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»The Infallible Rule of the Irregular«.

Time and Narrative in Karen Blixen's Tales

In 1935, the same year Karen Blixen published the Danish version of her first book, *Seven Gothic Tales* [*Syv fantastiske Fortællinger*], the American writer Gertrude Stein negotiates the question of what she calls »contemporariness«: »[E]verybody is contemporary with his period«, she states, implying that however good or bad you are as an artist or a writer, you cannot get rid of the fact that you are contemporary with everybody else living at the same time. Stein writes:

Each generation has to do with what you would call the daily life: and a writer, painter, or any sort of creative artist, is not at all ahead of his time. He is contemporary. He can't live in the past, because it is gone. He can't live in the future because no one knows what it is. He can only live in the present of his daily life.<sup>1</sup>

In other words: to be critical of ones contemporaries, to dramatize the past or to foresee the future, does not allow one to escape from the time and age when one is actually living. Stein's point, »that everybody is contemporary with his period«, may thus serve as a motto for Karen Blixen's self-reflective and self-conscious writing, her way of adopting a style which gives her the flair of an old fashioned and even archaic writer; in other words, her »denial of coevalness«<sup>2</sup> – term I will return to later.

However, time in Blixen's oeuvre is displayed as an existential condition fundamental to both life and art, as well as a being part of her narrative method. Her stories are composed of elements from various historical periods, and they are often ›about‹ time in one form or another. Her stories reflect time as a given neither life nor art can escape. In what follows I will look at how time in Blixen's writing on the one hand is staged as a tension between various, often conflicting periods and ages, and on the other hand, how the temporal is linked to the question of storytelling – what we may call a poetics. Finally I will give some examples on how time is thematized as an existential condition.

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<sup>1</sup> STEIN: 1974, 151.

<sup>2</sup> The term comes from FABIAN: 1983, 31.

Karen Blixen lived from 1885 to 1962 and she wrote her tales between 1934 and 1958. That makes her a modern writer. But her stories are set in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and in her public role-playing as 3000-year-old witch, Lucifer's daughter, the one who dined with Socrates or the Devil's friend, she emphasizes the timeless rather than what is characteristic of a specific age or period. All her ›acts‹ or ›parts‹ connote the enigmatic and the mystical. The archaic is a mask and to Blixen masks and masquerades are literary as well as personal strategies, parallel to her split position between two cultures and two languages, Danish and English, and her fictitious use of dual and provocative gender roles. She self consciously plays with different styles and personalities, and her masks allow for a certain distance: within an archaic frame Blixen can ask highly modern questions about art or sexual identity.

Blixen incorporates various ideas, plots and styles in her texts, she exploits Greek mythology and a romantic setting and she borrows from the Bible and the Koran, from Shakespeare, Dante and Danish writers like Hans Christian Andersen, St. St. Blicher and Søren Kierkegaard. She has learnt from her predecessors and is well acquainted with the literary tradition, but her unconventional use of it shows that she is writing from hindsight. She is thus neither nostalgic nor utopian; her dealings with the past are embedded in a distance which combines pity, humour and irony, but which keeps the idyllic and sentimental at bay.

Blixen's writings did not agree with the social and psychological realism of Scandinavian and Danish writing in the 1930s. The reception of her first book, *Seven Gothic Tales*, may give an indication on how she challenged the conventions. On September 25, 1935 the Danish literature and theatre critic Frederik Schyberg reviewed the Danish version of *Seven Gothic Tales* for the daily newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* and condemned it for being thoroughly immoral. The book, he claims, is written by a gifted but crazy writer, and he qualifies his view by attacking the book for »Snobberi, Fantastik og Perversitet« [snobbery, fantasy and perversity], and for portraying a world devoid of normality – »at der i de syv Fortællinger ingen normale Mennesker findes« [there are no normal human beings in the seven tales], he claims. Schyberg argues further that

[D]et erotiske Liv, der udfolder sig i Fortællingerne, er derfor af højst sælsom Art. Mænd elsker deres Søstre, Tanter deres Niecer, enkelte af Personerne er forelsket i sig selv, og unge Kvinder ›kan‹ ingen Børn faa, eller ›vil‹ ingen have, en fransk Grevinde slynger sin Elsker i Ansigtet, at han ikke er forelsket i

hende, men i hendes Mand – og han ved intet at svare hende, fordi han »indser«, at hun har Ret.<sup>3</sup>

[Men love their sisters, aunts their nieces, some of the characters are in love with themselves, and young women ›cannot‹ or ›will not‹ have children, a French countess blames her lover for not being in love with her but with her husband – and he has nothing to reply, because he »realizes« that she is right.]

