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The Chef and the Concubine: A Theory of Lived Christian Hospitality as the Imperfect Metabolism  
of Gift

Kara A. Kennedy

A Thesis in the Field of Religion  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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## Abstract

In the short story “Babette’s Feast,” literary master Isak Dinesen seeks to critique a particular expression of Christianity as ignorant and foolish. She does this, in part, by placing the lavishness of Babette’s gift in tension with the self-imposed poverty of a small-town religious order. In forming her critique, she ironically creates a space in which a more holistic rendition of the worldview she sought to undermine could be articulated and beautifully expressed. Subversive though she may be, her heroine is Christ, her plot is the Eucharist, her tenet is the gospel. Through Babette, Dinesen offers an (unintentional) apologetic for Christian hospitality as a lived theory, one that calls the reader to consciously enter into the imperfect metabolism of unending, transcendent gift.

This study considers the ideas of divergent scholars Elizabeth Newman and Jacques Derrida in order to glean a livable definition of Christian hospitality that is dramatized in “Babette’s Feast.” Attention then turns to a woman whom Babette has not yet met in scholarly conversation: the voiceless, victimized concubine of Judges 19. When the mysterious, miracle-inducing chef is introduced to the voiceless, tragedy-laden concubine, we can see how hospitality carries within it a certain undercurrent of war. Not the war of host over guest, oppressor over oppressed, or spiritual over material, but war of superabundance over privation. “Babette’s Feast” powerfully subverts the war-riddled privation of Judges 19 by declaring – through the extravagant circulation of gift – a very different act of war, one that transcends the story’s pages and finds its impact in our daily lives.

## Author's Biographical Sketch

Kara A. Kennedy studied finance and international business at the University of South Florida before venturing into the storied world of religion. She is married to Juan Carlos, with whom she enjoys a full color, overflowing life, and she is honored to be the mother of Isabelle, Julieana, Jeremiah, and Isaiah.

Kara is the author of *Supper: Reflections from Our Table* and various essays that seek to uncover that enchanted space where the immanent and transcendent collide in our everyday experience. Her writing is inspired by her children and children's children, a generation yet to be born. She writes in the hope that they will come to love and defend the True, Good, and Beautiful. With the conclusion of this thesis, she looks forward to publishing additional essay collections that are informed by a richer and more robust understanding of Christian hospitality.

A lover of overlooked existential joys like homemade bread and butter, Kara likes to bake. She kneads dough into tangible prayers, seeing the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in the miraculous creation of bread that emerges from crushed grain revived in water. And as far as butter is concerned, well, it just tastes good.

She is committed to keeping a home that is a refuge for the weary, and embodying, albeit terribly imperfectly, the Christian hospitality that she studies.

Her favorite word, and the end to all her means, and her prayer for all who read her work or dine at her table, is *shalom*.

Dedication

*For my uncle*

*Dr. Robert L. Kennedy*

*who believed.*

## Acknowledgments

I'm grateful to those who have journeyed with me to see this work completed:

Juan Carlos, who promised that he would support my studies wherever they took us, and never faltered. His sacrifice, patience, and faith sweeten these pages.

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My parents, who gave me the unhurried space of childhood to think about things.

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endeavor. Who has invited me time and time again to pull up a chair at His table and rest. My humble Guest, my lavish Host, my eternal Shalom.



## Table of Contents

Author's Biographical Sketch.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Chapter I. Introduction.....	1
Chapter II. An Analysis of Existing Scholarly Interpretations of “Babette’s Feast”.....	6
Chapter III. Hospitality According to Elizabeth Newman and Jacques Derrida .....	18
Ontological Differences .....	24
Truth and Power.....	27
Roles of Guest and Host .....	31
Understandings of Gift.....	34
Identity Formation .....	37
A Tentative Definition of Hospitality .....	41
Chapter IV. The Chef’s Gift: Reading Christian Hospitality in “Babette’s Feast” .....	43
A Clash of Ontologies.....	43
Truth, Power, and the Superimposition of Grace .....	50
The Dignity of Interchanging Roles .....	57
The Imperfect Metabolism of Unending Gift .....	64
Everything is Gift.....	64
We Cannot Live Outside of Gift’s Circulation .....	67
Gift has Redemptive Potential .....	70

