Babette's Relational Art: Dualistic Worship in Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*

by Emilia Halton-Hernandez

Abstract

In this paper I would like to explore the number of dualisms that exist throughout Isak Dinesen's short story, Babette's Feast (1958). It seems to me that Dinesen seeks to deal with these opposing forces in a way not previously thought about by other critics. H.Wayne Schow has understood Dinesen to be 'the poet of wholeness and coherence' (Stambaugh 112), but I argue that this statement underestimates Dinesen's more sophisticated understanding of the necessary conflicts and oppositions existent in human life and relations. Babette's feast is reparative not by virtue of reconciling these dualisms, but by inculcating a new way of approaching and relating to the inevitable fault lines that exist between the word/thing, aesthetic/ascetic, body/mind, self/other dichotomies. Finally, I will show how Babette can be thought of as a proto 'Relational artist' in her creation of the 'real French dinner' (Dinesen 42) which I will explain with regards to the aims and practices of the Relational Art movement of the 1990s.

Dualistic Thinking in *Babette's Feast*

Dinesen's Babette's Feast, a short story included in the author's collection Anecdotes of Destiny (1958), is set in the village of Berlevaag in northern Norway and tells the story of the lives of two sisters Martine and Philippa. Their father, the Dean, is the leader of a small Lutheran sect and his daughters are expected to abstain from marriage in order to lead the sect after his death. As young women, Martine attracts the attention of Lorens Loewenhielm, a young lieutenant who becomes infatuated with her but is never brave enough to reveal his feelings. Philippa catches the eye of a visiting opera singer from France, Achille Papin, but she breaks off their meetings. Both sisters remain unmarried and lead the life that is expected of them after the death of their father. Fifteen years later, the sisters receive a visit from a Catholic Parisian woman called Babette, who was forced to flee her country after the Paris Uprising of 1832. She brings with her a letter from Papin who asks if the sisters will take her in as a maid as she now has nowhere to live and has lost her family. The

sisters agree, and Babette becomes a live-in cook and maid. Thanks to Babette's playing the French lottery by mail, she wins a ten-thousand franc prize and offers to pay for the sisters hundredth birthday celebration of their father. Babette invites the Lutheran congregation as well as a now middle-aged Loewenhielm to a sumptuous feast, an experience which is powerfully transformative for all the characters involved. At the core of this tale about the simple lives and lost loves of a puritanical sect and its visitors in nineteenth century Norway, is the deep division between the worship of the word and the thing. This polarity is one that affects all characters within the story, who to different degrees and at differing times adhere to one side or the other. I will first consider the divisions inherent in puritanical thinking, and then move onto an analysis of the different character's negotiation of these binaries, both in their religious adherences and in their personal predilections and outlooks on life.

I would like to use the psychoanalyst Ronald Britton's paper 'Fundamentalism and Idolatry' to think more deeply about the dualisms at play in the story. Scholars Elaine Martin and Laurie Brands Gagne have analysed the ways in which the text stages a conflict between self and other, and body and soul, respectively. Whilst these dualisms are certainly present within the text and my paper will address them, I find Britton's notion of 'thing-worship' (the worship of the concrete body of the mother and the maternal realm of the primary object) and 'word-worship' (worship of the word/law of the father, the realm of the secondary object) provides a more fundamental way of understanding the intrinsic divisions within the text, of which the binaries of self/other and body/soul are encompassed. In psychoanalytic terms, the line of cleavage is one between a parental object experienced as the 'source of solace and comfort [the mother] and the parental object perceived as the source of knowledge' the father (Britton 162).

Britton uses the terms 'thing-worship' and 'word-worship' to understand the way in which some religious thinking sees a conflict arising between sacramental theology and its ritualistic relationship

to the symbolic, and the textual, anti-materialism of fundamentalism. In its most polarised form, God and spiritual goodness is believed to be either found through contemplation of the divine material world and its objects and icons, or found in sole reflection on the Holy Scriptures and texts which are believed to come from the literal authority of a divine being. In this latter view, sensualist images and representations of God are viewed as blasphemous and their iconoclastic destruction is understood as doing God's will.

