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Karen Blixen's Humour – with reference to Kierkegaard and Pirandello
- and Spinoza's SUB SPECIE AETERNITATIS

Motto: "L'umorismo invita a guardare l'oggi con gli occhi di domani" (Giovaninno Guareschi).¹

Allow me to start with a biographical note about the Danish storyteller Karen Blixen. In 1931, after 17 years as a farmer or colonialist in Kenya, she returned to her childhood home, Rungstedlund, some 30 kilometers north of Copenhagen. Here she dedicated herself to writing stories. In 1934, when she was almost 50 years old, her Seven Gothic Tales was published in the USA – under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen. Immediately a big success.

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'. Let us hear her answer: "Je répondrais: il faut avant tout avoir du courage. Sans un grand courage, pas moyen de vivre. Et s'ils me questionnaient encore, je leur dirais: il faut avoir le don d'aimer, et il faut avoir le sens de l'humour"²

It is worth noting that 'sense of humour' – in her terms – is something you can choose, decide, that is: it is not necessarily innate. This idea is also expressed in a letter from her stay in Africa to her brother Thomas, who at that time had some difficulties in his life:

"I think two things would help you just now: a sense of humour, and danger. And by the way, read Søren Kierkegaard..."³

Please note how Kierkegaard is mentioned in connection with 'sense of humour' – and danger! Here we have my first cornerstone: **Humour as a 'view of life'/'vision du monde'/'concessione della vita' – or in German: *Lebensanschauung*.**

The Art of Fiction is the title of Eugene Walter's interview with Blixen in Rome 1956. He asks her 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.”⁴

And this is my second cornerstone: **Humour as a ‘literary technique’** – with reference to Pirandello.

But first: **Lebensanschauung** – ‘the art of living’

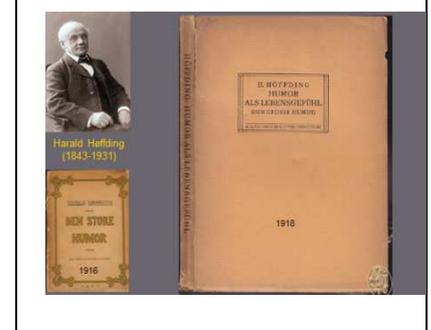
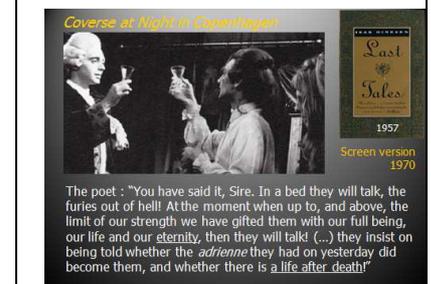
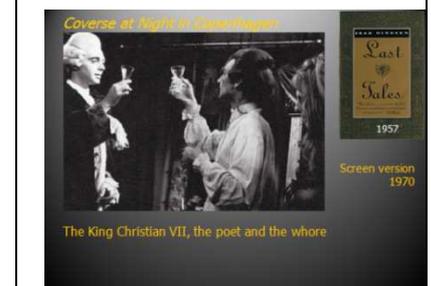
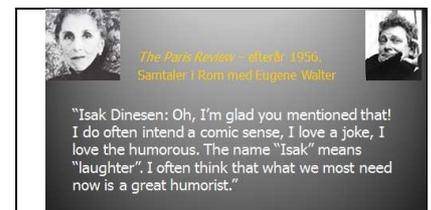
I prefer the German word because it is a concept typical of German philosophy in the first part of the 19th century: Jean Paul, Hegel – and Kierkegaard.

“We shall have a story now” – with the words of Robert Redford in *Out of Africa*. Here we will take *Converse at Night in Copenhagen* – from the 1957-collection *Last Tales*.

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. In here the poet Johannes Ewald has already finished his business, as he says – and the king and the poet start their conversation. The king moans about the prudes, the virtuous ladies at court, and he concludes: “and in a bed they will 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!”⁵

A very important source for my pinning down Blixen’s humour is *The great Humour*, in the German version: *Humor als Lebensgefühl. Das Grosse Humor*, by the Danish philosopher Harald Høffding, who contributed considerably to developing Blixen’s *Lebensanschauung*. According to Høffding there is a small humour (jokes, puns, wise cracks etc.) connected to concrete situations and context; and there is a great humour (‘Lebensanschauung’ or ‘Lebensgefühl’), which is a disposition or attitude towards life as a whole: a ‘total emotion’, in Høffding’s terminology.⁶



When ejaculation, as in Blixen's tale, is combined with 'full being' and 'eternity', then this is small humor; it is comic (but not illogical!).

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 in the Romantic era, the period where most of Dinesen's stories take place.

