end by believing in God*' (p. 78).

This notion of 'carrying over' or across is thus crucial for Kristeva, for whom metaphor is not simply a linguistic turn but rather a dynamic psychic transaction at the heart of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Metaphors, for Kristeva, are emblematic of that which destabilises, disrupts and dissolves the unified subject; the divided, speaking subject is radically transformed in the process of metaphorical identification, as borders, limits and boundaries between signifiers blur, carrying the subject across and back to that which is sacred or divine within. Indeed, O'Grady (1997) goes on to point out that for Kristeva, metaphor may be understood as the unconscious linguistic pursuit of the ineffable, sublime Other, an attempt by the subject to grasp that which is lost, absent and unnameable within the self. In her essay *on Identification and the Real* (1990) Kristeva suggests that the Eucharistic meal is '*the perfect enactment of the metaphorical process*' (p. 172), entailing precisely this kind of 'blurring' in which the actual absorption of the body of Christ into the subject fuses the physical/food with the psychic/Word. For Kristeva, then, the Eucharistic rite enacts the passage of internal strangeness or otherness at the heart of each of us where the physical and the psychic are welded together. Here, in this moment of transubstantiation, is the subject's opportunity for transformation and metamorphosis.

Like Dinesen, Kristeva makes no claim to be Catholic, merely drawing on Catholic imagery and discourse to illuminate the subjective significance of hosting the stranger, the foreigner within. '*I speak of religions*' she claims in an interview with Clark and Hulley (1990) '*because the question of the other is fundamentally, I think, a religious question*' (p. 164). However, it is inevitable that both Dinesen and Kristeva's use of the Eucharist will raise important differences between the Catholic and the Protestant understanding of the term. In Catholicism, according to the Council of Trent (1551), transubstantiation is that process of consecration which converts the 'substance' of bread and wine into the 'substance' of the body and blood of Christ. The appearance, or 'species' of the bread and wine remain the same, whilst the substance – the 'breadness' of the bread, for example - is transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Christ's Real Presence is said to be contained in the elements of the bread and wine that have been transubstantiated. In Protestantism, there are a

variety of views on the Eucharist, or communion as it is more often called, depending on the particular denomination. However, most Protestants regard communion as a symbolic act commemorating the Last Supper, Christ's Passion and His promise of redemption.

This ontological distinction lies at the heart of *Babette's Feast*, in which a dinner is prepared to remember the loss of the Dean. When the Catholic Babette asks Martine and Philippa if she can cook a '*real French dinner*' for the Dean's hundredth anniversary, the sisters are horrified. '*The ladies had not intended to have any dinner at all*' we are told. '*A very plain supper with a cup of coffee was the most sumptuous meal to which they had ever asked any guest to sit down*'. When the time comes for the party, the sisters' '*little preparations*' suggest that the meal is expected to be merely commemorative, an opportunity to '*put on their old black best frocks and their confirmation gold crosses*' and along with their fellow Brothers and Sisters sing one of the Dean's favourite hymns. However, in Dinesen's version of transubstantiation, '*something happens*', as the poet Mary Oliver says, to the food and drink; Babette's culinary artistry transforms the food's very '*substance*' into something miraculous, something that enables the '*taciturn old people*' to receive '*the gift of tongues*' and to retrieve the lost feelings of love they had for each other in a way that redeems the community. That this change is effected by transubstantiation is underlined by Dinesen in a small but telling epilogue where the sisters go to thank Babette after the dinner. Finding her sitting exhausted in the kitchen, Martine privately recalls a tale told to her by a friend of her father's who had been a missionary in Africa. '*He had saved the life of an old chief's favorite wife, and to show his gratitude the chief had treated him to a rich meal. Only long afterwards the missionary learned from his own black servant that what he had partaken of was a small fat grandchild of the chief's, cooked in honor of the great Christian medicine man*'. It is precisely this absorption, this consummation - rather than commemoration - of the other within us that Dinesen, like Kristeva, wants us to understand is the more profound issue at stake: indeed, just as Christ says in the words of St John: '*He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him*', this is a consummation that ensures a restoration of the divine within the flesh, and, more importantly for the abstemious Dean's flock, the flesh to the divine.

