

Ieva Steponavičiūtė

Vilnius University

ieva.steponaviciute@ff.vu.lt

Story as the main dish

On some transcreative mechanisms in Karen Blixen's "Babette's Feast"

'I am a good translator,
I even improve on the original'¹

Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen), who wrote both in English and Danish, was a writer with a very fine sense of style and an excellent command of several languages. These qualities could have made her a brilliant translator, and yet she did not elect to pursue a career in this field... The "problem" with Blixen seems to be her "inability" to reproduce a text without altering its contents, a liberty that she could only allow herself in regard to her own text or texts which she intertextually inscribed into her own.² It is commonplace in Blixen scholarship to say that she never translated but rather recreated in Danish what she had written in English. The term "transcreation" – so popular today in business translation and meaning the creative rendering of a text into the target language – seems to be especially fitting in her case. According to professor W. Glyn Jones who studied Blixen's translations of her own work, her Danish text was still close to the initial one and therefore could hardly be called an adaptation. What Blixen did was to change a detail here and there, to add some information, to reshuffle the sentence in order to improve the text stylistically or make it more dramatic.³ One can also claim that these small changes could even become part of the semantic play of the text and thus have an effect on our reception of it.

I will illustrate this point with "Babette's Feast," a text that is undoubtedly the most popular Blixen wrote. It was originally composed in English and published in 1950 in the American periodical *Ladies' Home Journal*. Two years later, it was published in Denmark as a separate book, in a translation by Jørgen Claudi, and afterwards it was reproduced in Danish by Blixen herself and included into the collection *Skæbne Anekdoter* (1958), with its American and English pendants *Anecdotes of Destiny* coming out the same year.⁴ We will come to some

of the differences between the English and Danish versions of the story, but I will first examine the major events relating them to its narrative structure, in which these differences have a role to play.

The structure of “Babette’s Feast” is quite transparent and, in its own playful way, fits into the much criticised but still useful model of the classical novella proposed by Aage Henriksen. According to this model the novella is usually centred around a collision between two opposing poles – the familiar settled order, which Henriksen metaphorically calls “the anthill,” and an unexpected event, “the stick,” – something strange and undesirable that intrudes into this. Henriksen provides three possible outcomes of this intrusion: (1) the “stick” can be expelled (2) it can be assimilated, or (3) it can triumph and make the original order collapse.⁵ In “Babette’s Feast”, as we will see, all three possibilities are played out.

“The anthill” in this story, is, of course, the little town of Berlevaag, isolated from the temptations of the outside world by mountains and the great piousness of its community. Its centre is the little yellow house in which its spiritual leader, the Dean, used to live and where his two unmarried daughters Martine and Philippa are still living. The house has its own centre – the living room where the community used to gather and where Babette’s feast celebrating what would have been the Dean’s 100th birthday will take place. In the Danish text, the room has three windows:

Denne lave Stue med hvidskurede gulv og de gamle blankslidte Møbler var Provstens Folk velkendt og dyrebar. Udenfor dens tre Vinduer med de smaa Ruder laa den store Verden.⁶

In the English text, there are only “windows,”⁷ and although this change has little semantic effect, it surely makes the Danish text more symbolic: the three windows in the very heart of Berlevaag’s secluded universe mark the three attempts of the great world to enter it.

The first “intruder” is the young officer Lieutenant Loewenhjelm, a representative of active existence, the world of ambition and earthly pleasures, in which, as the narrator comments, he is not happy. Martine emerges before his eyes as “a gentle, golden-haired angel,” who could grant him “a higher and purer life, with no creditors, dunning letters or parental lectures, with no secret pangs of conscience /.../.”⁸

However, despite Loren’s grand name and audacious reputation, his tongue fails him in the presence of the Dean and his disciples. He gives up his dream and retreats from Berlevaag’s ascetic universe. Once again, he chooses “the world,” yet this time it is not gambling and amorous feats, but career and glory.

