

## Karen Blixen's Humor

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### Abstract

It is curious that practically no critic nor reviewer in either America or England or Denmark has pointed out the humor in the works of the Danish storyteller Karen Blixen / Isak Dinesen. Not least because she actually wanted to be perceived as a humorist herself. In this paper I intend to demonstrate the humor in her tales as a combination of the small and the great humor, using a concept pair introduced by the Danish philosopher Harald Høffding—and with references also to Søren Kierkegaard. The great humor is an overall view of life, while the small humor is fun – also in the sense of oblique angles and norm-breaking views.

**Key Words:** Blixen, great and small humor, irony, audacity, view of life, secularization, distance, Kierkegaard, Arendt

Eugene Walter asks the Danish author Karen Blixen / Isak Dinesen about the comic spirit in her tales. “Isak Dinesen: Oh, I’m glad you mentioned that! I do often intend a comic sense, I love a joke, I love the humorous. The name “Isak” means “laughter.” I often think that what we most need now is a great humorist.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1931, after 17 years as a farmer or colonialist in Kenya, Blixen returned to her childhood home, Rungstedlund, some 30 kilometers north of Copenhagen. Here she dedicated herself to writing stories. In 1934, when she was 40 years old, her *Seven Gothic Tales* was published in the USA. It was immediately a big success. Her principal works, apart from this book, were: *Out of Africa* (1937), *Winter's Tales* (1942), *Last Tales* (1957), and *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), all of which she wrote first in English under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen, then rewrote them in Danish, often with subtle stylistic changes.

A few months before she died, September 1962, she gave an interview to Belgian TV. She was asked to give young people some wise words concerning ‘the art of living’. Her answer: “First and foremost, you must be brave. You cannot live without great courage. And if they were to inquire

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<sup>1</sup> “The Art of Fiction,” Eugene Walter’s interview with Isak Dinesen in Rome 1956 (Brundbjerg 2000: 212).

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further, I would say: You must be able to love, and you must have a sense of humor” (Brundbjerg 2000: 353).

Now, what does it mean, “a sense of humor”—in her terms?

“Well, I *am* audacious by nature,” Blixen once wrote to a friend, “and I contain or hide my impudence, only because I am *bien-elevée!*” (Blixen 1996a: vol. 2, 147). Sure, well-behaved and well-educated, she was. And when reading her tales, you sometimes have to pay close attention to how frivolous she is—behind the cultivated facade and the old-fashioned language attire. Her tales are full of jokes and scoffs on and between the lines, allusions to mythological figures and their wild quirks, amusing anecdotes about famous people and sacred figures whose filthy thoughts are revealed in Blixen’s fabulous storytelling. Certainly, she does not always manage to control the audacity—even though she hides behind persons in stories that tell of a narrator who tells ...

However, the author is not audacious just for the sake of audacity.

A distinction between irony and humor is that irony creates distance between the interlocutors, humor creates a sense of community, you laugh *at* somebody or *with* somebody. Blixen knows the whole register. In one of her stories a husband asks his wife why she, after they have been married just a few years, tries to evade his company. “My husband,” she answered, “surely you will realize that to an ambitious woman it is hard to enter a ballroom on the arm of a cuckold.” This is scathing irony, expressed by a woman who has suffered a loss, but she can manage on her own.

Below I use a concept pair: the little and the great humor.

The little humor of Blixen can be in the form of a grim ironic remark about a figure, delivered with a twinkle in the eye. Perhaps a hidden allusion to an obscene painting, or an elegantly worded cheeky joke—more daring than one might possibly imagine. And she was quite aware that some people were annoyed by what she wrote – and yes, she says, then you might as well be annoyed with *The Arabian Nights!* She emphasizes that all the writers she admires usually have a sense of humor.

The great humor is an overall *view of life*.