Schyberg's point is that Blixen's way of constructing her stories consciously avoids clear answers or solutions to the various conflicts her readers are met with. That is indeed a valid point, but whereas for Schyberg normality means the conventional family and the conventional plot, for Blixen inversion, interruption and deviation represent the norm – what we may call, with an expression borrowed from »The Cardinal's First Tale« (CFT) »the infallible rule of the irregular« (CFT, 7). About 20 years later, another Danish critic, Harald Nielsen, repeats many of Schyberg's accusations in his study of what he calls Blixen's literary mysticism. Blixen's style is characterized as being subtle but incomprehensible, and the content of the tales is in his view based on a »pervers Seksualitet« [perverse Sexuality].<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, the negative reviews demonstrate, better than the highest of praise, the provocative or critical potential hidden behind an apparently glossy mask. Armed with irony and humour, Blixen questions the so-called normal and she invites the reader to confront herself and her world anew.<sup>5</sup> The temporal as well as the ideological tension inherent in Blixen's work, is evident both in her tales and in the books based on her life in Africa, *Out of Africa* (OoA, 1937) and *Shadows on the Grass* (1960). The difference between Europe and Africa is here established in cultural and racial terms, but it is also established as a temporal difference. According to Blixen, the European lives within another temporal dimension than the native African; they are in other words not contemporaries. Furthermore, Blixen claims that native Africans neither acknowledge the principle of time the way Europeans do nor the division between past, present and future. In short, it is the white European who according to Blixen introduces time in Africa.

3 SCHYBERG: 1980, 227–228.

4 NIELSEN: 1956, 39.

5 Dag Heede has discussed the question of normality in Blixen's oeuvre in detail. See HEEDE: 2001. See also my discussion of Schyberg's review in SELBOE: 1996, 69.

To look upon a foreign culture as timeless is not unusual among European travellers from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. According to anthropologists time was frequently used as a means to create a temporal distance between the I and the others among white travellers. This is what Johannes Fabian calls »a denial of coevalness«.<sup>6</sup> But for Blixen that which exists outside the boundaries of time, what she labels the timeless and non-contemporary, has positive connotations and is not a label used to diminish other races and cultures. On the contrary, it is a quality, a mark of distinction for everybody she admires, regardless of race, colour and class. The proud African and those she admires among the whites are united in their ability to live in more ages than one, and this ›timeless‹ quality separates them from the hated white English middle class. History's great travellers are recognized by this trait: they hold their ground and assert themselves in the time and age they live in, but they don't fit in, they are in Blixen's words ›outcasts‹, a word carrying positive connotations. In *Out of Africa* she comments on two of her friends:

It was not a society that had thrown them out, and not any place in the whole world, either, but time had done it, they did not belong to their century. [...] In the present epoch they had no home, but had got to wander here and there [...]. (OoA, 206)

In Blixen's discourse the African present is compared to the European past; what is lost or gone in Europe, lives on in Africa. The art of listening to tales is given as one major example: in Europe one has lost the oral tradition, while the African, who cannot read, will listen to a story and ask what happens next. Blixen's point is that the African knows how to listen while the European is used to getting his or her impressions via the eyes. She herself makes a point of preferring the oral tale – she claims to make up stories for her listeners ›like Scheherezade herself‹ – the storyteller from *Thousand and one nights*.