The second “stick” is Achille Papin, an opera singer from Paris who sees in Philippa a future opera diva. Neither he is to become a conqueror and the outcome of this event is the same as of the first. Like Lorens, who represents the physical and rational world, Papin stands in opposition to the religious world of the Dean and his community. However, he is also the opposite of Lorens as he represents the world of art and imagination and is a stranger in the real one. Identifying himself with the part he plays, he kisses Philippa in an artistic zest, and is later baffled by her decision to terminate the singing lessons:

A little later he thought: “I wonder what is the matter with that hussy? Did I kiss her by any chance?”

In the end he thought: “I have lost my life for a kiss, and I have no remembrance at all of the kiss! Don Giovanni kissed Zerlina, and Achille Papin pays for it! Such is the fate of the artist!”⁹

The third “event” is the arrival of Babette, a refugee from the Paris Commune. From the very start, the sisters feel a strange anxiety in Babette’s respect for her complete otherness. Paris, where “luxury and extravagance”¹⁰ reigns, embodies better than anything else for them the strange and dangerous world they have rejected.

Babette is, however, not expelled like Lorens or Papin. Out of Christian mercy and probably sentimentality, the sisters give shelter to the woman in need sent to them by Providence and an old acquaintance of theirs. Babette experiences, according to Henriksen’s model, the second outcome i.e. assimilation. For many years, she patiently cooks the sisters’ modest meals, although, as the reader is later to find out, she is a culinary genius from a most fashionable Paris restaurant.¹¹ Why the great world loses again in the person of Babette is not difficult to explain. The little we know about Babette before the news of her great gain makes her a half-character, just as Lorens, Papin or the sisters, unable to become a victor on a foreign ground. Babette’s function as a representative of physical, everyday existence is embodied in her role as a *pétroleuse* in Paris and a servant in Berlevaag, with the latter being symbolically summarised in the allusion to the Gospel according to Luke: “the dark Martha in the house of their two fair Marys.”¹² Having won 10 000 francs in the French lottery, Babette, however, regains her former status as an artist, and from a half-character turns into a fully formed one. Now she can approach the world of Berlevaag anew and even conquer it, thus realising the third of Henriksen’s outcomes. For a few hours only, Babette establishes within the space of Berlevaag a space of her own, a space in which body and soul unite and past and present meet.¹³ Like a real cultural hero, she brings the world back to

the primordial time of the beginning of things, and creates order out of the chaos which has settled over Berlevaag after the Dean's death.¹⁴ Babette's art makes earlier antagonisms dissolve: the pious community and the intruder from the great world, General Loewenhielm, eat and drink at the same table, and all experience what they have lacked or rejected. The brothers and sisters grant forgiveness to each other and finally, although unconsciously, indulge in bodily pleasure. Lorens regains his idealism, renouncing his ambition to give reasonable explanation to things: "General Loewenhielm no longer wondered at anything"; "better be drunk than mad."¹⁵

The bliss that Babette's art produces is, however, but momentary. Despite the snow symbolism that follows the feast episode, and which serves as a suggestion of the purifying power of art, the text also shows the transience of the aesthetic experience. After a short period of intoxicated sleep, Berlevaag is likely to return to its former state of being, and Babette will never go back to Paris – a sad evocation of Auden's famous dictum "that poetry makes nothing happen."¹⁶

These are the events that constitute the story in "Babette's Feast." On the level of discourse, they are arranged by the narrator, an element also discussed by Henriksen, but in this discussion he is most indebted to his predecessor Søren Baggesen. According to Baggesen, the function of the narrator, be it purely mechanic or individualised, always comes to the fore in the novella. In the latter case, a dialectic interchange between the narrator and the story occurs which might develop into the play between the story and the reader.¹⁷ Also Thomas Bredsdorff who, with his tongue firmly in his cheek, pairs Baggesen's and Henriksen's models together under the name of B/H, builds his theory of the rhetoric of the classical novella on the function of the narrator. He sees it as an element of the creation of fiction, the truth effect, which makes fictive events appear as if they were real but also reminds the reader of the impossibility of gaining knowledge. What the classical novella tells us is that actually "one/you can never know."¹⁸