When dealing with Blixen’s humor it is often difficult to distinguish between the little and the great humor. It is characteristic of Blixen’s humor that a joke or an anecdote often is a concentrate of a more overall problem in the whole authorship, for example *the deputy motif*: The biblical story about Barabbas who is saved from the cross as Jesus takes his place, is turned upside down in Blixen’s version.<sup>2</sup> Here, Barabbas addresses the Apostle Peter. He would like to buy some of the marvelous

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<sup>2</sup> In “The Deluge at Norderney” (Dinesen 1963: 173ff).

wine Peter and his friend had at the party Thursday night (at 'The Last Supper'). He is despairing to death. Why? Because he was ready to take responsibility for his deeds and take his punishments, but he was 'overridden' by someone who sacrificed himself for "our sins." So, from the point of view of a proud man as Barabbas the responsibility was taken from him! This is the Christian doctrine of atonement in Blixen's critical and humorous concentrate. The deputy motive is linked to the existential question of *being*, and moreover: being *something*; about pride and dignity. Blixen's motto: *Je responderay* means "I will answer for what I say or do; (...) I will be responsible" (Dinesen 1984: 9). No "savoir" is needed, no eternal salvation! And that's how Blixen over and over again—in paradoxical stories—turn her back to God and eternity, just the way Søren Kierkegaard's humorists do. As we shall see below. But she does it "for the love of the world."

Blixen was pleased that a friend of her regarded her as a humorist, which happened in a discussion about what she *was*. She has been characterized as an esthetician, ethicist, Christian, agnostic, aristocrat. But no, she prefers *humorist*!

### Secularization—for Love of the World

"Secularization in our time" —i.e. the time around 1800, the period where most of Karen Blixen's stories take place—is essential for my view of Blixen as a humorist in a Kierkegaardian sense.

Secularization as the distinctive feature in our time, the modern age, is a precondition for the modern experience of contingency, i.e., the experience that there is no meaning given beforehand. In 1932, in an article in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* the German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt argued that "[Søren] Kierkegaard was the first thinker to live in a world constituted much like our own, that is, in a wholly secularized world stemming from the Enlightenment" (Arendt 1994: 46). Later, speaking about the history of Western thought in general, she asserted: "The important historical fact is that an overwhelming majority has ceased to believe in a Last Judgement at the end of time" (Arendt 1994: 230). In his own time, Kierkegaard was well aware of the shift taking place in the modern age in the basic outlook on life, from traditionalism to modernity. In *Fear and Trembling* (1843), published under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, he wonders about this: "How strange it is that precisely in our age (...) doubt about the immortality of the soul could be so widespread" (Kierkegaard 2013: 182).

Kierkegaard's teacher Poul Martin Møller discussed this tendency toward secularization in his 1837 article, "Thoughts on the Possibility of Proofs of Human Immortality, with Reference to the Most Recent Literature Belonging Thereto." The article referred to German literature, since, as Møller

makes clear, denying in public the immortality of the soul was forbidden in absolutist Denmark (Møller 1965: 163). As we know, God's irrelevance was later famously announced by Nietzsche, but already in 1802, Hegel had declared that the "sentiment underlying religion in the modern age [is] the sentiment: God is dead" (Arendt 1978: 9). Kierkegaard's pseudonymous narrator of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), Johannes Climacus, declares, "I, who am in essence myself a humorist and, with my life in immanent categories, seek the Christian-religious" (Kierkegaard 2009: 378).

Kierkegaard's so-called stage theory is well known: The Aesthetic, the Ethical and the Religious stage. Kierkegaard, however, places Humor as the *confinium* between the ethical and the religious stage. Humor is a *Lebensanschauung* prior to faith, he states, because the humorist turns his back on God and eternity (Kierkegaard 1992: 501).

As a prototype for the humorist Kierkegaard chooses the German poet Heinrich Heine, whom he refers to with all due respect; in *Stages on Life's Way* (1845) the pseudonymous narrator Frater Taciturnus notes about Heine and others that "they frequently are well informed about the religious—that is, they know definitely that they do not want to have anything to do with it. This is a great advantage over the systematicians (i.e., Hegel and other philosophers)." And, he adds, "At present, when our age seldom has a great believer to show, we must always be pleased to have a few really clever ones who are offended" (Kierkegaard 1988: 452). "Offended" of course relates to Jesus's assurance given in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me" (Matt 11: 6).