However, Blixen is not entirely consistent in her arguments. Even though she blames ›our technical age‹ for the fact that different races no longer are able to understand each other, she still emphasizes the necessity of driving a car, and the joy of seeing a bird's-eye view of the world from an aeroplane. And regarding the question of the oral versus the written word, the ear over the eye, it may come as a surprise to find that

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<sup>6</sup> FABIAN: 1983, 31.

in an essay written two years after the publication of *Out of Africa*, she states that the main faults with the current changes in Danish orthography, which she does not agree with, are supported by people who remember by listening rather than reading. And Blixen claims, quite contrary to what she says in *Out of Africa*: »I should like to speak a word for those people who understand and remember visually.« (On Orthography, 142)

Blixen scholars have frequently discussed the tension between the written (the present) and the oral (the past) inherent in Blixen's oeuvre. The oral tradition is staged biographically, as a sort of public role which connotes Scheherazade, and textually. In tales like »The Blank Page«, »The Dreamers« or »The Diver« we find the traditional situation of the tale consisting of a group of people gathered around an old storyteller. As an answer to a question a story is invariably told. Tales are delivered from generation to generation, and the question of telling, whether in oral or written words, is a recurrent theme in Blixen's narrative universe. Different forms of tales and genres are explicitly discussed among her characters; »The Cardinal's First Tale« from *Last Tales* (1957) is a prime example.

»The Cardinal's First Tale« makes obvious the connection between telling and identity, love and art. The scene of the narration is the library, a setting that has special significance for Blixen. The library epitomizes the fact that telling stories is a way of recapturing and reformulating the past – the story is told in the absence of something – and the library is a place for books and for dreaming, for story and for history. The library reflects the coexistence of different temporal existences and can thus be said to symbolize both the time and the space of literature. It represents the book's presence – now and then are both here in the form of rows of books – and at the same time it is the very place where speech and presence become absence and silence.

The frame of the tale is the Catholic confession, but the opening scene of the story inverts the normal procedure; it is the visiting woman in black who asks the question »Who are you?«, whereas the cardinal answers by telling a far from straightforward story about the young princess Benedetta who marries the ageing prince Pompilio. Characteristically, the erotic awakening of Princess Benedetta takes place in the library, within a written or artistic dream so to speak, and not in the outside world – where the marriage belongs. The young princess has been ordered into

three years' celibacy after having given birth to a one-eyed son, and while she is waiting to return to the grown-up world of the marriage, she spends solitary time reading. This is meant to help her avoid temptation, but as often is the case in Blixen, the result is the opposite of what is expected. The consequence of the stay in the library is a love of or via the eye, an erotic awakening which has come about through reading. The princess falls in love without having any other object for her love than books, and the library falls in love with her.

When her husband is away, the princess falls in love – with poetry, with books. It is absence which leads to love. However, while the husband may not understand much, he does understand that reading can »be harmful to his wife's health and mind« (CFT, 6), with the result that she is forbidden more reading and goes from enjoying the pleasure of the eye to the pleasure of the ear: instead of reading books she now starts listening to music.

Princess Benedetta goes to the opera and hears the famous soprano Marelli sing in Metastasio's *Achilles in Scyros*. The young soprano in the opera sings the ›cadenza d'inganno‹ a musical form which is explained by the following definition:

[...] the ›cadenza d'inganno‹, of which the musical dictionaries will tell you that it makes every preparation for a perfect finish and then instead of giving the expected final accord, suddenly breaks off and sounds an unexpected strange and alarming close. (CFT, 7)

This musical form – the interrupted ›cadenza‹ – can be seen as a sort of emblem for Blixen's stories; it indicates something about ›how‹ the stories are narrated and ›what‹ is narrated; both the narration and the various erotic meetings tend »to break off and sound an unexpected strange and alarming close« (CFT, 7). The telling of a story is quite often broken off just before its conclusion – when we expect an explanation – and is instead interrupted by a new tale which in turn has its own unexpected close. One may say that erotics and poetics are two sides of the same coin in Blixen's highly artificial world. Her turnings or deviations indicate a distinct narrative technique, but can also be said to characterize meetings and love stories which are in some way or other interrupted. Or rather, they end in what we may call an inverted way, that is, they deviate from the expected norm.

