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“Deeper Down in the Domain of Human Hearts”

Hope in Isak Dinesen’s *Babette’s Feast*

ISAK DINESEN’S *BABETTE’S FEAST* was first published in 1950 in *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Dinesen, a Danish writer, had heard that Americans were interested in stories about food. So when she wrote a short piece for an American audience, she centered the transformative action of the story on a splendid meal.¹ About twenty years before *Babette’s Feast* was published, the German Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper wrote a work titled “On the Meaning of Courage.” He was encouraged by his publisher to write treatises on the seven virtues, to which he responded with great enthusiasm, publishing *On Hope* in 1935.² “How much I, basically unsuspecting, had fallen into a simply inexhaustible theme, which I had been capable of sketching only in outline at best, became clear to me quite soon,” Pieper notes.³ Nevertheless, the theme of hope has not been the focus of much philosophical inquiry aside from Kant; as Bernard N. Schumacher notes, “In the history of philosophy, hope has never been a dominant theme; it was generally treated, if at all, ‘incidentally,’ just as it continues to be treated today among the majority of philosophers.”⁴ Yet the experience of hope is fundamental to the human condition; the loss of hope for an individual or for a community

can be devastating. In an insightful essay on Pieper's work, Gilbert Meilaender notes that "doing what is right requires being good, but we can become good only by doing what is right. . . . [Pieper's] discussion leaves us to wrestle with the problem: how to hand on moral knowledge in a society which often fails to inculcate the doing of what is right."⁵

This is the crux of the tension and discord in Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*: moral knowledge has not permeated the community. Their religious leader, known in the narrative as the Dean, has died, and "his disciples were becoming fewer in number every year, whiter or balder and harder of hearing."⁶ The congregation remembers the Dean's message but individual members have trouble living it out. They sing hymns, study the Dean's writings, and gather for worship services, but nevertheless "sad little schisms would arise" (*BF*, 3–4). The Dean's daughters, although they live virtuous lives, have been unsuccessful in "hand[ing] on moral knowledge" to the community. The example of their lives—selfless, giving, and nurturing—is not enough to provide spiritual transformative direction. This is a community adrift, a group of professed believers who have lost their way. In *Babette's Feast*, Dinesen offers a fictional example of the ways in which individuals and communities can recover hope.⁷ The dramatic restoration of hope to this community occurs at the end of the story during an elegant feast that the servant/artist/chef, Babette, prepares and serves.⁸

Babette is an outsider. She is French, she is a political exile, and she is Roman Catholic. The narrator tells us that it is indeed a "strange thing" for "a couple of Puritan women in a small Norwegian town" to have a "French maid-of-all-work" (*BF*, 22). The people in this small mountain town of Berlevaag, Norway, find the explanation for Babette's presence "in the sisters' piety and kindness of heart" (*ibid.*). This is partially true; the sisters had taken Babette in when she threw herself on their doorstep twelve years ago, cold, wet, and penniless, "a friendless fugitive, almost mad with grief and fear" (*ibid.*). However, the narrator tells us early in the story that

“the true reason for Babette’s presence in the two sisters’ house was to be found further back in time and deeper down in the domain of human hearts” (ibid.), a statement that resonates and echoes throughout the story, and further reveals Dinesen’s approach. Speaking of her narrative technique in general, she writes, “I know the whole story before writing the first word. I actually carry my stories in my head for a long time, before I write them. I tell them and retell them to myself.”⁹

Babette’s Feast moves back and forth in time so that the feast can be understood as an elaborate palimpsest for the participants, the chef, and the readers. Robert Langbaum aptly describes the demands that Dinesen’s narrative technique place upon the reader: “One has always to be reading backwards and forwards . . . One has always to be weaving the pattern of the story. . . . For the past appears not in sequence but through tales which advance the present situation, and we do not let go of one understood episode to move on to another but insert as it were the later episodes into the earlier in order to understand them.”¹⁰ In order to understand the significance of the feast in this story, then, the reader must read backwards and forwards in time: 1854, 1871, and 1883. These dates are tied to significant choices that the characters make; these choices come to epiphanic resolution during the feast.

Despite its remote setting, the village of Berlevaag nevertheless has attracted figures from the outside world: Achille Papin and Lorens Loewenhielm in 1854, and Babette Hersant in 1871.¹¹ When Philippa, the younger sister in *Babette’s Feast*, was seventeen (1854), Papin, a renowned French Opera singer, arrived in Berlevaag for a short stay, “but he felt small in the sublime surroundings; with nobody to talk to he fell into that melancholy in which he saw himself as an old man, at the end of his career, till on a Sunday, when he could think of nothing else to do, he went to church and heard Philippa sing” (*BF*, 26). Instantly he realizes that this young person possesses the talent to bring all of Paris to her feet. Roused out of despair, he gains admission into the Dean’s house to give Philippa

singing lessons: "Achille's expectation grew into certainty and his certainty into ecstasy. He thought: '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!'" (*BF*, 27). Without thinking of Philippa, her family, or her ties to her community, however, Achille envisions a future for Philippa that is more reflective of his own ambitions and past than of hers. In thinking about the future his emphasis is upon himself ("I," "My," "me") and his imagined future "triumphs."¹² Although Achille's confidence has been restored in this small village, he has become blinded by his own ambition. He does not see Philippa for who she is; he sees her for what she might be as his protégé, his singing companion.