The narrator in "Babette's Feast" is by no means a purely formal element, but an important aspect of the construction of meaning which provokes interplay between the text and its reader. There are several markers that point to the narrator's presence in the narrative: her comments, the unified language of the characters, the narrative woven of episodes which possess their own exposition, middle and end and which are strung together by the central episode of the feast. However, it is not enough for the reader to visualise the narrator as a representation of a human being, a character of a professional storyteller, akin to those we meet "in person" in some other texts by Blixen (like the old storyteller

in “The Blank Page,” or Miss Malin in “The Deluge at Norderney”). It is here that a small difference between the English and the Danish versions comes into play. By making some simple calculations, we can easily determine the time to which the storyteller belongs. Babette appears at the sister’s doorstep in 1871, and in the English text, the central event – the feast, takes place twelve years later, in 1883. In her own respect, the narrator places events around the feast “Sixty five years ago,”¹⁹ and thus locates herself and the time of the narration in 1948 (1883 + 65).

It is curious that in both the Danish version translated by Claudi and that of the author herself, fourteen not twelve years have passed since Babette’s arrival in the sisters’ house. It moves the “narrator’s time” forward to 1950. The two years that expand the duration of Babette’s stay with the sisters before the dinner in the Danish text correspond exactly to the two year interval that separates the first publications of the English and the Danish variants. This also suggests that Blixen could have been involved in Claudi’s translation. In this way, the historical context in which the text was written brings to the fore the implicit relation between the narrator figure in “Babette’s Feast” and the image of the author who has created it.²⁰

Our reception of the narrator as a professional storyteller and even a professional writer associated to the authorial image relates directly to our reception of the text as a meta-story about the engendering of art. This is a highly common interpretation of “Babette’s Feast,”²¹ but it is still interesting to trace how, through a careful selection of symbols and their play, the text creates the parallel between the miraculous culinary event and art, narrative art in particular.²²

A hint towards this parallel can be found in another of Blixen’s texts which also uses food metaphors to elucidate an aesthetic concept. In her review of H.C. Branner’s novel *The Riding Master*, Blixen addresses her contemporary writers with the following words:

The average Danish reader who, for more than three-quarters of a century has been satiated by the depiction of reality, has, – like the thirsty hart in a dry land that smells and senses a running spring far away – suspected and sensed myth and adventure far away in the *Riding Master* – the spring, the fountain, the well; and has run towards them. /.../ Danish poets of the year of Our Lord 1949! Press the grape of myth or adventure into the empty goblet of the thirsting people! Do not give them bread when they ask for stones – a rune stone or the old black stone from the Kaaba; don’t give them a fish, or five small fish, or anything in the sign of the fish, when they ask for a serpent.²³

In this quote which playfully subverts Biblical imagery,²⁴ Blixen warns against the primitive use of the Christian mystery (“fish”) and realism (“bread”) in literature and advocates the art of the mythical story (“grape,” “stone” and “serpent”), which speaks of what is universal to man and resists univocal interpretation.²⁵ If we now return to Babette’s menu, we will literary find all the symbolic ingredients of the good story in it. Read in the relation to the quotation above, exquisite wine and grapes acquire new symbolic meaning, as does the turtle soup, with the figure of the turtle undergoing interesting transformations. The turtle comes to the sisters’ house alive and, seen with Martine’s eyes, evokes traditional Christian interpretation, as the symbol of evil:

In the light of the lamp it looked like some greenish-black stone, but when set down on the kitchen floor it suddenly shot out a snake-like head and moved it slightly from side to side. /.../ this thing was monstrous in size and terrible to behold.²⁶

However, in relation to the feast episode, which in many ways parallels the structure of heathen cosmogony myths,²⁷ the serpent-like turtle invites a different interpretation. Out of the “serpent” Babette makes a soup – an act which in itself reads as a symbol of creation, since the killing of a serpent in different cultures symbolically stands for the overcoming of chaos and creation of cosmos.²⁸ It is noteworthy that the turtle is not only associated with a serpent by Martine, but also with a stone, another of the metaphors in the review quoted earlier, standing for the mythic, symbolic, non-realist, non-preaching narrative.