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.”⁷

Imagination is in fact the core of Karen Blixen's literary technique, her **art of fiction**. The ascension – die menschliche Himmelfahrt – is turned upside down: Heaven, eternity, and beatitude are present here and now – on earth. Thanks to *Dichtung* and Imagination. In the king's words – in the suggestive room of the whore: “Il y a dans ce monde un bonheur parfait.”⁸

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-elevée!”⁹ Blixen was a master of intertext and context, subtext and irony, and a way of 'hiding' her impudence was to shift into French. Not least in the room of a whore.

When Dinesen as a non-Christian deals with these things: earth and heaven, eternity and beatitude – and she often does – she cannot but make fun of Christianity, of doctrines of body and soul and atonement, to drag the most holy phenomena down to earth.



Jean Paul
(Johann Paul Friedrich
Richter)
1763-1825

Jean Paul:
Vorschule der Ästhetik, 1813

Dichtung - "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."



Screen version 1970

Chr. 7.: "Il y a dans ce monde un bonheur parfait."



Letter 1953

Well, I am audacious by nature, and I contain or hide my impudence, only because I am bien-elevée!

Jeg er da fræk af Naturen og behersker eller skjuler kun min Fræshed. Fordi jeg nu engang er bien-elevée! 17.7.1953

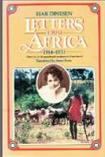
When, 1926 in Africa, she tried to assess her life and possibilities, she dedicated herself to her angel Lucifer, and she explains the symbolic expression thus: “The search for truth... a sense of humor which is afraid of *nothing*, but has *the courage of its convictions* to make fun of everything...”¹⁰ Whereby she outlined the program for her future literary praxis, her **art of fiction**.

In *Babette’s Feast* 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.”¹¹

A blessed joke, the narrator states. Of course! Because the ascension – die menschliche Himmelfahrt – of these ascetic Christians is due to the good wine! They are simply drunk.

Even if her 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 part of her subtext and irony. And furthermore: Blixen expounds the biblical texts and expressions in an immanent and non-metaphysical mode, 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: “Thy will be done, William Shakespeare, as on the stage so also in the drawing room.” (*Tempests*)¹²



Letter to Thomas Dinesen
Ngong 1.4.1926

The symbolic expression Lucifer

The search for truth ... a sense of humor which is afraid of *nothing*, but has *the courage of its convictions* to make fun of everything...



Screen version 1985

Babettes feast, 1950, 1958

... 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."




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.

Tempests, 1958



Thy will be done, William Shakespeare, as on the stage so also in the drawing room.

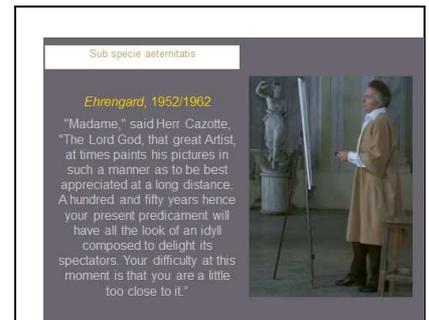


In her posthumous story *Ehrengard* she mobilized her biblical metaphorical vocabulary, putting God on the stage: "Madame," said Herr Cazotte, "The Lord God, that great Artist, at times paints his pictures in such a manner as to be best appreciated at a long distance. A hundred and fifty years hence 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."¹³

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 survey themselves and the lives to which they are committed. Without developing the 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. (To quote the philosopher Thomas Nagel)

Spinoza, the 17th century philosopher, is, as we remember, the author of the expression *sub specie aeternitatis*. Both Høffding¹⁴ 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 Karen Blixen's *Winter's Tales* (1942) is called *The Heroine* – the Danish version, however, *Heloïse*. The name is significant: Our female protagonist is a nude dancer and she 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 a discussion 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." She addresses this to the male protagonist, Frederick – an Englishman, a bit indolent, who has been occupied with "the doctrine of atonement" as well as **the paintings of Tizian and Veronese**. And Heloïse! But 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 Tizian. And the story ends with the sad words: "How I wish, my dear friend, that you had seen me then."¹⁵



Words, however, said with a humorous twinkle. Because now – 7 years after their first meeting and the big chance he missed – he has just seen her 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.”¹⁶ BUT: *sub specie aeternitatis*: “How I wish, my dear friend, that you had seen me then.” Great humor, sobering and comical – and melancholic.