The princess listens to the ›cadenza d'inganno‹, and at the seventh encore »a pair of blue and a pair of black eyes met across the pit in a long

deep silent glance, the first and the last« (CFT, 8). That is all there is, but anyone familiar with Blixen will recognize the importance: the long deep silent glances, very often dark glances, always have significant meaning in her texts. That goes for Babette in »Babette's Feast«, and the African women in *Out of Africa*; through numerous heroines we are met with a long deep silent or dark glance which is always significant yet wordless, often connected with pain, departure or what cannot be expressed in any other way. Not surprisingly, this silent union between Princess Benedetta and Marelli – a ›union‹ even though it is based on distance and absence – occurs after a ›cadenza d'inganno‹ has been sung – by a young soprano »formed and prepared in the conservatorio of San' Onofrio, and once and for all cut off – no laugh not! – from real life« (CFT, 8). Through this deceptive cadenza, sung by someone unable to be a woman's lover, »she triumphantly became her whole self« (CFT, 7).

Art and love, artistic principles and erotic awakening thus come together, and despite the cut-off quality of the meeting, it leads to a metamorphosis, »a total change« whereby »her whole being was transported« (CFT, 7). As is often the case in Blixen's tales, it is a meeting of opposites, even of paradoxes, stylistically an ›oxymoronic‹ confrontation. The oxymoron is Blixen's stylistic means of combining what can't be combined: »[the] often-embraced lady had for her only lover the Marelli, who was the lover of no woman« (CFT, 9). The lover of no woman or not, the princess gives birth to twins after this meeting, but of course the happy situation doesn't last long; one of the twins is killed in a fire in the library. The quest for harmony is invariably met with disharmony. This meeting is in other words both a complete ›cadenza‹ and a ›cadenza d'inganno‹ – a broken, deviated or interrupted ›inganno‹ – the musical form which invites harmony and then breaks it.

Part of the dialogue between the cardinal and the lady in black is a discussion about the difference between the psychological-naturalistic novel and the classical story. The discussion about different art forms – or different forms of literary conventions – is linked to the past and the present respectively, i.e. what is labeled »the classical story« is linked to the past, but is about to be taken over by the modern literature of identification – characterized as »the literature of individuals« (CFT, 24). The lady in black formulates her protest against the ancient divine and classical story by calling it »a hard and cruel game, – which maltreats and mocks its human beings« (CFT, 25). The main point of the cardinal's poetics, on

the other hand, is the following utterance: »For within our whole universe the story only has authority to answer that cry of heart of its characters, that one cry of heart of each of them: ›Who am I?‹« (CFT, 26). And with this as a starting point he sets up a dichotomy between the modern novel and the ancient tale.

While the novel – the literature of the individuals – depicts the world and its living people, it is the so-called classical storytelling which is focused in the ancient tale. The difference between them is the old one of ›mimesis‹: while the novel reproduces ›live‹ people, the story is a variation on older literary models. We may say that the novel tries to capture reality – meaning everyday life as we know it – while the story tries to capture life and literature in its essence by repeating given literary forms of telling. The other difference, equally important, is one of ›distance‹: the novel desires intimacy, in time and in space, and its way of identifying with its characters gives it a therapeutic function; it becomes in other words a means of compensation. It lacks the possibility of the grand (over)view, of being able to abstract or extract from the individual to the general. While the novel accentuates the passing feeling, what is now, the story is focused on the eternal. That is why it can offer an answer to the existential question: »Who am I?«

But what about Blixen's own tales – can they be said to be in accordance with the norms for the classical story, which here is synonymous with the oral story, much in the way it is defined in Walter Benjamin's much quoted essay »Der Erzähler«.<sup>7</sup> In Benjamin's essay, as well as in Blixen's conception of the classical story, the continuity of experience, ›die Erfahrung‹, is a fundamental condition for the transmission of oral stories. However, this ›Erfahrung‹ is challenged in Blixen's stories. The oral is part of a context which is broken at the time Blixen writes her stories. Tradition, defined as belonging to an ongoing chain of events, gives a framework within which several of her figures understand themselves, but this unity is also demonstrated as somewhat frail and unreliable. The immediate harmony and understanding the narrator often emphasizes at a given time is inevitably broken off and confronted with other ways of thinking and living. One might say that the frequent interpretations and comments on storytelling and art are a kind of interpretation which compensates for the interrupted continuity. This broken continuity is re-

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7 BENJAMIN: 1977.

flected in the text's form: it is not a whole, unified and harmonically rounded off, but several, interrupted and deviated. The stories can be said to be unfinished in the way a ›cadenza d'inganno‹ is unfinished, but it is exactly this way of securing what is ›not‹ said or done, that is their driving force.