In 1953 Blixen made a remark that can be read as a humorous comment to Kierkegaard's statement. She said, "I could throw myself in the arms of Shakespeare and kiss Heine, —but I would, in that sense, —at the very utmost be an offence to Søren Kierkegaard" (Blixen 1996a, vol. 2: 150). One could argue that Blixen belongs to those "few really clever ones who are offended," for she was well informed about religious themes, and she often refers to the Bible and other religious texts. However, it would be more accurate to call her *non-believer* or existentialist insofar as the starting point in existentialism, seeking the Christian-religious or not, is to focus on existence here and now rather than on what lies beyond or on life hereafter. Which is probably what Hannah Arendt meant when she claimed that philosophy (in the sense of a traditional focus on the transcendent) is dead and called herself an anti-metaphysical thinker.

Changing the focus is also what the anti-metaphysical storyteller Blixen does, for example in the story "Converse at Night in Copenhagen," included in her second-to-last collection of short stories, *Last Tales* (1957).

On a rainy night in 1767 the Danish king Christian VII—young, wild and loony—has been fighting with the police in the streets of Copenhagen, as he often did. He escapes and finds himself in the suggestive room of the whore Lise. There the poet Johannes Ewald has already finished his business, as he puts it—and the king and the poet start their conversation. The king complains about the prudes, the virtuous ladies at court, and he concludes: “and in bed they will talk and talk!”

The poet can only agree: “You have said it, Sire. In a bed they will talk, the furies out of hell! At the moment when up to, and above, the limit of our strength we have gifted them with our *full being, our life and our eternity*, then they will talk! (...) they insist on being told whether the *adrienne* they had on yesterday did become them, and whether there is *life after death!*” (Dinesen 1991: 327; my emphasis).

Twice the king quotes one of the Easter hymns written by the eighteenth-century pietist Hans Adolf Brorson. The hymn praises the glory of heaven on the day of Resurrection: “Hvor sødt det er at smage / hvad Huset *der* formaar” (‘How sweet it is to taste the flavor / Of what the house may call its own). In the Danish version the author has emphasized the humor by changing the king’s second reference to the hymn: “Huset *der*” (the house *there*) to “Huset *her*” (the house *here*), and suddenly the hymn seems to be referring to the pleasures available in the paltry room of the whore Lise, where the king and the poet are being entertained (Blixen 1996: 294, 298; Dinesen 1991: 332, 338). This is a significantly different trinity from that in Heaven; thus, the king can conclude, “il y a dans ce monde un bonheur parfait” (“in this world there is a perfect happiness”) (Blixen 1996: 298; Dinesen 1991: 338).

Both Blixen and Arendt seem to agree with this attitude in their acceptance of the world – Blixen as a Nietzschean Yes-sayer, and Arendt with her “amor mundi” which means “for love of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Flipping through the *New York Times* one November day in 1957, Hannah Arendt found an interview with Isak Dinesen, in which the author stated, “I’m a storyteller (...) all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.” This statement was to become famous. It immediately struck Arendt, and she used it again and again. A year later, November 16, 1958, she wrote to her friend Gertrud Jaspers in Germany, explaining “I have read a wonderful book. *Anecdotes of Destiny* by Isak Dinesen [or Karen Blixen], a great Danish storyteller, great lady and wise old

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<sup>3</sup> *Amor Mundi* is also the title of Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s Arendt biography of 1982.

woman” (Arendt 1985: 395). This book was to have a considerable influence on the literary strategies Arendt drew upon when writing about political issues. During her stay in NY 1959, Blixen was invited to talk in “The 92Y”—The Poetry Centre in YMHA (Young Men’s Hebrew Association). Hannah Arendt witnessed the performance and reported of the encounter, “She came, very very old, terribly fragile, beautifully dressed; she was led to a kind of Renaissance chair, given some wine, and then, without a shred of paper, she began to tell stories, almost word for word as they exist in print. The audience, all very young people, was overwhelmed... She was like an apparition from God knows where or when. And even more convincing than in print. Also: a great lady” (quoted in Young-Bruehl 1982: 18-19). In her 1968 essay on Isak Dinesen, Arendt explains the reason why she admires Dinesen’s storytelling, “The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings” (Arendt 1983: 104).

### **The Great and the Small Humor**

An important inspiration for my focus on Blixen’s humor is *The Great Humor (Den store humor, 1916)* by the Danish philosopher Harald Høffding who contributed considerably to developing Blixen’s *livsanskuelse* / *view of life*—or *Lebensanschauung* (I prefer the German word because it is a concept typical of German philosophy in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Jean Paul, Hegel—and Kierkegaard).