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.”¹⁷

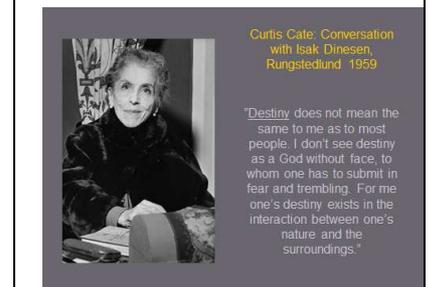
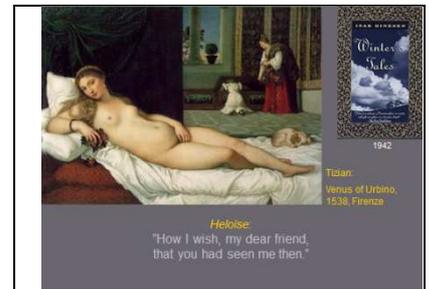
Surroundings and nature – or you could say: *fortuna* and *virtù*. Fortuna has been rough to many of Blixen's protagonists (mostly female); the question is how they react: their virtù. And the answer is: with dignity, pride, forgiveness, generosity, HUMOR.

In *The Roads Round Pisa* – one of the Seven Gothic Tales – Prince Nino has raped Agnese ‘a year ago’, whereupon both of them have lived as “prisoners” in a mental prison. In the final scene however, she forgives him, quoting Dante's *Divine Comedy*:

“... 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...” (Purg. XXXIII, 31-36).¹⁸



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 ultimate bodily level. But again: Prince Nino lacks the stature and greatness, and Agnese is left back in loneliness, sadness and resignation. Like Heloïse.

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.”**¹⁹ This statement also applies to Agnese when she reads herself and the villain Nino into the *Divine Comedy*.

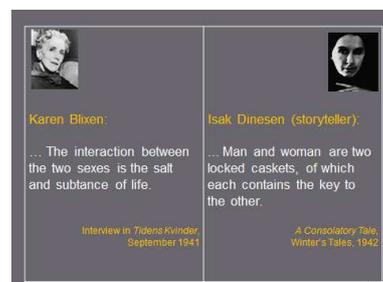
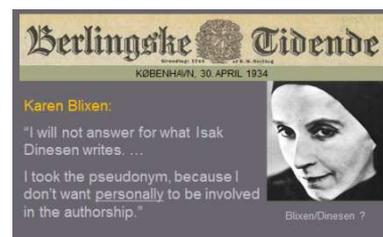
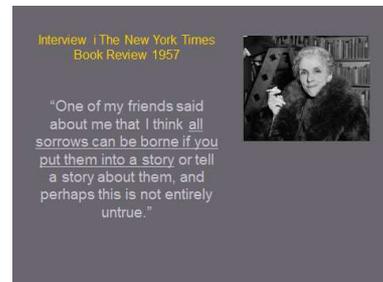
This is typical of Blixen: with a humorous and peculiar misreading of an intertext she creates an interaction between predicament in time and the point of view from a distance. Stories or **the work of art are** – in Wittgenstein's words, **the object seen sub specie aeternitatis**.

Typical of Blixen – or rather typical of Isak Dinesen! After the identity of the successful Isak Dinesen was disclosed in Denmark in 1935, she stated, in an interview: **“I will not answer for what Isak Dinesen writes”**. And furthermore: **“I took the pseudonym, because I do not want to be involved personally in the authorship.”**²⁰

She herself discriminates between Karen Blixen, the author in flesh and blood, who is a very ethical person, and the storyteller Isak Dinesen, who is designed to make fun of everything. A kind of insistence upon a double identity.

To give but one example: In an interview in 1941 she affirms that **“The interaction between the two sexes is the salt and substance of life.”**²¹ In one of the *Winter's Tales* (A *Consolatory Tale*) she was writing at the same time, one of the characters can state: **“Man and woman are two locked caskets, of which each contains the key to the other”**.²²

Checkmate!



Here we have Pirandello's 'umorista' in action: Isak Dinesen is a voice from "l'abisso che è nelle anime (...) pensieri strani, quasi lampi di follia, pensieri inconseguenti, inconfessabili finanche a noi stessi, come sorti davvero da un'anima diversa da quella che normalmente ci riconosciamo? (...) di qui quel che di scomposto, di slegato, di capriccioso, tutte quelle digressioni che si notano nell'opera umoristica..."²³