Later in the story, while singing Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* with Philippa, Achille becomes carried away: "As the last melting note died away he seized Philippa's hands, drew her toward him and kissed her solemnly, as a bridegroom might kiss his bride before the altar. Then he let her go. For the moment was too sublime for any further word or movement" (*BF*, 28). Philippa, however, does not share Achille's emotional moment of epiphanic revelation. She recognizes the sexual implication of the gesture, and cancels the singing lessons abruptly. Achille returns to Paris, thinking that he has "lost [his] life for a kiss. . . . Such is the fate of the artist!" (*ibid.*). In this moment Philippa loses, in Stephanie Branson's words, "a devoted lover and a brilliant career as an opera singer, in remaining with her sister and father."¹³ Instead, Philippa gains a life of companionship with her beloved sister Martine as well as a life of service to others and to her father. She chooses a private venue for her talents rather than the public sphere, and for this Philippa has often been condemned by critics who see her and her sister Martine as passive and servile. Bruce Bassoff writes "Though . . . [the sisters are] admirable among Dinesen's women for their lack of disguise or pretense, their unthinking obedience to their father and their fear of life outside their fjord make them, like Lise, shallow."¹⁴ Frantz Leander Hansen, writing of the choices that the sisters have made, claims that "on the

surface *Babette's Feast* is the moving story of the Dean's daughters who are the very picture of self-sacrificing, charitable angels. . . . But just a little scratch in the varnish, and a different story begins to surface; the story of a life spent in passivity and self-repression and of pent-up passions as the cost that brings the demons into play." Hansen also sees "pernicious parental authority" at work in the narrative, and condemns both the Dean and "destructive ecclesiastical authority" as the ultimate villains for both Martine and Philippa's inability to "free themselves."¹⁵ However, Martine and Philippa have made their decisions freely; it is Lorens who decides to become a military careerist and leave the vision of a holier and more sacred existence that he has glimpsed in a possible future life with Martine behind; Achille desires to shape Philippa into the next opera diva as compensation for his own feelings of inadequacy. Both Lorens and Achille are primarily interested in their own careers rather than the desires and well-being of Martine and Philippa. Martine could have married Lorens, but he would have had to stay in Berlevaag, a sacrifice he was not willing to make. Philippa could have had a brilliant singing career as Achille's protégé, but she followed *her own* desires rather than Achille's. Ron Hansen stresses that the ultimate emphasis on the freedom to choose in *Babette's Feast* is related to Dinesen's ability to "merge incongruities, reconcile the irreconcilable. With Søren Kierkegaard, Karen Blixen argues against the either/or proposition that there is only one correct way to live one's life, that we are faced with a series of critical choices and if we choose wrongly we are lost."¹⁶

Nor does Philippa completely lose Achille. He remembers her and grieves that her "voice should never fill the Grand Opera of Paris" (*BF*, 14). Because of this memory, many years later, he sends the distressed and exiled Babette to live with Martine and Philippa. From Achille's vivid memory of Martine and Philippa the possibility for a new life for Babette is born; Babette in turn will help the community of Berlevaag to find new life. Achille addresses his letter to *both* Martine and Philippa ("*Ladies!*"). He writes, "*Knowing that I*

was once a visitor to your magnificent country she [*Babette*] comes to me, asks me if there be any good people in Norway and begs me, if it be so, to supply her with a letter to them. The two words of 'good people' immediately bring before my eyes your picture, sacred to my heart" (*BF*, 30). Philippa's seeming rejection of a magnificent future ultimately results in palpable good for the community she has chosen,¹⁷ for with *Babette's* arrival a gradual transformation for the better begins to take hold in Berlevaag.

Lorens Loewenhielm, another visitor to the village of Berlevaag, is similar to Achille in that while on a brief visit to the village many years before he too falls in love with one of the sisters, Martine. During this visit, he had for a moment experienced a "mighty vision of a higher and purer life" (*BF*, 23)—a life that he ultimately rejects because he "did not want to be a dreamer; he wanted to be like his fellow officers" (*BF*, 25). Many years later, General Loewenhielm wonders whether he made the right decision to abandon Martine and the life and love she represented. On his way to the sisters' house, Lorens "let his mind stray far away":

In Paris he had once won a *concours hippique* and had been feted by high French cavalry officers, princes and dukes among them. A dinner had been given in his honor at the finest restaurant of the city. Opposite him at table was a noble lady, a famous beauty whom he had long been courting. In the midst of dinner she had lifted her dark velvet eyes above the rim of her champagne glass and without words had promised to make him happy. In the sledge he now all of a sudden remembered that he had then, for a second, seen Martine's face before him and had rejected it. (*BF*, 47)