According to Høffding there is a small humor (jokes, puns, wisecracks etc.) connected to concrete situations and context; and there is a great humor (“*Lebensanschauung*” or “*Lebensgefühl*”), which is a disposition or attitude towards life as a whole: a “total emotion,” in Høffding’s terminology (Høffding 1967: 44).

When ejaculation, as in Blixen’s tale above, “Converse at Night in Copenhagen,” is combined with “full being” and “eternity,” then this is an expression of small humor; it is comic (but not illogical!). The duality of Blixen’s humorous literary technique corresponds to Lydia B. Amir’s statement, “From a cognitive point of view, humor (...) enables “rapid cognitive-perceptual shifts” (...) between various conflicting points of views” (Amir 2014: 242). In Blixen it is a shift between a sensual and a religious point of view. Similar to the anecdote in her *Gothic Tale* “The Deluge at Norderney,” “In Egypt, in the great triangular shadow of the great pyramid, while the ass was grazing, St. Joseph said to the Virgin: “Oh, my sweet young dear, could you not just for a moment shut your eyes and make believe that I am the Holy Ghost?” (Dinesen 1963: 183).

Nevertheless, eternity, i.e., the question whether there is a life after death, is the pivotal point in the “invention” of the great humor—as a view of life, just as it was in the philosophical discussion all over Europe during the Romantic era.

I shall restrict myself to mentioning Jean Paul, who—besides Kierkegaard—is an important inspiration for Høffding. Jean Paul mirrors a common romantic “life-view” of that time when he describes *Dichtung* as “dieser menschlichen Himmelfahrt, wo der Himmel selber zu uns herunterfährt, nicht wir später in ihn hinauf. Es wohnt eine Kraft in uns, deren Allmacht uns ebensowohl Himmel als Höllen bauen kann, es ist die Phantasie” (quoted from Kjældgaard 2007: 321).

Phantasy or imagination is in fact the core of Blixen's literary technique, her art of fiction. The ascension—die menschlichen Himmelfahrt—is turned upside down: Heaven, eternity, and beatitude are present here and now—on Earth. Thanks to *Dichtung* and Imagination. As in King Christian VII's altering the heavenly sweetness in Brorson's hymn to Heaven on Earth in the whore's room; followed by the king's words, “Il y a dans ce monde un bonheur parfait” (Dinesen 1991: 338).

Here it is worth noting Blixen's remark: “Well, I *am* audacious by nature, and I contain or hide my impudence, only because I am bien-élevée!” (Blixen 1996: 147). Blixen was a master of intertext and context, subtext and irony, and a way of masking her impudence was to shift into French. Not least in the room of a whore.

When Blixen discusses Christian themes like Earth and Heaven, Eternity and Beatitude – which she does remarkably often for a non-Christian—she cannot help making fun of Christianity, of doctrines of body and soul and atonement, to drag the most holy phenomena down to earth.

When, 1926 in Africa, she tried to assess her life and possibilities, she swore an allegiance with her angel Lucifer, and she explains the symbolic expression as a “... search for truth... a *sense of humor* which is afraid of *nothing*, but has *the courage of its convictions* to make fun of everything...” (Dinesen 1981: 249). Whereby she outlined the program for her future literary praxis, her art of fiction.

In *Babette's Feast* (1950) the French cook exalts her narrow-minded Protestant guests inasmuch as she turns the dinner “into a kind of love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety.” What happens during this supper? “The rooms had been filled with a heavenly light ... Taciturn old people received the gift of tongues... Time itself had merged into eternity... They had been given one hour of the

millennium. ... 'Bless you, bless you, bless you,' like an echo of the harmony of the spheres rang on all sides" (Dinesen 1993: 51, 53f).

Pope Francis has mentioned several times Gabriel Axel's 1987 film *Babette's Feast* as his favorite film, and in his papal encyclical, *Amoris Letitia* (2016), he stated: "The most intense joys in life arise when we are able to elicit joy in others, as a foretaste of heaven. We can think of the lovely scene in the film *Babette's Feast*, when the generous cook receives a grateful hug and praise: 'Ah, how you will delight the angels!'" (Pope Francis 2016: 97).