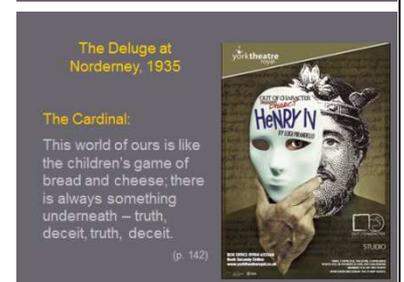
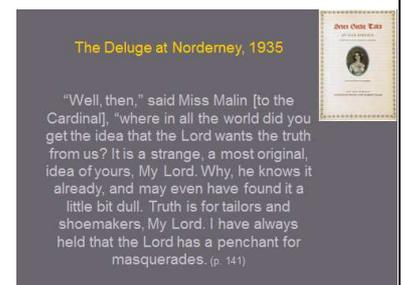
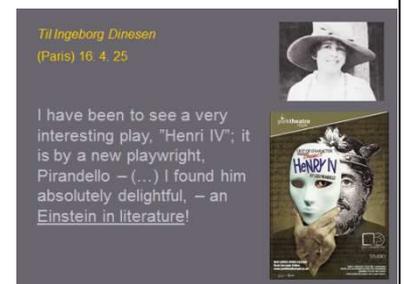
The characters in Dinesen's stories – as well as the readers – are checkmated! All values and principles are relativized or tested. And this is what she learned from Pirandello! What characterizes HUMOUR as a style of writing is: it undermines, disorganizes, decomposes... relativizes.

Actually, when, in 1925, Blixen was in Paris on her way to a visit in Denmark, she wrote in a letter: "I have been to see a very interesting play, 'Henri IV'; it is by a new playwright, Pirandello – (...) I found him absolutely delightful, – an Einstein in literature!"²⁴

Everywhere in Dinesen's stories we hear Pirandello's voice. I will just quote one of the souls ("le anime") in the story *The Deluge of Norderney*:

"Well, then," said Miss Malin [to the Cardinal], "where in all the world did you get the idea that the Lord wants the truth from us? It is a strange, a most original, idea of yours, My Lord. Why, he knows it already, and may even have found it a little bit dull. Truth is for tailors and shoemakers, My Lord. I have always held that the Lord has a penchant for masquerades."

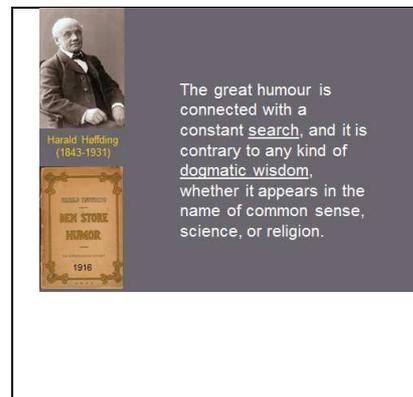
And the Cardinal: "This world of ours is like the children's game of bread and cheese; there is always something underneath – truth, deceit, truth, deceit."²⁵



I will sum up Blixen's humour with the words of the above mentioned Danish philosopher Harald Høffding. "The great humour", 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."²⁶

This applies to Blixen as well.

Due to the time restrictions I unfortunately have to postpone the elaboration on Blixen's relationship to Søren Kierkegaard's humour – as a *Lebensanschauung*, a specific 'Stage on Life's Way'. Perhaps at the V International Conference on Humour?



¹ Quoted by Guido Conti at the conference.

² *Samtaler med Karen Blixen*, ed. Else Brundbjerg, Gyldendal 2000, p. 353.

³ Isak Dinesen: *Letters from Africa, 1914-1931*, The University of Chicago Press 1981, p. 225.

⁴ *Samtaler med Karen Blixen*, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

⁵ Isak Dinesen: *Last Tales*, Vintage(Random House 1991 (1957)), p. 327.

⁶ Harald Høffding: *Den store humor*, Gyldendal 1967 (1914), p. 44.

⁷ Quoted from Lasse Horne Kjældgaard: *Sjælen efter døden*, Gyldendal 2007, p. 321.

⁸ Isak Dinesen: *Last Tales*, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

⁹ *Karen Blixen i Danmark, Breve 1931-62*, Gyldendal 1996, p. 147.

¹⁰ Isak Dinesen: *Letters from Africa*, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

¹¹ Isak Dinesen: *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard*, Vintage/Random House 1993 (1958 and 1963), p. 51 and 53f.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.225.

¹⁴ E.g. Harald Høffding: *Den store humor*, *op. cit.*, 156 ff.

¹⁵ Isak Dinesen: *Winter's Tales*, Random House 1942, p. 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁷ *Samtaler med Karen Blixen*, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

¹⁸ Isak Dinesen: *Seven Gothic Tales*, Penguin 1963 (1934), p. 45.

¹⁹ *Samtaler med Karen Blixen*, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²² Isak Dinesen: *Seven Gothic Tales*, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

²³ Luigi Pirendello: *L'umorismo*, Mondadori 1992 (1908/1920), p. 162.

²⁴ Isak Dinesen: *Letters from Africa*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

²⁵ Isak Dinesen: *Seven Gothic Tales*, *op. cit.*, p. 141f.

²⁶ Harald Høffding: *Den store humor*, *op. cit.*, p. 56