Despite the glories of his accomplishments he is gripped by sadness and remorse, "Somewhere something had been lost," he thinks (*BF*, 46). The General suffers from what Pieper describes as the beginning and the root of despair: *acedia*. *Acedia*, Pieper writes, is "a kind of sadness . . . [and] causes inactivity, depression, and discouragement."

ment. One who is trapped in *acedia* has neither the courage nor the will to be as great as he really is. He would prefer to be less great in order thus to avoid the obligation of greatness. . . . *Acedia* is a perverted humility.”¹⁸ As a young man, Lorens had found himself unable to speak in Martine’s presence, and most especially when he is at the Dean’s table. He feels humiliated by this strange muteness: “He was amazed and shocked by the fact that he could find nothing at all to say, and no inspiration in the glass of water before him. . . . the words stuck in his throat” (*BF*, 23). Years later, recalling himself as a “shy and sorry figure in the house of the Dean,” he resolves “to dominate the conversation round that same table by which young Lorens Loewenhielm had sat mute” (*BF*, 47).

“If our deeds help shape our character, as Pieper certainly believes, it is also true that this character is not just a thing which is made. It is a continual doing,” Meilaender notes.¹⁹ The General’s deeds have helped to shape his character, and have contributed to the man he is as he returns to the place that his younger self rejected. As he prepares for the evening the General “would, he resolved, tonight make up his account with young Lorens Loewenhielm” (*BF*, 46). However, instead of dominating the conversation as he had originally intended, as the feast unfolds the General is both amazed and rendered almost speechless by the rich array of gourmet food, aperitifs, well-chosen wines, and liqueurs with which he is presented. His earlier resolve to dominate the dinner conversation melts away even as his astonishment at the riches of the feast are continually met with silence by his fellow diners. Unbeknownst to the General, the other members of the dinner party, followers of the Dean, have taken a vow not to remark upon the food or drink, in homage to the Dean’s memory, and as a show of support for the two sisters, who have reluctantly agreed to allow Babette to prepare this French feast. Thus, the General is again silenced at the table, for the language that he speaks—the discourse of privileged nobility and high ranking military figures that would know and appreciate the elaborateness of the feast—would be indecipherable. As each

magnificent course is served, however, the General's "perverted humility" fades; he begins to understand his relationship with Martine in a different way, and he relinquishes his earlier desires. Instead of monopolizing the conversation, the General becomes more receptive and open, and listens to the members of the community as they recount the miracles that occurred while the Dean was alive.²⁰

During the course of the feast the General gradually comes into a new perception of his past, his present, and his future so that by the end of the evening his manner and style of speaking have been transformed: "He spoke in a clear voice which had been trained in drill grounds and had echoed sweetly in royal halls, and yet he was speaking in a manner so new to himself and so strangely moving that after his first sentence he had to make a pause" (*BF*, 52). As he speaks the words that the Dean had uttered many years before ("Mercy and truth, my friends, have met together. . . . Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another") the prayer changes him.²¹ Before this moment, the General "was in the habit of forming his speeches with care, conscious of his purpose, but here, in the midst of the Dean's simple congregation, it was as if the whole figure of General Loewenhielm, his breast covered with decorations, were but a mouthpiece for a message which was meant to be brought forth" (*ibid.*). Langbaum, writing more generally of Dinesen's technique, notes that, "As always in her work, Isak Dinesen is dealing with the way in which relative or human motives are unconsciously at the service of absolute or divine intention."²² Both the General and Achille become agents of grace, and both are given the gift of hope. As he notes in his letter to Philippa and Martine, Achille's hope is restored when he thinks of Philippa in the afterlife, receiving the adulation and attention her voice deserves.²³ Lorens's hope is restored when he begins to look toward the future and to understand his past choices more humbly and with a deeper sense of gratitude.

This change in outlook is evident in the General's brief speech at the end of the dinner. The General makes two points. First, he emphasizes humanity's "foolishness and short-sightedness" in its under-

standing of grace, for “we imagine divine grace to be finite” (*BF*, 52). The General is speaking in this instance of humanity, but is thinking of his own former self, when as a young man he had exclaimed to Martine, “I have learned here that fate is hard, and that in this world there are things which are impossible!” (*BF*, 24). Lorens had closed himself to the infinite possibilities of God’s grace through an act of will.²⁴ When he rejected Martine, Lorens also rejected that part of his nature that encompassed the spiritual and the visionary; thus, the General is a divided self.²⁵ Because of this inner division, Lorens feels a continual sense of unease. He abandons the vision that Martine represents and instead becomes single-mindedly devoted to his career: “He even in the course of time benefited from words and turns which had stuck in his mind from the Dean’s house, for piety was now in fashion at Court” (*BF*, 25).