Before going to the table, the guests sing a psalm which is a direct reference to the Gospel according to Matthew,²⁹ but also to the review quoted earlier in which the Gospel words are subverted:

Wouldst thou give a stone, a reptile
to thy pleading child for food. . .³⁰

Ironically, it is exactly this which they get served in the form of a turtle soup, yet the reader who is familiar with the symbolic meaning of these ingredients from Blixen’s essay, reads them as symbolic components of the myth-like story representing the narrator’s and, behind her, the author’s own art.

There are a few other points illustrating the idea that “Babette’s Feast” is a story about the narrator commenting on and exploring the art she practices herself. Paradoxically, the text can even be said to lay bare the very principles of textual genesis which later were formulated by Wolfgang Iser. According to Iser’s theory, the literary text both

oversteps and incorporates reality by transferring its separate elements onto the fictional space in the act of fictionalising. These elements combine and interact among themselves, creating a new reality, a space of textual play. This is what gives the fictional text its double quality: it both represents what is and what is possible.³¹

We can trace this idea of the dual nature of the literary text in the episode of the feast. It assembles almost everybody (with the exception of Papin) mentioned earlier in the text, and the events recounted earlier in the story, serve as a background for the central episode and can even be said to represent “the raw material” for Babette’s art – the extra-textual reality behind the fictional world that Babette creates. We see that this new world preserves some of the relationships that the characters have been initially involved in (Martine and Lorens, the Dean and the community, Philippa and her art), though through interaction with new textual elements, these relationships undergo transformations and are set into a new spatial and temporal frame. The episode of the feast projects the possibilities of the “real” life that have never been fulfilled: Martine symbolically gets engaged to Lorens with all the exuberance of the Wedding at Kana. The feast also alludes to the possibility of Philippa’s triumph, as she symbolically finds herself in Café Anglais as Papin once predicted. At the same time, none of these possibilities are shown as actually taking place, and this new world retains until the very end its “as if” quality. The guests are not celebrating Martine’s wedding or Philippa’s talent. Both events are nothing but visions, the possibilities that in “life” turned out to be impossible, and have only been staged by Babette’s art and verbalised through the interpreter’s discourse.

If the feast episode is read as a metaphor for the art of the story, one can better understand the presence of certain textual paradoxes. One should not wonder, for example, why Lorens is astonished on hearing the words of his own speech, as his reaction reminds us of human prototypes who have recognised themselves in a literary text:

“/.../ For this reason we tremble/ . . .” Never till now had the General stated that he trembled; he was genuinely surprised and even chocked at hearing his own voice proclaim the fact.³²

The interpretation offered here also explains why the narrator calls the events that happen immediately before and during the feast the “tale,”³³ although, at that point, she has already recounted stories from the sisters’ youth as well as Babette’s arrival and her long years in Berlevaag. Certainly the fact that the narrator calls the events of the feast “this tale” would not be enough to read the story as a tale about the

“engendering of narrative,” to borrow Susan Aiken’s formulation.³⁴ In order to come to this present interpretation, it was necessary to analyse the narrative structure of the text, its mythological and other references and symbolism, to consider other analyses of the story as well as the tiny factual changes in the Danish versions. Curiously enough it was the latter which has triggered the present investigations into the metafictional character of the text by hinting at the connection between the narrator, her story and the authorial image behind them. It is possible that this at first sight insignificant change also says something about the art of translation as such, by showing that it is sometimes necessary to make adjustments in factual information in order to preserve the semantic unity of the text.