Britton's study focuses on the example of a series of tracts called 'The Fundamentals', published in 1909 in the USA. Their religious zealousness depended upon the belief that every word in the Bible is the literal Word of God, which therefore guarantees its infallibility and ultimate authority (Britton 163). Importantly, they considered Modernism and Roman Catholicism as anathema to their aims and belief, regarding the sacramental bread and wine as signifying the blood and body of Christ as idolatrous (Britton 163). The Dean's puritanical sect bears many similarities of faith and worship to those described in Britton's case study of word-worship. The Dean and his world view is the paternal word of law, one for whom 'the earth and all that is held to them was but a kind of illusion' (Dinesen 23). This condemnation of the idolised material object (sacrament) and the notion that only the word or the idea contains the truth is essential to the sect's puritanical thinking. We are told that 'its members renounced the pleasures of this world', living ascetically and sparingly, with the two sisters Martine and Philippa 'never possess[ing] any article of fashion; they had dressed demurely in grey or black all their lives' (Dinesen 23). Britton states that crucial to worship of words is the notion that the 'words of the text are treated as powerful, sacred and inviolable beyond their function of conveying, inexactly, like all words, a meaning' (Britton 168). The congregation's main form of reverence is in the form of gathering 'together to read and interpret the Word' (Dinensen 24). The importance attributed to the word is similarly felt when Martine and Philippa assume that Babette is engaging in her own kind of word worship, despite

these words being 'popish': '[t]hey would find her in the kitchen, her elbows on the table and her temples on her hands, lost in the study of a heavy black book which they secretly suspected to be a popish prayer-book' (Dinesen 38). And yet, Babette most importantly comes to be suspected for her dangerous thing-worship by the sisters and the congregation. Anne L Bower describes the sumptuous feast that Babette cooks up as sacramental, writing that the experience she creates is 'worthy of St Barbara, that brings atonement (at one meant) to its participants, just as the Catholic mass does' (Bower 212).

In this sense, the transubstantiation of the Eucharistic offering into the real body and blood of Christ in the Catholic Church is an example of substance or the material possessing spiritual power considered by Lutherans/puritans/word-worshipers as idolatrous. Britton writes that '[i]n idolatory the thing itself though a material object is treated as possessing psychic or spiritual power' (Britton 168), and it seems that Babette is initially feared of as engaging in this kind of veneration. Martine's disturbing dream features 'Babette poisoning the old Brothers and Sisters, Philippa and herself…The ladies could not tell what fires had been burning or what cauldrons bubbling there from before daybreak' (Dinesen 46-48). With Babette suspected to be scheming a 'witches' Sabbath' (Dinesen 46), her creations are clearly felt to have dangerous, powerful effects that possess the spiritual devilish power to excite sensual desires. Sensual experience and desire linked to materiality is felt to be the enemy of Godliness and is therefore vehemently opposed and feared by doctrines founded upon the exaltation of the word.

This split between sensual 'thing-worship' and non-sensual 'word-worship' is, in my opinion, the fundamental fault line in the story and something which all of the characters struggle. But more than just representing the struggle between puritanism and sacramental Catholicism in the story, Britton's terms to describe these dualisms help us to see how the more philosophical conflict between idealism/subjectivism versus realism/objective materialism are also at play in the story. Britton adds that a similar mutually

hostile tendency exists in philosophy between idealism and realism, and in psychology between behaviourism and subjectivism (162). The struggle between these binaries are encapsulated in the characters of Lorens Loewenheilm and Achille Papin.