In the course of the evening at the Dean’s home, however, the General comes into a new understanding of his past, an understanding infused with the knowledge of God’s grace and mercy. The second part of his speech emphasizes the courage, humility, and magnanimity that come with the knowledge that, as the General tells his fellow diners, “grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude” (*BF*, 52). During the evening the General changes: he becomes more receptive and forgiving, and sets aside his earlier feelings of sorrow, regret, and remorse. This clarity of vision tempered by right judgment is also known as the virtue of prudence. As Meilaender notes, writing more generally about prudence, “We will know what justice requires, what courage calls for, what moderation really means in different circumstances only if we are open to all values and claims of our world, only if we see the world as it really is.”²⁶ As the General leaves, he tells Martine:

“I have been with you every day of my life. You know, do you not, that it has been so?”

“Yes,” said Martine, “I know that it has been so.”

“And,” he continued, “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.” (*BF*, 54)

The General realizes that the love he feels for Martine reaches back in time as well as forward: “That which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us” (*BF*, 52). The General sees Martine as, in Pieper’s words, “the possible companion of future beatitude” (as quoted in Meilaender).²⁷ The General’s understanding of his past and of his present love for Martine now encompasses his younger self and all that he thought he had rejected.

These words, which end the General’s speech, also refer to Babette. Babette is described as “the dark Martha in the house of [the] two fair Marys” and as “the stone which the builders had almost refused [that] had become the headstone of the corner” (*BF*, 33). As previously noted, Babette arrived in destitute condition at the sisters’ house. In his letter to the sisters that serves as Babette’s initial introduction, Achille tells them that “in her misery she has still got resourcefulness, majesty and true stoicism” (*BF*, 30). Babette’s resourcefulness is reflected in the impact that she has on the household and larger community. The sisters were initially concerned that they would be unable to afford a servant; because of Babette’s skills in household economy, however, the sisters soon not only have more income, but more time to minister to the community: “They found that troubles and cares had been conjured away from their existence, and that now they had money to give away, time for the confidences and complaints of their old friends and peace for meditating on heavenly matters” (*BF*, 32–33). The sisters are also “alarmed and dismayed” at the idea of “French luxury and extravagance” (*ibid.*) especially in regard to cuisine; they are anxious to show Babette how to prepare

the split cod and ale-and-bread soup that is the staple of their diet. Babette watches their demonstration with an “absolutely expressionless” face, and “within a week Babette cooked a split cod and an ale-and-bread-soup as well as anybody born and bred in Berlevaag” (*BF*, 32). But the sisters are perhaps most concerned about “receiving a Papist under their roof” (*BF*, 31). They quickly devise a strategy of modeling behaviors to Babette that will, they think, lead to her conversion: “But they did not like to worry a hard-trying fellow-creature with catechization; neither were they quite sure of their French. They silently agreed that the example of a good Lutheran life would be the best means of converting their servant. In this way Babette’s presence in the house became, so to say, a moral spur to its inhabitants” (*ibid.*). The first two of the sisters’ concerns are met and dispelled almost immediately; despite the language barrier Babette manages the household finances with more facility than the sisters. Her industry allows the sisters to focus more on their ministry to the community. The beneficial effects of Babette’s presence are thus quickly and gratefully absorbed by the community, a community that literally and figuratively is hungering for transformation.²⁸ The religious conversion that the sisters hope for will take longer and will also take a form and an avenue that the sisters do not expect; this transformation will involve the whole community of believers in Berlevaag.

When she spends her lottery earnings to prepare a sumptuous feast for the community in order to help the sisters to remember and celebrate their father’s birthday, Babette displays magnanimity, although she states that her motives are ultimately linked to her vocation as an artist. Babette’s magnanimity is linked to her courage. Pieper defines magnanimity as “the aspiration of the spirit to great things. . . . A person is magnanimous if he [or she] has the courage to seek what is great and becomes worthy of it. . . . Magnanimity, as both Aristotle and Aquinas tell us, is ‘the jewel of all the virtues,’ since it always—and particularly in ethical matters—decides in favor of what is at any given moment, the greater possibility of the

human potentiality for being.”²⁹ Just prior to this passage he also notes, “The proper impulse of natural hope, as such, is toward the virtue of magnanimity.” At the *Café Anglais* in Paris, her meals were recognized, the General recalls, as “a kind of love affair—a love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety!” (*BF*, 50–51). So too in *Berlevaag*, although the immediate impetus for preparing this feast, Babette tells Philippa, is linked to her desire to give her utmost as an artist rather than out of any sense of indebtedness or gratitude to the sisters.

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

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

“For your sake?” she replied. “No. For my own.”

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

“I am a great artist!” she said.