Notes

¹ Quoted after memory from Tarkovsky’s film *Nostalghia*.

² In the latter case, her imagination had no limits. Dag Heede calls Blixen’s *œuvre* “a mirthful tumbling in the world’s cultural history, an orgy of references” (“en begejstret boltren sig i hele verdens kulturhistorie, et orgie af referencer”), ranging between pompous evocation of the tradition and absolute disrespect towards it, see Dag Heede, *Det umenneskelige. Analyser af seksualitet, køn og identitet hos Karen Blixen*, Odense Universitetsforlag 2001, p. 245.

³ W. Glyn Jones, “Karen Blixen’s Translations of Her Own Work,” in *Karen Blixen – Out of Denmark. Papers from a colloquium at the Karen Blixen Museum, April 1997*, The Danish Literature Information Centre 1998, p. 9.

⁴ For bibliographical information, see Liselotte Henriksen, *Blixikon*, Gyldendal 1999, pp. 34–35, 41 and 280.

⁵ Aage Henriksen, “Johannes-Evangeliet som novelle,” in *Gotisk tid*, Gyldendal 1971, p. 81.

⁶ Karen Blixen, *Skæbne-Anekdoter*, Gyldendal 1958, p. 56.

⁷ “Outside its windows lay the great world.” (Isak Dinesen, *Anecdotes of Destiny*, Penguin Books 1986, p. 49).

⁸ Dinesen 1986, p. 26.

⁹ Dinesen 1986, p. 32.

¹⁰ Dinesen 1986, p. 36.

¹¹ This makes “Babette’s Feast” a valuable text in the context of novella studies, bearing in mind Thomas Bredsdorff’s claim that examples of assimilation are hard to find “in literature with the status of a classic,” see Thomas Bredsdorff, “Documentarism as a Formal Category in Nineteenth-Century Danish Literature – Structure and Rhetoric in

the Classical Novella,” in Paul Houe and Sven Hakon Rossell (eds), *Documentarism in Scandinavian Literature*, Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 18, Rodopi 1997, p. 189.

¹² Dinesen 1986, p. 37.

¹³ Textually, the establishment of a qualitatively different space is marked by the topos of the doorstep that the guests have to pass, see Dinesen 1986, p. 49.

¹⁴ There are other signs in the text than the discord within the community, indicating that Berelvaag represents a wild and untamed space which Babette is to “cosmicize” in Mircea Eliade’s terms: its geographical position in the North, as opposed to Paris where Babette comes from, as well as its wild vast landscape as experienced by Papin. For the discussion of cosmicisation rites and their relation to the cosmogony myth, see Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return – or, Cosmos and History*, translated by Willard R. Trask, Princeton University Press 1971, pp. 9–10.

¹⁵ Dinesen 1986, p. 59, 57.

¹⁶ “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” 1939.

¹⁷ Søren Baggesen, *Den blicherske novelle*, Blicher Selskabet 1965, p. 4.

¹⁸ Bredsdorff 1997, pp. 193, 197.

¹⁹ Dinesen 1986, p. 23.

²⁰ Neither it seems to be accidental that the year of the feast in the Danish text (1885) is the year Blixen was born (see Tone Selboe, *Kunst og erfaring. En studie i Karen Blixens forfatterskab*, Odense Universitetsforlag, p. 105).

²¹ To mention just a few: Sara Stambough, *The Witch and the Goddess in the Stories of Isak Dinesen*, UMI Research Press 1988, pp. 79–81; Susan Hardy Aiken, *Isak Dinesen and the Engendering of Narrative*, The University of Chicago Press 1990, p. 254; Marleen Barr, “Food for Postmodern Thought,” in Libby Falk Jones and Sara Webster Goodwin (eds.), *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*, The University of Tennessee Press 1990, pp. 19–33.