Both characters seem to swing between devoting themselves to an illusory ideal, and then with the inevitable disappointments of these quixotic beliefs they turn to the worship of material goods, status and worldly ambitions. Loewenheilm falls prey to revering the ideal illusory world of subjective imagination that is involved in Britton's definition of word worship. Upon seeing Martine he felt 'at this one moment there rose before his eyes a sudden, mighty vision of a higher and purer life…with a gentle, golden-haired angel to guide and reward him' (Dinesen 26). Young Lorens sees Martine as an ideal, angelic almost platonic form whom he cannot properly relate to because he feels himself almost intolerably earthly fleshy and material: '[h]e followed her slim figure with adoring eyes, but he loathed and despised the figure which he himself cut in her nearness' (Dinesen 26). Importantly, the family madness which he fears he has inherited involves the power of omnipotent second-sightedness, the ability to see beyond the earthly and the material into the realm of the spiritual thanks to the legend that one of his ancestors was a Huldre, a female mountain spirit of Norway (Dinesen 27). Loewenheilm worries that he may be suffering from this visionary condition, (that is, hyper subjectivism), and the narrator writes that 'panic fell upon him. Was it the family madness which made him still carry with him the dream-like picture of a maiden so fair that she made the air around her shine with purity and holiness? He did not want to be a dreamer; he wanted to be like his brother-officers' (Dinesen 27). This state of panic clearly betrays the General's own fear of glorifying a hypersubjective ideal, an illusion of love and femininity that is not rooted in reality and cannot provide the foundations for a real relationship. As the young Lorens bids farewell to Martine, he cries 'in this world there are things that are impossible!' (Dinesen 27). At the core of Loewenheilm's statement here is surely a defeatist recognition

about his own predilection to worship the impossible and unreal in the world around him. The young Lorens begins in word-worship, but as he continues into adulthood he drives himself to the other side of the same coin— the thing-worship of social status, material wealth and ambition, endeavors which are all felt to provide a false sense of spiritual sustenance and power. These material enticements replace the lost illusory certainties of an earlier, younger stage, and so his desires become geared to the accumulation and possession of worldly things.

The French musician Achille Papin is also caught up in his own struggle between idealistic and realistic approaches to viewing the world. Though perhaps entertaining some romantic illusions about Philippa, Papin's worship of an ideal is more in her artistry and in his ability to cultivate a virtuoso that will be adored by the audiences of France. As he hears Philippa's voice, the narrator writes, '[l]ike Loewenheilm he had a vision' (Dinesen 29), suggesting the beginning a fantasy of fame and artistic acclaim. In his new-found prodigy, he wonders: 'I have been wrong in believing that I was growing old. My greatest triumphs are before me! The world will once more believe in miracles when she and I sing together!' (Dinesen 30). His belief in these illusions even allow him to entertain the notion that bodily decay can be stayed. Corporeal decay and the natural loss of powers with age will not happen to him - his material conditions are allayed by a worshipping of the miracle of their combined talents. When Philippa decides to put an end to her lessons, Papin like Loewenheilm when comparing himself to the ideal Martine, seems to experience a reality-checking fall to earth from the heavens: 'I have been wrong. My day is over. Never again shall I be the divine Papin' (Dinesen 30). The sense that idealism and realism are irreconcilable and unable to coexist is here clearly shown. And like Loewenheilm, Papin resorts to taking the other side of the path into thing-worship when we later hear of his estimation of his life in his letter to the sisters: 'I feel that you may have chosen the better part in life. What is fame? What is glory? The grave awaits us all!'

(Dinesen 34). Loewenheilm has also experienced his turn to thing-worship as an ultimately unfulfilling approach to life. Loewenheilm reasons that he 'had obtained everything that he had striven for in life and was admired and envied by everyone' but '[o]nly he himself knew of a queer fact, which jarred with his prosperous existence: that he was not perfectly happy' (Dinesen 51). This mature existential crisis coupled with the unhappiness of the disappointed idealisms of his early youth illustrates exactly the problems with taking either route of word or thing-worship. The congregation also seems to have reached an impasse in their adoration of the illusory and ideal. Their conception of the world as an illusion, with 'the true reality' as 'the New Jerusalem toward which they were longing' does not seem to provide real spiritual sustenance to the congregation, as shown by the breakdown in their relations (Dinesen 23). We are told early on in the story that since the death of the Dean, the congregation 'were even becoming somewhat querulous and quarrelsome, so that sad little schisms would arise in the congregation' (Dinesen 23). Whilst Martine and Philippa are perhaps presented as the most calmly contented of the characters with their lot, it is subtly suggested that their abstinence has led to a shrinkage in their depth of experience of life and their denial of sensual pleasures has come at some cost to the development of their personalities. Martine avoids discussing her dalliance with Young Lorens with her sister, and on the topic of Papin, 'they lacked the words with which to discuss him' (Dinesen 32).