This restoration is gloriously conveyed during Babette's celebratory dinner where the ascetic Brethren move from a position of comically refusing to acknowledge the delicious food and drink to one in which they become joyously able to receive and appreciate it in the right way. '*It was, they realized, when man has not only altogether forgotten but has firmly renounced all ideas of food and drink that he eats and drinks in the right spirit*'. It is unclear to the participants - and to the reader - whether the miracle of their metamorphosis occurs via their bodily senses or their spirits. Indeed, the two appear to be interchangeable; or, rather, the usual distinction between the body and the soul, the worldly and the otherworldly no longer appears relevant. '*The Word*', says St. John, '*was made Flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth*'. Dinesen's text thus wonderfully enacts, via a blurring and surpassing of traditional dualisms, a transubstantiation in words that gestures

towards an indwelling of otherness, an incarnation of the Word in the Body that, for Kristeva, is the mystical substrate of our subjectivity. *'Of what happened later in the evening nothing definite can here be stated'* says Dinesen of the dinner guests. *'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'*. Transubstantiation is thus an ecstatic blending of the spiritual and the corporeal, - a reversible fusion, as General Loewenheim points out, *'in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety'* – that transports the subject, that welds the self to the essence of the other, that ingrains the other within our synapses. The self is no longer just the self, but is now 'carried over' above and beyond itself, imbued and saturated with the other's presence. And it is not blind belief in the Dean's teaching, but rather a willing receptiveness to the presence of this inner union that ensures, through the General's speech at dinner, the arrival of grace in the community: *'Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude....for mercy and truth have met together and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another'*. Indeed, the Danish word for grace is *'nade'*, linked via the German term *'gnade'* to the notion of descent, as in the image of the sun's descent in the sky (Braune 2007); and so grace carries the connotation of an ineffable love descending from the heights to touch the horizon of our world, bringing God closer to man. The General's speech thus sets the seal on the restoration of grace within the community; a grace that brings both the 'righteous' worldly horizons of the Dean's flock and the limitless 'bliss' of divine food together in one assimilative event.

Dinesen is far too subtle a connoisseur to insist we read *Babette's Feast* merely as a literal critique of certain kinds of religious faith. It is not simply that the outward trappings of faith are contrasted with a more authentic, inner experience of the sacred; but rather that Dinesen's business extends well beyond any specific doctrine or confession, gesturing towards transcendence and the way in which the community's rather sterile belief in the literal words and abstemious practices of the dead Dean comes to be transformed into a sacramental capacity to appreciate a God who exists in and through the world and His creatures rather than one who merely exists beyond it. When we eat food or relate to the other in the right spirit, Dinesen seems to be saying, we are touched by, we keep faith with, we are nourished by a sense of the Other's inner presence. The Other is 'food' within us: not swallowed whole in a fixed or frozen way, as with Dean's flock who have adhered slavishly to his precepts, but rather, as Kristeva suggests, absorbed metaphorically; digested in a creative, generative sense in a way that continually multiplies, prolongs and deepens the profound and vivifying impact of its unseen presence in our lives. The logic of transubstantiation thus provides the conditions both for mourning and for psychic renewal; it is the means by which we symbolically replenish ourselves. *'Behold what you are!'* exclaims St Augustine in his sermon on the Eucharist, *'become what you receive!'* In receiving well - when we *'eat and drink in the right spirit'* of Dinesen's Eucharistic hospitality

perhaps - we open ourselves up to the advent of this incarnate Other within; we assent to, we participate in, we become and are transformed by that which we have been given.

The psychoanalytic encounter.

How might we, as clinicians, make use of Dinesen's story? It could certainly be argued that there are important differences between the dispensation of a sacrament and receiving psychotherapy. The former requires the presence of a priest and the operation of divine grace; and whilst there are those, like Foucault, and indeed Kristeva herself who have aligned the position of the psychotherapist with that of a priest, the latter differs from a sacrament not least in terms of the extent to which its benefits might be perceived to be universally available. The story of Babette clearly draws on the Augustinian notion of a salvation that comes about simply through the grace of God, grace that is neither warranted nor earned. '*Grace...*' claims General Loewenheim, '*makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular*'; like Babette's lottery win, it is a gift that arrives when one is least expecting it. This freely-given love cannot be willed, summoned or demanded, but can only be '*awaited with confidence and acknowledged in gratitude*'. By contrast, in a psychoanalysis we are dealing with the infinitely various and often intractable difficulties patients have in being able to receive what the analyst has to offer, vicissitudes which arguably limit the extent to which therapeutic change or transformation is possible.

If we turn to the role of the analyst however, there seems to be a close affinity between what Dinesen sees as the condition of the soul required for the fruitful reception of the divine and the ethical position of the analyst who is asked to receive the patient's otherness. I think Dinesen enjoins us to do psychotherapy '*in the right spirit*' by maintaining a radical receptiveness to the other in our clinical work, a receptiveness that I think has much in common with a Levinasian perspective where the client as radical Other has an ethical claim on us. Levinas's emphasis on the face-to-face encounter with the Other who bears the trace of God's face lays the ground for a psychotherapeutic encounter in which '*The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign*' (1969, p. 194). Like Babette whose 'foreign' presence interrupts and awakens the community in Berlevaag, the presence of the Other in the patient interrupts and awakens the therapist's subjectivity. Indeed, Dueck and Parsons (2007) point out that '*the self of the therapist is traumatized – fissured – by the otherness of the client*' (p. 279). Just as metaphor inflates systems of signification to breaking point, so too there is a surplus of signification in the Other that surpasses our capacity to absorb and contain its infinitude. Like Babette '*who has swelled and grown to such dimensions*' that the anxious sisters see her forthcoming French dinner as '*a thing of incalculable nature and range*', so the Other in Levinas is ontologically amplified, unassimilable, always already more than we can know or comprehend. Our ethical responsibility then is to regard the Other, as Dinesen's General does, as a '*mystic, not a moral concern*' and to bear the burden of his or her existence to the point of what Levinas calls 'substitution' or putting oneself in his or her place.