"...as a foretaste of heaven." Quite consistent with Paul's dictum on *Dichtung* as "dieser menschlichen Himmelfahrt, wo der Himmel selber zu uns herunterfährt..."

In continuation of the enthusiasm the Pope has demonstrated for *Babette*, some Catholics have focused on the author and her view of life:

...for a Christian, the parallel to the Eucharist, to a heavenly feast (in *Babette's Feast*), is striking. In her sacrifice, her pouring out of her resources in an expansive love, *Babette* is a riveting Christ-figure. The satiating meal, an earthly parallel to the heavenly banquet, is eucharistic. And the grace it imparts, the rich outpouring of emotion among the gloomy Danish congregants, mirrors the spiritual life-giving nourishment of the Eucharist. But curiously, the story's author Isak Dinesen herself seems to have been limited by her personal secularism, incapable of applying the story's imagery within the context of faith. Raised in a Unitarian household, Dinesen drew upon the Old and New Testaments and other spiritual works for her themes; but she remained an agnostic, never raising her eyes toward the heavens to gaze upon the transcendent God. Her personal life was marred by a failed marriage and unsatisfying relationships. She was addicted to painkillers, and she died in 1962 of malnutrition—starving both physically and spiritually.

So, my question: Can an agnostic be divinely inspired?

My answer is a resounding "Yes." It seems that Dinesen reached beyond herself, beyond her wildest imaginings, to reveal a Truth which she, lacking true faith, could not understand. (Schiffer 2016)

The conclusion may be debatable but is in fact an accurate record of Blixen's view of life. But a doctrinal Catholic viewpoint will fail to capture Blixen's humor (small and great) which is of course clearer in the book than in the film: "A blessed joke," the narrator states. Of course! Because the



ascension—die menschlichem Himmelfahrt—of these ascetic Christians is due to the good wine! They are simply drunk.

### Distance

Even if Blixen's criticism of Christianity is seriously meant, you could say that her consequent use of Christian terminology and doctrines, mentality and view of life and death is still fundamental to her employment of subtext and irony. She exploits the biblical texts and expressions in an immanent and non-metaphysical way, regarding for instance expressions like "the divine," "God" and "destiny." Religious terms indicate conditions in human life—not in Heaven. In short: God is a metaphor for the great artist—or vice versa. As in "Tempests," one of the *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958): "Thy will be done, William Shakespeare, as on the stage so also in the drawing room" (Dinesen 1993: 94).

Blixen's way to express the great humor in her stories is a dialectic play between the characters' involvement in and consciousness of their present predicaments and their capacity to step back and observe themselves and the lives to which they are committed. With no illusion that they are able to escape from their specific position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis*—and this view is at the same time sobering and comical.

Baruch Spinoza, the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, is the author of the expression *sub specie aeternitatis*. Both Høffding and Blixen (and Kierkegaard) often refer to Spinoza; *sub specie aeternitatis* is, so to say, Blixen's humorous position and viewpoint. Which includes, as we shall see, a certain sadness or touch of melancholy.

One of Blixen's *Winter's Tales* (1942) is called "The Heroine." The story deals with Heloïse and Frederick. They meet in 1870, at the eve of the French-German war, in a small German town, Saarburg, near the border, both of them on their way to France. She is a beautiful 23-year-old French lady (in fact a nude dancer by profession, as we are informed later on), whose desire was roused in earnest in Saarburg. Frederick is a young Englishman studying Religious Philosophy in Berlin, in particular occupied with "the doctrine of atonement," a bit indolent; even if he falls for her, inevitably, he is more into books than into love—at any rate the kind of love that involves both soul and body.

Seven years after the events at the border—and the big chance he missed—Frederick goes to Paris where he sees Heloïse again—naked (and this is small humor); namely as the goddess Diana in the show in an exquisite music-hall in Paris, called *Diana's revenge*: "The climax of the whole performance was the appearance of the goddess herself, with nothing on at all" (Dinesen 1983: 77).

After the performance they have a long talk, reminiscing about the good old days. While Heloïse is being extremely nice and charming to Frederick, there is still a subtle irony—which the reader should understand even if Frederick may not—in her referring to his scholarly and literary ambitions, the very thing that blocked his instincts then, and still does.