She waited a moment and then repeated: “I am a great artist, Mesdames. . . . A great artist, Mesdames, is never poor. We have something, Mesdames, of which other people know nothing.” (*BF*, 57–58)

Just as the guests savor the meal, so too does Babette savor the preparation of the feast, from its planning to her travels to the careful coordination and presentation of the dishes.³⁰ She tells the sisters, quoting Achille, “Through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me leave to do my utmost!” (*BF*, 59). Winning the lottery allows Babette, one last time, to do so. Babette, then, wishes to “attain the furthest potentialities of his [her] nature,”³¹ a wish that is linked to the very meaning of the word “virtue.” Meilaender notes that “the word ‘virtue’ does not just point toward some ensemble of desirable character traits; it suggests the utmost which a human being can be.”³²

Surprisingly, after she prepares the feast, Babette explains to the sisters that she will not return to Paris, because the very same people who were educated to appreciate her art were also “evil and cruel. They let the people of Paris starve; they oppressed and wronged the poor . . . those people of whom I have spoken are no longer there” (*BF*, 58). Babette could do her utmost as an artist before, in Paris, because she had access to the right materials, and, she thought, the proper audience. But her audience was corrupt even though they had educated palates and could appreciate her artistry with food. In 1871 Babette took part in the Commune uprising that, although unsuccessful, ultimately contributed to political and economic changes in France; she thus had to flee France because the very same French General who described her meals as “a love affair of the noble and romantic category” (*BF*, 51) pursues her with “blood-stained hands” after the attempted revolution (*BF*, 29). Sarah Webster Goodwin notes that “Babette is caught in the contradiction between her political convictions, deeply rooted in her personal experience, and the audience her art requires.”³³ Yet Babette is also a realist; she has shaped a new audience in Berlevaag, preparing the way with the small adjustments she could make to such a humble meal as split cod and ale-and-bread soup; her work in the kitchen has had a direct impact over time on the well-being of the community.³⁴ In Berlevaag her audience comprises “good people” who have lost their spiritual leader. Their vision must be restored, and the feast that Babette has prepared is ideally suited to do so.

After they learn that she has won the lottery, many in the community assume that Babette will return to France. This realization brings sadness: “Did that good and faithful servant realize that in going away from Berlevaag she would be leaving many old and poor people in distress? Their little sisters would have no more time for the sick and sorrowful” (*BF*, 21). As Babette later explains to the sisters, however, her home is now Berlevaag; the life she knew in Paris has disappeared. After this evening she will return

to the preparation of simple meals and to the domestic service she provides as a servant to the two sisters, the "good people" that Achille has helped her to find. Thus, her sense of her vocation has not changed. Paradoxically, as a revolutionary she willingly took up arms against a corrupt aristocratic social regime, the very regime for which she had prepared magnificent feasts. After this splendid night she will return to the preparation of the humble cuisine that the sisters have asked her to cook. Lorens Loewenhielm serves as a connection to that original audience, but because he is not French he merely represents their social class. His knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the sumptuous food and drink serve as a point of comic relief for the text's readers, but also as a way of educating the audience(s) about the magnificence of the feast. As many critics have noted, Lorens is a crucial component in the gathering; he straddles both worlds, the world of Berlevaag and the world beyond Berlevaag. Just as Lorens comes to terms with his past, Babette, too, in the course of the evening comes to terms with the paradoxes of her past and present.

The loss of hope (looking forward to the "not yet") sometimes occurs in old age because a person may feel that what might happen in the future cannot supersede what has happened in the past. But this loss of hope can also permeate a community that has grown old together. Pieper describes this emotional shift in the following way: "Natural hope blossoms with the strength of youth and withers when youth withers. . . . On the other hand, it is above all when life grows short that hope grows weary; the not-yet has turned into the has-been, and old age turns, not to the 'not yet,' but to memories of what is no more."³⁵ In the small community of Berlevaag, hope has grown weary. Early in the story Dinesen writes that this community had "renounced the pleasures of this world, for the earth and all that it held to them was but a kind of illusion, and the true reality was the New Jerusalem toward which they were longing" (*BF*, 21). Despite this pronounced eschatological focus, however, the elderly members of this community are caught

in memories of the past: slights, quarrels, destroyed relationships. Dinesen writes:

From a past half a century back, when the unshepherded sheep had been running astray in the mountains, uninvited dismal guests pressed through the opening on the heels of the worshippers and seemed to darken the little rooms and to let in the cold. The sins of old Brothers and Sisters came, with late piercing repentance like a toothache, and the sins of others against them came back with bitter resentment, like a poisoning of the blood. (*BF*, 34)

The members of the community are unable to extricate themselves from these memories on their own. The Dean is long dead, “the fine and lovable vigor of [his] personality had been evaporating. . . . And his departure had left the door ajar to things hitherto unknown . . .” (*ibid.*). Indeed, although they form a community in order to sing of the next world—“Jerusalem, my happy home / name ever dear to me”—their mouthing of the words in song are directly contradicted by their behavior, thoughts, and actions toward each other.