As shown, the conflict between this kind of dualistic thinking and living is encountered in the text in a multiplicity of ways that we can be understood as all belonging to either a kind of word-worship or thing-worship. We see this theologically in the divide between Puritanism and Catholicism, philosophically in the divide between idealism and realism in the ambitions of Loewenhiem and Papin, and in the divide between asceticism/abstinence and aestheticism/sensualism as encapsulated in the characters of the Sisters and Babette. Elaine Martin has also interestingly observed how the mind/body

dualism in the story is most powerfully observed in the character of Babette herself: 'Physically exiled to the provincial, unimaginative, and endlessly repetitive world of split cod and ale-and-bread-soup, Babette's mind nonetheless continues to inhabit the kitchen and the Café Anglais in Paris' (Martin 36). Through the 'popish' book the sisters suspect Babette to be reading, it is by what is in fact most likely a 'cookbook, [that] Babette, trancelike, removes herself to Paris' (Martin 36).

A Breakdown of Divisions?

Martin goes on to argue that via Babette's artistic feast, the dualisms of body/mind and self/other existent in the story are finally broken down and the transformative properties of the food and wine enable the group to achieve community through consumption (Martin 36). Deane Curtin's 'food-centered philosophy of human being' as outlined by Martin also provides a particularly fruitful way for thinking about how Babette's feast breaks down the dualistic thinking that the characters are defined by (27). Curtin understands food to be an important site for complicating the self/other duality that has characterised Western thinking for so long. In Martin's words, '[s]ince food is ingested and becomes part of the self, it obliges us to reconceptualise not only the other but also identify of a self that is so permeable, it can physically incorporate the other' (27). Brands Gagne's article also looks at how Babette's artistic abilities are integrative and unifying. She writes that it is Babette's ability as an artist to connect us to our souls, which is 'the point of unity of mind and body' that is the artist's ultimate gift, enabling the blurring of the corporeal and the spiritual (231). She adds that 'Babette's Feast calls us to the task of recovering the soul and participating, thereby, in the work of reconciliation' (Brands Gagne 231).

In Britton's terms, it is through feeding and nourishing the group with her sensual gift that Babette provides a more maternal 'source of solace and comfort' that is usually split into 'thing-worship' (Britton 162). According to Britton, '[t]he true symbol

(as understood in the German and English Romantic movement and now in psychoanalysis) is the meeting place of meaning and matter, or of spirit and substance. It is the place where something is simultaneously what it is in its substance and is also what it signifies' (Britton 165). All great art is ultimately a symbol, and it is possible to understand Babette's ability to better integrate these two split forces that ultimately revives those around her as that which marks her as a true artist of body and soul.

The Problem with Worship

Identifying the separate elements Babette unifies and integrates through her feast as Martin and Brands Gagne have done allows us to better make sense of the feelings of revitalization and reconciliation that the feast-goers undergo. There seems to be something almost akin to a Hegelian dialectic that Babette achieves. However, Babette does not simply erase the conflict between 'word-worship' and 'thing-worship' as both writers would seem to be suggesting. The ultimate irreconcilability of the word and the thing or body and mind is unavoidable. Britton writes that these dualistic forces 'are bound together in mutual hostility and always co-exist' (Britton 164). And it is not just that these opposing forces come about simply thanks to a dualistic way of thinking (despite Curtin's hopeful claims that it is a problem special to Western thought) - they are inherently a part of the complex experience of the world with which we as human beings must encounter and negotiate. James Ogier has importantly observed how the feelings of transformation through unity that the feast provides is in fact figured as an impermanent state within the story. He writes that:

> Just as one might expect from a Dionysian revel, the effects of the altid are short-lived. The party breaks up under a brilliant star-filled sky, expressing the hope that it may never snow again. It does, of course, almost immediately…The appearance of snow also underscores the brevity of the group's…epiphany and leads to doubts

> about the long-term effect of Babette's efforts on the group (Ogier 184).