In the Danish version Blixen changed the title of the story to “Heloïse.” The name is significant: Our female protagonist, the nude dancer, suggests that she *could* have named herself Spinoza. Quite a peculiar stage name for a nude dancer! She mentions Spinoza at the end of the story in the talk with Frederick about time—and about women in time: “It is we who feel it, the women,” she says. “From us time takes away so much. And in the end: everything.” He didn’t see her; in time; and in the way she wanted to be seen by him; that is: as a woman (not a heroine!) in a position like that of Venus or Danae by Titian. And the story ends with the sad words: “‘How I wish,’ my dear friend, ‘that you had seen me then’” (Dinesen 1983: 81).

Words, however, said with a humorous twinkle, seeing herself and their love affair from a thoughtful distance: *sub specie aeternitatis*. Great humor, sobering and comical—and melancholic.

Amir points out:

The comic seems to be Kierkegaard’s most effective reflective tool. After one suffers the tragic, one sees and understands the comic. The tragic is felt, the comic is thought. The individual suffers the tragic and sees the comic “with his understanding.” (...) The comic is both sword and shield that distances the individual from himself: As a counter-force to the tragic, the comic enables reflection, purifies the emotional pathos, shields from ridicule, and stabilizes the inner equilibrium. (Amir 2014: 190, 192)

Heloïse is exemplary in this regard.

In her posthumous story *Ehrengard* (1962) Blixen mobilized the sword and shield of distance, putting God on the stage: “‘Madame,’ said Herr Cazotte, ‘The Lord God, that great Artist, at times paints his pictures in such a manner as to be best appreciated at a long distance. A hundred and fifty years hence your present predicament will have all the look of an idyll composed to delight its spectators. Your difficulty at this moment is that you are a little too close to it’” (Dinesen 1993: 225).

Or, in the words of the Italian humorist Giovanini Guareschi: to see today with the eyes of tomorrow.

## Destiny and Distance

*Anecdotes of Destiny* from 1958 is the title of Blixen's last collection. Blixen's use of the word 'destiny' has confused many readers and scholars. She herself clarifies: "Destiny does not mean the same to me as to most people. I don't see destiny as a God without face, to whom one has to submit in fear and trembling. For me one's destiny exists in the interaction between one's nature and the surroundings" (Brundbjerg 2000: 330).

Surroundings and nature—or you could say: *fortuna* and *virtù*. Fortuna has been rough to many of Blixen's protagonists (mostly female); the question is how they react: their virtù. And the answer is: with dignity, pride, forgiveness, generosity, humor.

"The Roads Round Pisa" is one of Blixen's *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934). "One year ago," Agnese was raped by Prince Nino, after which both of them have lived as "prisoners" in a mental prison. In the final scene however, she forgives him, quoting Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Purg. XXXIII, 31-36; in the English version quoted in Italian):

...da tema e da vergogna  
voglio che tu ormai ti disviluppe,  
e che non parli più com' uom che sogna.

...

Sappi che il vaso che il serpente ruppe  
fu e non é... (Dinesen 1963: 45).

[... Of fear and bashfulness  
Henceforward I will have thee strip thyself,  
So that thou speak no more as one who dreams.

...

Know that the vessel which the serpent broke  
Was, and is not... (Longfellow's translation).]

It is obvious that Dante's allusion to the damage due to the snake, i.e. the Beast in the Revelation, is twisted in Blixen's context—or subtext: from a spiritual to an ultimately bodily level. But again: Prince Nino lacks the stature and greatness, and Agnese is left back in loneliness, sadness and resignation. Like Heloise.

Blixen has affirmed: “One of my friends said about me that I think all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them, and perhaps this is not entirely untrue” (Brundbjerg 2000: 255). This statement also applies to Agnese when she reads herself and the villain Nino into the *Divine Comedy*.

This is typical of Blixen: with a humorous and peculiar misreading of an intertext she creates an interaction between predicament in time and the point-of-view from a distance. Stories or the work of art are—in Wittgenstein’s words, the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Let me sum up Blixen’s humor with the words of the above-mentioned Danish philosopher Harald Høffding. “The great humor,” he states, “is connected with a constant search, and it is contrary to any kind of dogmatic wisdom, whether it appears in the name of common sense, science, or religion” (Høffding 1967: 56).

This applies to Blixen as well.

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