Blixen's writing is thus neither a novelistic literature of individuals nor does it fulfill the cardinal's rather vague norm of the classical story. In my opinion the existential pathos which undoubtedly exists in Blixen's tales, is linked to the necessity of continuing to ask the question »Who am I? « while at the same time realizing the impossibility of answering it. One cannot turn to a Blixen story and find the answer but one will find the question reformulated – as a problem. Blixen seems to say that to give an ultimate answer to the oldest – and the most modern – of all questions, would mean the end of all storytelling.

Perhaps the strangest example of Blixen's ›poetics‹ which embodies what in »The Cardinal's First Tale« is called »the infallible rule of the irregular«, is the image of the blank page (TBP) in the little tale by the same title. The story is delivered by an ancient storyteller, who tells the story as a commentary on the art of story telling. The setting is an old convent in Portugal for sisters of the Carmelite order, and the crux of the story concerns a curious exhibition in the gallery of the convent, involving sheets of linen with blood stains from numerous princesses' wedding nights. These sheets are framed and exhibited as a row of similar paintings:

But in the midst of the long row there hangs a canvas which differs from the others. The frame of it is as fine and as heavy as any, and as proudly as any carries the golden plate with its royal crown. But on this one plate no name is inscribed, and the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner, a blank page. (TBP, 104)

The white sheet, the blank page, gains its effect only in relation to the pale images of blood on the other canvases. The fascination lies in the fact that it is as an interruption in the row of similar paintings that it gains its significance, it speaks to the viewers as ›deviation‹, as that which breaks the rule and thus the expectation. It presents itself as an enigma – in relation to the pale images on the other sheets, which resemble recognizable historical images:

Within the faded markings of the canvases people of some imagination and sensibility may read all the signs of the zodiac: the Scales, the Scorpion, the

Lion, the Twins. Or they may there find pictures from their own world of ideas: a rose, a heart, a sword – or even a heart pierced through with a sword. (TBP, 103)

The pale reproductions resemble a story already written, or pictures already painted: a rose, a heart, a sword. The images of blood are signs which may be read as figures from the history of art, literature and the Bible, in other words, other canonical histories and stories. The blood has become a figure, the individual experience may be interpreted as a generalized expression. The women whose blood is exhibited are visible as framed works of art – separate works which have their individual mark or imprint but resemble each other nevertheless. The titles following the pictures emphasize their official status as works of art belonging not primarily to the female and virginal convent, but to the outside world, ruled by men who declare: »virginem eam tenemur« – »we declare her to have been a virgin«. (TBP, 102–103) Each of the princesses has her own hidden story, but the result of her story belongs to the male society surrounding the female convent.

It is the ›secret‹ which is pivotal in Blixen's text. The blank page, the white canvas with nothing ›written‹ on it, establishes no images to be recognized. It is open to interpretations and evades recognition. There is no name that guarantees it – something has taken place, but we don't know what or who was the agent. However, we are told that silence speaks upon the blank page; the utopian dimension of the story is clearly linked to blankness or silence – that which may or may not happen.<sup>8</sup> The point is thus not to solve the riddle of the blank page, but to secure it as an enigma which may engender an indefinite number of new stories. The little tale may be said to function as a ›mise en abyme‹, a mirror image or reflection of all Blixen's tales. Through its blank page the story demonstrates the poetic principle of irregularity, deviation and postponement which secures continuity. This »poetics« is however formulated in relation to women's life: the silence is gendered.

The text as a whole covers a period from the biblical era until the nineteenth century, but this historical line conceals a lot of ellipses – temporal gaps which remind the reader of that which is ›not‹ being told in the text. In other words, the way the story is told reflects what it is about. The temporal gaps do, like the blank page itself, indicate that of

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<sup>8</sup> See Antje Wischmann's article in this volume.

course something is left out. It is exactly this absence which triggers the reader's imagination, thus, the story titled »The Blank Page« reproduces its own narrative form, its own gaps, by hinting at what has been left out.