As a psychoanalyst, Kristeva is perhaps more attuned than is Levinas to the unconscious disruptive effects of the 'foreigner' within that act to constrain and delimit the kind of ethical encounter, the generosity and patience that Levinas proposes. Managing the sheer 'otherness' of one's inner disruptive forces is necessary before entering into speech and relationships that can take account of 'otherness' in other people. But the ethic of waiting, service and sacrifice that Babette embodies and Levinas articulates is important in preparing the way for the advent of grace, a word that is scarcely mentioned in the psychotherapeutic literature at all. This is understandable, if only because the word is so heavily freighted with theological and doctrinal significance. But the idea of grace as a gift from God also helps to disrupt and break the narcissistic, independent, '*bounded masterful self*' (Cushman, 1990, p. 608) of Enlightenment rationality in which an investment of personal effort, agency and action is privileged over passivity, patience and sacrifice. Paving the way in our clinical work for grace perhaps means to wait and serve the client in the way he or she needs us to, rather as Babette patiently agrees to serve split cod and bread-and-ale-soup to the sisters. It also implies a willingness to be used in the service of the analytic process, a process in which '*neither the patient nor the analyst can bring about change through an act of will*' (Safran, 2016, p. 63). I recognise of course that these ideas will sit uneasily with much contemporary psychotherapeutic literature emphasising the need for evidence-based practice, effective outcomes and the skills and training of the therapist; and admittedly, the implications of Babette's Feast for clinical practice remain blurred and incomplete. Indeed, I would like to argue that, like all good parables, Dinesen's tale gives us no simple foothold in terms of praxis, but rather leaves a bare outline for the reader which is intended to act as spur to personal meaning and a stimulus to spiritual – and perhaps clinical - growth.

Conclusion.

As I try to draw the threads of this paper together, I realise I am now straining to contain the plethora of ideas, images and theoretical concepts I can feel surging up within me in response to Dinesen's story. Notions of substitution, hospitality and gift, for example, are particularly rich philosophical and psychotherapeutic seams that remain, tantalisingly, yet to be quarried. But it is clear from the numerous writers and theorists who continue to find fresh insights and readings of Dinesen's text that the tale of Babette inevitably evokes a surplus of signification; an excess that perhaps indexes the very fecundity that is at the heart of the metaphoric process constitutive of her Eucharistic aesthetic.

Rowan Williams (2003) writes: '*Every good story is about flesh becoming inhabited.....life's uninhabited places breed a hunger for Spirit*'; and there is certainly something in Dinesen's '*good story*' that profoundly resonates with the mysteries I puzzled over so long ago as a seven year old preparing for my First Holy Communion. For me, Dinesen's parable invites us to consider the significance of the other's presence within us and to understand it not as a 'thing' or an object to be swallowed whole; not something merely to be captured by a static likeness, an image, a set of principles, doctrines or tenets, as the Dean's flock imagine. The

Stranger within, like the refugee Babette, rather has a metaphorical quality of transitivity; of continual 'carrying over'; of savouring, perhaps, rather than swallowing. She embodies a direction rather than a destination. That we are called to remain receptive to the presence of this sacred Stranger, to remain faithful to the Other who is always in the process of coming is surely '[t]he true reason for Babette's presence in the two sisters' house'.

I have suggested that the metaphorical process that Dinesen illuminates in her Eucharistic aesthetic is one that resonates deeply with the psychoanalytic project. But I remain mindful of how Dinesen herself sees a sacramental sensibility as constitutive of artistic creativity more generally and of writing in particular. It is the artist whose sacramental imagination imbues the world with new significance and meaning, allowing us to see the universal in the particular, the everlasting in time, the transcendent in the immanent. It is the artist, like Babette and like Dinesen too, who is permeable, receptive to 'other' ways of seeing and experiencing, to new possibilities for creative living; it is she who provides us with what Kearney (2013) calls '*privileged portals to the hidden truths of the real*' (p. 428). Isak Dinesen has touched us all in her radiant tale of Babette, gracing us with a rich feast of thought-provoking insights into some of the '*hidden truths*' of both faith and psychoanalysis; and for her imagination, inspiration and artistry we must, surely, give thanks.

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