Gift Reveals the Reality of Superabundance in Our Midst.....	71
Identity as Self-Understanding, Given and Created .....	74
“Babette’s Feast” Serves Up a Livable Definition of Christian Hospitality.....	79
Chapter V. The Chef and the Concubine Meet.....	81
Mirrored Women on Common Ground .....	82
Storied Invitations to the Eucharist.....	86
Chapter VI. A Parting <i>Digestif</i> : Acts of War Transcending the Stories’ Pages .....	93
References.....	96

## Chapter I.

### Introduction

Writing of the linguistic tensions that hold the word *hospitality* hostage to irony, French post-structuralist Jacques Derrida recalls the story of the Levite and the Concubine in Judges 19, in which a woman is violently raped, murdered, and dismembered within the context of hospitality. He concludes his book with a question no less haunting than the story he cites: “Are we the heirs to this tradition of hospitality?... They testify without end in our memory” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 155).

Decades earlier in 1958, Danish literary artist Karen Blixen (writing under her English pseudonym Isak Dinesen) ventured to form a comedic critique of a particularly pietistic expression of Christianity by playfully spinning churchly tropes into the fanciful tale, “Babette’s Feast.” The story plays out with a backdrop of hospitality, featuring a refugee woman who sacrifices all she owns to give a singular, extravagant meal for unsuspecting, quarreling guests who lack the means to fully appreciate her artistry. This story was, in Dinesen’s own words, “played on a lighter instrument...You might say it was played on a flute, where the [other stories] were played on a violin or cello” (Cate 127). Through this subversive comedy, she forms a polemic against the worldview of Christianity with which she spent a good part of her adult life wrestling (Bunch 4–5, 12–13). Some scholars are quick to recognize her specific attack of Kierkegaard’s Christianity (Langbaum 247; Bunch 156–57). The meal is viewed as a “secular eucharist” (Aiken 22) and the story is heralded as a “feminist triumph” (Stambaugh 79–81); a

seductive force that awakens the capacity of the tongue (Pallesen 190). Babette is likened to a witch (Stambaugh 81; Hansen and Kynoch 80), a “magical alien” (Barr 23), a “Dionysian priest” (Stambaugh 81), a force that pits “strict Puritanical rejection” against “Epicurean enjoyment” (Gossman 323). She represents the triumph of the artistic over the religious (Bunch 156–57) and the reconciliation of morality and pleasure that opens the door to a universal, pluralist salvation (Langbaum 252–54).

But lo and behold, the story *also* captured varieties of the Christian imagination (with apparently little regard for the story’s intended comedic-subversive effect). Many Christian-influenced scholars unequivocally identify the heroine, Babette, with Christ while drawing all sorts of theological and spiritual riches from the story’s depths (Podles 565). Picking up on ample Eucharistic language, her feast is seen as a last supper and her actions are viewed as reconciliatory and salvific (Podles 565; Waldron 559; Beck 212). She is a “sacred Stranger” or “divine Other” who is ever in our presence (Rizq 551). Her aesthetic genius is not a critique of the religious in favor of the material but rather points to God’s goodness in the face of life’s evils (Curry 35). Babette is seen to bring reconciliation and wholeness to the divided community (Gagné 227). Taken from this perspective, she does not undermine or subvert Christianity, but rather, upholds it.

It might be tempting to write off the discordant readings of this story as merely personal opinions of the respective scholars. But reducing the interpretations to separate, individual views risks missing the greater vision that Dinesen’s parable can offer. Taken *together*, the disparity of interpretations works to expose, rather than exclusively endorse or subvert, certain tensions that Christianity bears within itself: the tension between the spiritual and the material, between looking beyond for the sacred and recognizing the

sacred in the present, between experiencing abundance and perceiving scarcity, between needing grace and crying out for justice. These tensions locate the Christian experience within a liminal space that straddles the present creation and the Kingdom come, the *yes* and the *not yet*, and calls for community to be forged despite deep brokenness and difference. “Babette’s Feast” dramatizes these mysteries within the context of a uniquely Christian form of hospitality.