These disagreements grieve Martine and Philippa because they feel powerless to dispel them. The Dean had been able to do so by keeping the community focused on the “New Jerusalem”: by modeling an acceptance of God’s ways, by calmly citing scripture, and by living the message he proclaimed. For instance, when Achille Papin had come to the Dean’s door to offer his services as a voice teacher to Philippa, the Dean gives his consent and then remarks to his daughter, “God’s paths run across the sea and the snowy mountains, where man’s eye sees no track” (*BF*, 27). Here the Dean implies that sometimes humanity is blind to the far-reaching plans that God may have for us or bring to us. We cannot see or understand these paths, but should remain open to them nevertheless. Later, when Philippa cancels the lessons, the Dean tells her “And God’s paths run across the rivers, my child” (*BF*, 28). The Dean substitutes local imagery

(rivers instead of mountains and the sea) to symbolize God's plans, comforting Philippa with the knowledge that sometimes our future lies close at hand rather than far away. In both instances the Dean watches, waits, listens, and then offers counsel based on scripture and prayer.

The feast that Babette prepares for this community sets in motion a lasting transformation in the community and in the individuals who attend. Meilaender asks, "Is the Christian moral life all of a piece? Or is there a great discontinuity between the sort of virtue we can achieve by human effort and the virtue which is made possible by divine grace?"³⁶ The feast represents a combination of *both* human effort and divine grace. The food and drink Babette prepares creates an atmosphere that helps the community to remember the Dean. The Dean's vision had been forgotten by the community; during the feast they remember his remarkable deeds, his words, and his inspiring presence among them. Indeed, Ann Gossman notes that the imagery Dinesen employs in her description of the feast suggests "a Communion service . . . [using] a cluster of bread-stone, blood-wine images."³⁷ Working diligently in the kitchen, Babette and the feast she prepares serve as the catalyst for change as the memories of the Dean's wisdom and devotion to his flock strengthen and nourish the community's faltering faith:

A Sister on the other side of the table opened on the subject of strange happenings which had taken place while the Dean was still amongst his children, and which one might venture to call miracles. Did they remember, she asked, the time when he had promised a Christmas sermon in the village the other side of the fjord? . . . The villagers were giving up hope, but the Dean told them that if no boat would take him, he would come to them walking upon the waves. And behold! Three days before Christmas the storm stopped, hard frost set in, and the fjord froze from shore to shore—and this was a thing which had not happened within the memory of man! (*BF*, 49)

This seemingly impossible feat is made possible, it is implied, through faith. The Dean's statement that he "would come to them walking upon the waves" evokes the passage in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus "early in the morning came walking toward [the disciples] on the sea" (14:26). In *Babette's Feast*, the speaker at the dinner table as well as those gathered around signify the disciples—willing in spirit but incredulous and terrified when the moment of action occurs. Because of the cumulative power of these memories and the good fellowship created by listening to them over a meal, individual members of the community begin to let go of past hurts.³⁸ Gradually they turn to each other and exchange words of contrition, forgiveness, and hope, leaving behind an obsession with the "has-been" and turning instead to a clear-eyed recognition of the "not-yet." The community, Dinesen writes, "had been given one hour of the millennium" (*BF*, 54). One hour of the millennium is enough to last them for the rest of their lives, and they go forth into the snowy night holding hands and singing. Harmony has been restored, for "infinite grace" "had been allotted to them" (*ibid.*).

The feast that Babette prepares thus becomes an instrument of transformation, renewal, and healing, and serves to restore lasting hope at both the communal and the individual level.³⁹ Meileander writes, "In hope we know that the good for which we wait is not at the disposal of the hoper, that we must hope for it as a gift, not as something we can acquire through wise calculation. . . . Hope bursts the boundaries of our world and does not try to define the object of hope or set any criteria for it."⁴⁰ Babette represents Achille at this feast: in the background, but present, and his hope that, as he writes in his letter to her, "In Paradise I shall hear your voice again" (*BF*, 30). Philippa echoes this paradisaical vision at the end of the story. She tells Babette, "'Yet this is not the end! I feel, Babette, that this is not the end. In Paradise you will be the great artist that God meant you to be! Ah!'" she added, the tears streaming down her cheeks. 'Ah, how you will enchant the angels!'" The end of the story points toward the "New Jerusalem" for which the

community, Lorens and Martine, Achille and Philippa yearn: the new kingdom of eternal life. In *Babette's Feast*, then, hopelessness at the individual and the communal level is transformed—through the virtues of prudence, magnanimity, and self-giving love—into living and eternal hope.