We cannot know for sure about the long-term restorative effects that the feast will have on the group, and Ogier's observation does suggest that the kind of dualistic thinking that troubles the characters is in many ways unavoidable and will resurge. Indeed, Loewenheilm and Martine are never able to consummate their feelings for one another in any real sense. He says to her after the meal: 'I shall be with you every day that is left to me. Every evening I shall sit down, if not in the flesh, which means nothing, in spirit, which is all, to dine with you, just like tonight. For tonight I have learned, dear sister, that in this world anything is possible' (Dinesen 62). It seems that he has once again taken side with the veneration of the illusory and the ideal.

However, although word and thing are always going to be separated in some way, it is the tendency to dogmatically choose one or the other as a reaction to ambiguity, or as a rejection of the discomfort of the irreconcilable that seems to be where the key problem lies. I would argue then that the main issue dualistic thinking addressed in the story is not that these binaries exist per se, as they are unavoidable, but that the problem lies with how the conflict is intensified by the act of 'worship'. The characters seem to feel a constricting sense of having to devote themselves to one side or another. For example, the elder Loewenheilm right up until the feast feels compelled to choose between one kind of reverence or another, incapable of feeling satisfied by either. Upon arriving to Berlevaag after many years absence, the General suddenly wishes he had the power of second-sight (Dinesen 53). We learn that 'he would find himself worrying about his immortal soul', that looking into the mirror and seeing his decorated figure he exclaims "'Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!" The strange meeting at Fossum had compelled him to make out the balance-sheet of his life' (Dinesen 52).

With the gift of Babette's feast, the guests do not have to choose to absolutely devote themselves to either the thing or the word. Instead, the collective experience that Babette provides

them with enables the guests to cherish both the spiritual and the material in their taking in of her food and drink. We are told that the congregation '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' (Dinesen 58). The feast enables the guests to give up the dogma of word worship and take in that which they had previously forbidden themselves: '[t]he vain illusions of this earth had dissolved before their eyes like smoke, and they had seen the universe as it really is" (Dinesen 62). In Loewenheilm's speech we see how the feast enables him to feel that he has not been deprived of one way of thinking or feeling, despite his earlier choices: '[g]race, 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' (Dinesen 60). This sense of being opened up to a fuller and more whole experiencing of the world is felt to be a blessing. Crucially, this taking in of the other that had been previously rejected allows the guests to open their hearts to one another more freely. Old grudges and mistreatments are forgiven, and the words "'Bless you, bless you, bless you," like an echo of the harmony of the spheres rang on all sides' (Dinesen 63). In this sense, Babette erodes the closed and limited ways of thinking that are necessarily involved with veneration of any kind and allows them to relate to one another and themselves in such a way that both resembles and then produces the intersubjective give and take of a loving relationship. In a famous line from the story, Colonel Galliffet says of Babette's culinary artistry: 'this woman is now turning a dinner at the Café Anglais into a kind of love affair—into a love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety!' (Dinesen 58). A love affair is precisely dependent on a mutual relationality, a give and take of self and other.

In sum, worshiping inculcates a state of non-mutual relations

in which the object of desire is reified and set upon a pedestal. To worship, venerate or show devotion is a one-way street of desiring and feeling. And as we have seen, this way of relating to the world profoundly affects the relationships the characters have with one another. Characters come to worship one another - Loewenheilm and Papin worship the Sisters, and the Congregation worship the memory of the Dean, but these relationships become unsatisfying because they are not based upon intersubjective modes of relating. Essentially what Loewenheilm and congregation feels is a kind of freedom to relate and feel, to not have to choose between one restrictive way of being. For Loewenheilm, he feels a freedom to not have to choose between thing and word worship as expressed in his speech on Grace. For the congregation, the ability to enjoy what was previously feared and othered, material and sensual pleasure, is experienced as a liberation. Not having to choose between one form of dogmatic worshipping and being able to tolerate the dualisms that invariably exist in life is both enabled by the intersubjective experience of collective consumption, and in turn enables a more intersubjective and successful form of relating to one another.