So far, I have looked at some ways in which Blixen explores different times and different ways of telling. But her texts also reflect the question of time or temporality as a sort of fundamental condition, a ›sine qua non‹ of both life and art. I will now turn to »The Heroine« from *Winter's Tales* (1942) in order to demonstrate how Blixen employs a specific dramaturgic or compositional device – ›the second meeting‹ – to mark the story as inextricably linked to the division between now and then.

»The Heroine« is set during the nineteenth century German-French war, the story is first and foremost about a young man's fault in interpreting his own feelings – and the woman who is at the root of these feelings. It is only when the story's two protagonists meet again that this young man – and the reader – understand what actually happened several years earlier. When the two young people meet again six years after the dramatic incidents that brought them together in the first place, we not only get an explanation that contradicts what has thus far happened; it is in fact the second meeting which gives history its shape and form – in other words, transforms it into a story.

During the French-German war of 1870 the Englishman and religious scholar Frederick Lamond comes to a small village close to the French border. There he meets Heloïse, a woman he sees partly as art embodied and partly as a representative of the old French aristocracy. When the German troops enter town, the French refugees who are gathered there are captured, but the German officer who examines them gets attracted to the beautiful Heloïse, and promises to give them the passports they need to cross the border to Luxembourg if she will come and collect them »dressed like the goddess Venus«, in other words: stark naked. Rather than fulfilling what the officer asks of her, she gives a short speech in which she leaves it to the others to decide what to do. They reject being saved in this way, and as a consequence are brought into the courtyard without knowing whether they are going to live or die. After half an hour they get their permission to leave and a soldier brings Heloïse a bunch of roses from the officer. Then the refugees depart.

Six years later Frederick is taken to a music hall in Paris by a friend, and there he sees Heloïse dancing naked in a play called »Diana's Revenge«. After the show they meet, and she explains what happened six

years before: it was to spare her fellow prisoners from a feeling of life-long guilt that she refused to fulfill the officer's wish.

Parallel to the dramatic war events another story is going on, under the surface so to speak, which is, as is often the case in Blixen's tales, linked to an unfulfilled or unfinished love story. When Frederick and Heloïse part, he is left standing on the station, seeing her train depart with a feeling that »the curtain had gone down upon a great event in his life«. He then tries to find a solution to this feeling of loss:

It would be, he reflected, this moment of incompleting investigation and unobtainable insight, which now caused him to stand at the station in Wasserbillig with an almost choking feeling of loss or privation, as if a cup had been withdrawn from his lips before his thirst was quenched. (Heroine, 82–83)

The attentive reader will know better. Blixen has constructed the story in such a way that when we have come to this point in the narration, we understand that it is exactly the scholar's investigating mind which plays him a trick. Because Frederick cannot see Heloïse as anything but a work of art and a heroïne – like »a lioness in a coat of arms«, »the ideal figure of a »dame haute et puissante«, and an embodiment of ancient France« (Heroine, 73) – but not as a living woman of flesh and blood, he cannot interpret his feeling of loss as other than the disappointed research and insight of a scholar. Blixen's free indirect style, her ›erlebte Rede‹, which switches between Frederick and the narrator's perspective, puts his interpretation in an ironic light: »the episode he had lived through and the young woman beside him were like books, and all the same she was so gently and simply vivid, like no book in the world« (Heroine, 82). However, Frederick does not fully grasp the meaning. It is because he fails to see that Heloïse is not a book but a live woman that he loses her. In return for the loss, he is left with the story about her. He can only see her in terms of books and paintings and thus he gets what he asks for: a story rather than a woman.

The text offers several examples on these subtle shifts in perspective. When the officer has come with his proposition to Heloïse, Frederick – and with him the reader – misinterprets Heloïse's body language:

Only for a moment her hand went up to the collar of her mantilla, as if, choking under the wave of her disdain, she must free herself of it. But again the next moment she stood still; her hand sank down, and with it the blood from her cheeks; she became very pale. (Heroine, 78)

It is only at the very end, when we realize who Heloïse is and why she acted as she did, that we get the point: her hand went up to her collar, not in disgust or disdain, but in order to undress.