Notes

1. In 1949 Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen was her pseudonym) decided, as Frantz Leander Hansen notes, "that it was time to write for her American readers." So when one of her friends, Geoffrey Gorer, "voiced the opinion that she would not be able to write something acceptable to *The Saturday Evening Post*, Karen Blixen accepted the challenge. . . . The outcome was *Babette's Feast*, which *The Saturday Evening Post* turned down—as did *Good Housekeeping*." (*The Aristocratic Universe of Karen Blixen* [Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2003], 61.) *Babette's Feast* was later included in a collection of stories that Dinesen published in 1958 titled *Anecdotes of Destiny*. Gabriel Axel directed the film *Babette's Feast* (1987) with which most contemporary audiences are familiar.
2. Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997). "On Hope" is included in this edition reissued by Ignatius Press.
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. Bernard Schumacher, *A Philosophy of Hope: Josef Pieper and the Contemporary Debate on Hope* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 2.
5. Gilbert Meilaender, "Josef Pieper: Explorations in the Thought of a Philosopher of Virtue," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 11, no. 1 (1983): 26.
6. Isak Dinesen, *Babette's Feast, Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard* (New York: Vintage Books, [1958] 1993), 21. Subsequent citations to this work will be included parenthetically in the text.
7. For studies of *Babette's Feast* see Maire Mullins, "The Gift of Grace: Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*" in *The Gift of Story: Narrating Hope in a Postmodern World*, ed. Emily Griesinger and Mark Eaton (Waco, Tex., Baylor University Press, 2006): 279–96; Hansen, *Aristocratic Universe*; Susan C. Brantly, *Understanding Isak Dinesen* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002); Maire Mullins, "Home, Community, and the Gift that Gives in Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 23, no. 3 (1994): 217–28; Michael J. Shapiro, "Political Economy and Mimetic Desire: A Postmodernist Reading of *Babette's Feast*," *History of European Ideas* 13 (1991): 239–51; Susan Hardy Aiken, *Isak Dinesen and the Engendering of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Bruce Bassoff, "Babette Can Cook: Life and Art in Three Stories by Isak Dinesen," *Studies in Short Fiction* 27 (Summer 1990): 385–89; Sarah Webster Goodwin, "Knowing Better: Feminism and Utopian

Discourse in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Villette*, and 'Babette's Feast,'" *Feminism, Utopia and Narrative*, ed. Libby Falk Jones and Sarah Webster Goodwin (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 1–20; Susan Hardy Aiken, "Writing (in) Exile: Isak Dinesen and the Poetics of Displacement," in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989): 113–31; Robert Langbaum, *Isak Dinesen's Art: The Gayety of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); and Ann Gossman, "Sacramental Imagery in Two Stories by Isak Dinesen," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 1963): 319–26.

Indeed, although hope as a theme in the story has at times been alluded to in critical studies of *Babette's Feast*, very little critical discussion or analysis of the centrality of this theme and its relation to the transformation that takes place in the narrative exists.

8. In his essay "Tradition: The Concept and Its Claim Upon Us," Pieper notes that there is an "enormous difference between the observance of custom and that of holy tradition—one could even say, between the observance of 'traditions' and the observance of 'tradition.' . . . The feast is a particularly good example. It has been said that nowhere else does the power of tradition manifest itself so clearly as in the celebration of a feast. However, it is also the case that nowhere else does the problematic inherent within tradition come so clearly to light," *Modern Age* 36, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 224.
9. As cited in Brantly, *Understanding Isak Dinesen*, 2.
10. Langbaum, *Isak Dinesen's Art*, 24–25. Frantz Leander Hansen notes that *Babette's Feast* is a "simple and straightforward narrative, which is nevertheless immensely capacious: a charming and credible story, but with a considerable underlying depth in which a sharp irony and dangerous forces are at work" (*Aristocratic Universe*, 62).
11. Frantz Leander Hansen notes that in the Danish version of the story, "Berlevaag life" is rendered "Berlevaag's inert little world" (*ibid.*, 63).
12. In his book on hope, Pieper describes presumption as hope's "fraudulent imitation" (*Faith, Hope, Love*, 113); the perverse anticipation of the fulfillment of hope. To be presumptive is to be overconfident, to overreach: "For the essential nature of presumption is, as Saint Augustine says, a 'perverse securitas,' a self-deceptive reliance on a security that has no basis in reality" (125).
13. Stephanie Branson, "Dinesen in Three Dimensions: A Comparing of Irony in Two Films of Dinesen's Stories," *Literature/Film Quarterly*. 28, no. 1 (2000): 49–53.
14. Bassoff, "Babette Can Cook," 386.
15. Frantz Leander Hansen, *Aristocratic Universe*, 62, 64.
16. Ron Hansen. *A Stay Against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001): 147.
17. Dinesen's views on feminism fluctuated. In her biography of Dinesen, Judith Thurman notes, "Writing to Aunt Bess in the twenties, Karen Blixen called feminism

the most important revolutionary movement of the nineteenth century, and her analysis of sexism still reads brilliantly today. But in the fifties she repudiated any knowledge of the women's movement and claimed that 'feminism is a matter which I do not understand, which I have never concerned myself with of my own volition.'" *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 173.

18. Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, 117–20.
19. Meilaender, "Explorations," 37.
20. Indeed, even as the General loses his determination to dominate the conversation, the members of the congregation forget their earlier vow of silence: "Usually in Berlevaag people did not speak much while they were eating. But somehow this evening tongues had been loosened. . . . General Loewenhiehm, who was to dominate the conversation of the dinner table, related how the Dean's collection of sermons was a favorite book of the Queen's. But as a new dish was served he was silenced" (49).
21. Pieper writes that "Despair and presumption block the approach to true prayer. For prayer, in its original form as a prayer of petition, is nothing other than the voicing of hope" (*Faith, Hope, Love*, 127).
22. Langbaum, *Isak Dinesen's Art*, 210.
23. In his 1871 letter that heralds the arrival of Babette, Achille writes, "*And yet, my lost Zerlina, and yet, soprano of the snow! As I write this I feel that the grave is not the end. In Paradise I shall hear your voice again. There you will sing, without fears or scruples, as God meant you to sing. There you will be the great artist that God meant you to be. Ah! How you will enchant the angels!*" (*BF*, 30).
24. Pieper writes, "Today when we speak of despair we are usually referring to a psychological state into which an individual 'falls' almost against his will. As it is here used, however, the term describes a decision of the will. Not a mood, but an act of the intellect. Hence not something into which one falls, but something one posits. . . . Both he who hopes and he who despairs choose these attitudes with their will and let them determine their conduct" (*Faith, Hope, Love*, 114). In despair, the individual transforms the "not yet" of hope into merely the "not," as Pieper notes, and as such destroys the "pilgrim character of human existence" (*ibid.*, 113). The General has posited that his choice as a young man in love with Martine was between the spiritual path and the physical path. What he learns in the course of this evening is that through God's grace, both paths have been given to him, a paradoxical and yet healing way of comprehending his past.
25. In his essay "Voice as Summons for Belief," Walter J. Ong, SJ, describes the dynamic of the "stranger-double" in Conrad's *Secret Sharer*:

Conrad's profoundly symbolic tale is a kind of allegory of human existence. It reveals a rift, a limitation inside our own beings, but a rift which is our only hope of salvation—it is a rift which comes from our bearing vicariously within ourselves the other with whom we must commune, and who must commune

with us, too, and thereby compensate for the rift, the limitation in our persons.

The other within must hear all, for he already knows all, and only if this other, this thou, hears will I become comprehensible to myself.

Literature and Belief: English Institute Essays 1957, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 85. Fr. Ong's ideas about the divided self and the necessary dialogue between the internal "I" and the "thou" as a prerequisite to healing are applicable to General Loewenhielm, and capture his situation at the feast; the General listens and communes with his earlier self, and comes into a deeper understanding of "the rift, the limitation in our persons," buoyed by a renewed sense of faith and hope.

26. Meilaender, "Explorations," 26.
27. Describing the difference between "natural and Christian prudence," Meilaender asserts that "the difference is simply—but profoundly—that Christian prudence, informed by charity, sees deeper dimensions of reality in a way that significantly reshapes what prudence sees and requires" (*ibid.*, 123).
28. Dinesen writes, "The old Brothers and Sisters, who had first looked askance at the foreign woman in their midst, felt a happy change in their little sisters' life, rejoiced at it and benefited by it. They found that troubles and cares had been conjured away from their existence, and that now they had money to give away, time for the confidences and complaints of their old friends and peace for meditating on heavenly matters" (32–33).
29. Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, 101.
30. Michael Shapiro notes that "several things are being commemorated at the feast. Babette is enacting nostalgia for her past life as a famous chef in France; the group of worshippers are commemorating the life of their deceased pastor, and Lorens is reliving the turning point in his life, the point at which he placed career motivation above love and play" ("Political Economy," 247–48).
31. Pieper, as quoted in Meilaender, "Explorations," 116.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Goodwin, "Knowing Better," 15.
34. See Nicholas Vazsonyi, "Of Genius and Epiphany: Schlafes Bruder, Das Parfum, and *Babette's Feast*," *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 23, no. 2 (1999): 331–51, for a discussion of the ways in which art "can reveal a vision of transcendental truth" (333). Vazsonyi asserts, however, that this transformation in *Babette's Feast* "is only momentary" and invokes "the transitory spirit of Joyce's epiphany. The audience is transformed by the moment, but also for the moment only" (345). On the contrary, the transformation that takes place in this story is lasting because, for the faith community, for Achille and Philippa, and for the General and Martine, it is tied to an eschatological vision.
35. Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, 110.
36. Meilaender, "Explorations," 28.
37. Gossman, "Sacramental Imagery," 319.

38. In her book *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970) Iris Murdoch describes this shift in the following way: "By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world. . . . And if quality of consciousness matters, then anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue" (84).
39. Shapiro writes, "Death imagery abounds at the feast—there are those who have died during the revolt of the Communards in Paris; there is the deceased pastor, the extinguished love between Martine and Lorens, and the extinguished career of Babette" ("Political Economy," 248). What Shapiro fails to understand, however, is that the memory of the pastor, the love between Martine and Lorens, and Babette's career are not truly deceased but have been resurrected (and indeed have existed all along) through the healing power of the feast and through the resurgence and newly infused sense of hope that the community as well as individual members now experience. The story thus possesses a deeper theological resonance that Shapiro's Marxist reading cannot accommodate.
40. Meilaender, "Explorations," 43.