²² One, especially if she or he is not a Frenchman, can wonder why Blixen has chosen to speak about art in culinary terms. The story goes that Blixen followed her friend Geoffrey Gorer’s advice to write about food, a topic that could interest the American audience (see Jørgen Stormgaard, *Guds plan. Karen Blixen og Kristendommen*, Haase & Søn’s forlag 2010, p. 15). One can also speculate that this parallel saves the text from pathos which typically accompanies the Romantic concept of the artist as a divine creator. One can also find here an element of wordplay: Babette is a “chef,” (the word is used both in the Danish and

the English text) and the dinner is, of course, her work, which evokes association with the French word “chef-d’œuvre,” a masterpiece, the best that an artist can create.

²³ Isak Dinesen, “H.C Branner: The Riding Master,” in *Daguerrotypes and Other Essays*, with a Foreword by Hannah Arendt, translated by P.M Mitchell and W.D. Paden, The University of Chicago Press 1979, p. 191. Frantz Leander Hansen seems to be the first who has elucidated the relevance of this quote for “Babette’s Feast,” see his *Babette og det aristokratiske univers*, C.A. Reitzels Forlag 1998, pp. 75, 111–114. The importance of this quote for the understanding of Blixen’s poetics of the art of the story is also discussed by Ivan Sørensen and Ole Togeby, *Omvejene til Pisa*, København, Gyldendal 2001, p. 31.

²⁴ Both Mt 7, 9–11 and Psalm 42 (by substituting the myth for God).

²⁵ Blixen blames Branner for “blending mystery and myth” and showing unambiguously which character in the book is Christ. As Ivan Ž. Sørensen and Ole Togeby put it, Branner’s novel in Blixen’s opinion is “a gospel which is supposed to redeem the reader”, while “characters in the story is something one tells about, and not what the reader is to believe in” (Sørensen & Togeby 2001, p. 32). This does not prevent Blixen from weaving motives of the New Testament into her own narratives, however, she always does it with a touch of parody and ambiguity. “Babette’s Feast” contains Christian symbolism as well, but the use of the Atonement myth is ambivalent: it relates both to Babette and the Dean thus making them parallel, but also contrasted figures in regard to their potential of divine transcendence (see Stambaugh 1988, p. 81; Selboe 1996, p. 108; Charlotte Engberg, *Billedets Ekko*, Gyldendal 2000, pp. 224, 229), and in Babette’s case it is combined with heathen symbolism and demonic imagery (see Stambaugh 1988, p. 81; Selboe 1996, pp. 108–110; Engberg 2000, p. 227).

²⁶ Dinesen 1986, p. 45.

²⁷ It has been already mentioned that the episode alludes to the rituals of the “cosmicization” of a foreign uncultivated space. The parallel to the cosmogony myth is also created through the dissolution of former oppositions (this has a direct parallel in Nordic mythology according to which the universe is created from Ymir’s body born out of ice and fire), and also the kind of sacrifice that Babette makes, as opposed to the Christian self-sacrifice for the sake of others: “Dear Babette, /.../ you ought not to have given away all you had for our sake.”/.../ “For your sake?” she replied. “No. For my own.” (Dinesen 1986, p. 66).

²⁸ “The serpent symbolizes chaos, the formless and nonmanifested” (Eliade 1971, p. 19). In Nordic mythology, the serpent Jormungand

encircling Midgard represents a threat to the order of the world and plays a crucial role in Ragnarok – the Doom of Gods.

²⁹ See note 24.

³⁰ Dinesen 1986, p. 50.

³¹ Wolfgang Iser, "Fictionalizing Acts," in *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*, The John Hopkins University Press 1993, pp. 1–21.

³² Dinesen 1986, p. 60.

³³ "Babette remained in the house of the Dean's daughters for twelve years, until the time of this tale." (Dinesen 1986, p. 35).

³⁴ Cf. the title of her book: Aiken 1990.