Babette's Relational Art

Thanks to Babette's ability to transform the relational modes in the group through her culinary artistry, I think it is useful then to think of her as an artist that is engaged with a 'relational aesthetics'. Relational Art or Relational Aesthetics is a term coined by art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 book Esthétique relationnelle to describe the work by a select group of artists in the 1990s. Bourriaud defines relational art as 'an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space' (Bourriaud 14). Crucially for the relational artist, art is considered a state of encounter, 'consisting of convivial, socializing, interactive, non-object, artist-audience collaborations' (Perreault). By thinking along these lines, we can understand the transformative effects of Babette's feast

as lying not simply in the food she makes, the artistic product, but in the communal, relational experience she enables and develops through this artistic production. In relational art, the artist can be more accurately viewed as the 'catalyst' for the artistic experience rather than being at the centre of it (Nechvatal 73). The artist Rikrit Tiravanija's work which sets up communal dining experiences within gallery spaces seems to be most akin to that of Babette's, and a brief analysis of his work will be helpful in understanding how both artists are doing similar things.

In his landmark 1992 work entitled Untitled (Free/Still), Tiravanija converted a gallery into a kitchen where he served rice and Thai curry to the public free of charge[1]. In the words of Tiravanija:

> I am interested in making a condition or situation where…people have to come and stand next to each other and look at something…and deal with each other. I think it is quite important in the work, for me, that people participate in it or take action in it or are it. (Art Radar)

These aims very much parallel the collective and relational qualities of Babette's feast. It is the guests whose bodies and countenances in relation to one another bear the final artistic mark in the story. Again paraphrasing the Colonel's evaluation of the dining experience at the Café Anglais, it is the love affair that is produced between self and other that is the ultimate artistic achievement of Babette's—not the technical brilliance found in the aesthetic object, the food or drink. Bourriaud explains this collective creation of meaning with regards to relational art as: 'the audience is envisaged as a community. Rather than the artwork being an encounter between a viewer and an object, relational art produces intersubjective

1 It should be noted that this work was fist displayed at 303 Gallery in New York City, a commercial and privately-owned gallery. This might seem antipathetical to Bourriaud's statement that relational does not take place in private spaces. It does however perhaps bring the social contexts within which Tiravanija and Babette work closer together—they are both providing a free experience for a group of people within the domain of the private that is not their own—the former in a privately owned gallery and the latter in a privately owned house.

encounters, meaning is elaborated collectively, rather than in the space of individual consumption' (Bourriaud 17). This perhaps goes some way to explaining why the guests at Babette's feast cannot remember anything about the meal itself. We are told that Martine and Philippa 'realised that none of their guests had said a single word about the food. Indeed, try as they might, they could not themselves remember any of the dishes which had been served' (Dinesen 64). The guests are so caught up in the feeling that has been produced amongst and within them that the food itself comes to bear little meaning. Tiravanija captures this experience when commenting on the effects on his own work: '[a] lot of it is also about experiential relationship so you are actually not really looking at something but you're within it, you're part of it. The distance between the artist and the art and the audience gets a bit blurred' (Stokes). The divisions between art and life, artist and audience are broken down and obfuscated in much the same way as Babette's feast breaks down the aforementioned forms of dualistic thinking and forms of worship. Incorporating the communal consumption of food and drink seems to make culinary art the art form par excellence for achieving these relational outcomes. The inherent participatory quality of eating and imbibing amongst others moves people in such a way that other types of interactive and communal activities cannot do to the same extent.

Conclusion

One guest at Tiravanija's exhibition interviewed at the end of the dining experience remarked that 'there is something wonderful about mixing the contemplative, almost religious activity of looking at art and also having the possibility of sitting in the art gallery with the art, eat something lovely, and speak to either your companions or new friends that you meet' (Stokes). This sentiment of wonder at the mixing of the spiritual, culinary and interpersonal could have easily been expressed by one of the guests at Babette's meal.

Babette's feast opens up a space for new modes of relating dependent upon the act of eating and consuming collectively. Helped by the fact

that the ingestion of food itself breaks down dualisms between mind and body, self and other, we see the feast opens up space for relational modes that are not based on the restrictive worship of either word or thing, or the adoption of dogmatically dualistic thinking, but instead allows for the intersubjective creation of meaning and relating.

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