The events of the story are linked to a temporal perspective as well as to a gender perspective. »One is happy to meet one's friends again, she said, and yet it is then that one realizes how time flies. It is we who feel it, the women. From us the time takes away so much. And in the end: everything.« (Heroine, 88–89) The happiness of the second meeting is different for him and for her; for her time is a loss, for him time represents possibilities still to come.

»The Heroine« unfolds on a mythological and literary background: the name Heloïse goes back to the medieval love story between Abelard and Heloïse, a monk and a nun who fell in love and were badly punished for their love. Abelard was castrated, but even worse for Heloïse, was his final rejection of their love. Later Jean-Jacques Rousseau uses the name Heloïse in his *La nouvelle Héloïse*. However, Blixen has most likely borrowed the plot of a woman asked to get undressed in order to rescue others, from the French author Guy de Maupassant's short story »Boule de Suif«. But whereas Maupassant lets his heroine be betrayed as a consequence of her heroic act, our Heloïse is celebrated as a heroine – because she refrains from undressing. It is a characteristic of Blixen that she overturns the values of an earlier story and lets a modern young woman play the part of a virtuous lady with an aristocratic air. In this way Blixen lends slightly old-fashioned – even pompous – words like pride, chastity and honour, with a meaning which isolates them from class or social status, while at the same time emphasising the necessity of playing roles that surpass the individual and her limited horizon.

In one of her letters from Africa Blixen maintains that »Ideen [...] er gaaet af ›Kvindeligheden‹, af det at være Kvinde« [the idea of being ›female‹ has disappeared].<sup>9</sup> She maintains that the old ideals may have been grand and impressive, but that today it is those who cannot succeed in any other way who brag about virtue and chastity rather than quite simply embrace human honesty. In other words, Blixen does not put herself in a nostalgic position in relation to the past. But she is nevertheless of the opinion that it is a burden for modern women and men having to live their life independent of a larger framework. While people in the old days

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9 Letter to Ellen Dahl 13.I.28. In: BLIXEN: 1978, 130.

felt that they were representing something other and more grand than themselves, today's young people are judged from their own behaviour and individuality only. Blixen does not draw the conclusion that people necessarily were happier before, but she does claim that marriage was easier when it was based not exclusively on the partners' individual sympathy or antipathy, but on the recognition that marriage is a cooperation between »to Stormagters Ambassadører, i fuld gensidig Bevidsthed og Anerkendelse af de Magter og Værdier, som stod bag dem« [two ambassadors of Great Nations, both fully aware of the powers and values they were representing].<sup>10</sup>

Heloïse belongs to the modern type of woman, but lives at a time when the female concept of honour still exists. Therefore she acts in accordance with the past while she in fact feels otherwise. Like several of Blixen's heroines she occupies a double role which draws attention to the tension between past and present: nude dancer and virtuous goddess, member of the aristocracy and a simple woman. She thus confirms Blixen's point that it is not possible, not even for self-reliable modern people, to live »uden nogen given Rollebesætning i Tilværelsen« [without having been given a part to play].<sup>11</sup>

We may conclude by saying that Blixen embraces literature's ability to express experiences which are larger than life. Literature, to borrow words from Aristotle, is about what *may* happen. In this sense Blixen's stories may be classified as inherently literary or poetical; they may even be said to have as a theme what Aristotle says about poetry in relation to history in book 9 of *The Poetics*:

The difference between a historian and a poet is not that one writes in prose and the other in verse. [Herodotus is given as an example of a historian who could well be put into verse yet would still be a kind of history]. The real difference is this, that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.<sup>12</sup>

Blixen's stories form their own ›poesis‹, their own poetic significance which combine different styles, different genres and different historical

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<sup>10</sup> Ebd., 131–132.

<sup>11</sup> Ebd., 132.

<sup>12</sup> ARISTOTLE: 1991, 145b.

characteristics. They worship play, dream and metamorphosis – the unbearable lightness of being – within an awareness of silence and death. The question rather than the answer, the postponement rather than the final ending, situate the story in the realm of longing and dreaming, of possibilities and unfulfilled wishes. By combining past and present, then and now, the reader may feel that she is reading something very old – and something brand new. With words borrowed from »The Heroine«: it »affected the classic style, but was elegantly modern in its details« (Heroine, 84).

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