The centrality, mystery, and declaration of Babette’s identity in the story places Babette at the center of the diversity of scholarly interpretations. Who is Babette, really? And how did hospitality, and more specifically the dynamics of othering that she endured as she negotiated life in Berlevaag, influence her identity? She arrives to the story as a “massive, dark, deadly pale woman,” remaining as “a marble monument” when embraced yet is capable of turning food “into a kind of love affair” (Dinesen 32, 50, 59). Her extravagant feast and explosive declaration – “I am a great artist!” (66) – seems to have answered, not just with words but with conclusive action, that defining question which has plagued human imagination from time immemorial: *Who am I?* Yet it is precisely here, where her actions appear to take on such finality and certainty, where the disparity of interpretation occurs, and scholars tend to divide into camps.

There is room, of course, for multiple perspectives. Part of the genius of this deceptively simple story is that each interpretation of “Babette’s Feast” deepens the flavors and nourishes its nuanced meanings, suggesting that the cup from which one drinks at Babette’s table is ever-flowing, never dry. Those inclined to read “Babette’s Feast” as a subversion of Christianity will most likely construct Babette’s identity using the shifting cultural, social, and political circumstances of her (and by proxy, *their*)

particular historical moment. This is done in line with Alcoff's landmark positionality theory, which would "[make] her identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on" (433). This study recognizes the merits of that perspective so far as it brings to light the shifting dynamics of Christian experience and self-understanding at play throughout the text. But it is necessary to be more expansive, to intentionally engage with Dinesen's almost gluttonous reliance on biblical imagery and her apparent intention to undermine it. There is a need for a Christian lens that makes room for the *entirety* of the story without overlooking the story's subversive aspects.

This is where hospitality becomes particularly significant. Lived hospitality, from a Christian perspective, is simply the "circulation of gift" (Newman 141). Babette's story unfolds within the context of hospitality: she enters the story as a stranger, lives as a guest, and ultimately becomes a host. Hospitality is the key piece to the puzzle – it is not only the framework within which her identity is shaped and expressed but also lies at the heart of the story itself. With its emphasis on the givenness of creation, fluid roles of guest and host, and accommodation of the Other, Christian hospitality emerges from the scaffolding of tensions that upholds the story as *the* redemptive lesson to be grasped. Rather than offering yet another interpretation of "Babette's Feast," it becomes the message to be read within the tale. Specifically, in "Babette's Feast" we find an imaginative space in which Christian hospitality is shown to facilitate grace and bring about redemptive community and self-understanding despite deep brokenness both within and without.

The full weight of hospitality as a redemptive, formative theory and praxis is brought into greater clarity when Babette is introduced to the woman who troubled Derrida, someone whose story also unfolds within the context of hospitality, though with a tragically different ending: the voiceless, victimized concubine of Judges 19. Of all the scholarly conversation surrounding either story, these two women have never met. Scholars have not yet examined the surprising commonalities of their plights or the many ways in which one stands as a mirrored inversion of the other. By examining both stories, this study offers a theory of Christian hospitality as the metabolism of gift, not merely among one another but also with the divine, which engenders meaningful community. I argue that, despite the author's (purportedly) subversive intentions, "Babette's Feast" serves as a powerful apologetic for a Christian understanding of identity formation that modifies contemporary positionality theory by creating space for temporal-spatial transcendence and elevating the fluid roles of guest and host over other personal/social identifiers. This, in turn, becomes a constructive act of war against the privation of evil and scarcity that can otherwise corrode the human condition.

Derrida asks if we are heirs to a hospitality that is violent and leads to personal and communal fragmentation. The chef and the concubine come together in this study and respond, revealing not that one must be fragmented in the context of hospitality, but that hospitality's circulation of gift opens a distinct possibility to be known and to be whole.

## Chapter II.

### An Analysis of Existing Scholarly Interpretations of “Babette’s Feast”

The diverse and often irreconcilable meanings offered up by scholars can be accounted for if one reads “Babette’s Feast” as a permeable parable, one that generously lends itself to the contours of the reader’s will. Asserting that this tale is best understood as a parable, Rizq explains that “it indicates, rather than designates; its meaning is open, not closed. It invites and provokes curiosity, wonder, thought. The reader is to be teased into making his or her own meaning from it and living accordingly” (540). The story is an open invitation to taste and see, which scholars across the globe have indulged for decades.

The multiplicity of views calls for some organization. Discussions on the story can be usefully arranged along two interpretive axes. One axis represents the way the scholar reads Christianity in the story. These discussions are often siloed into two extremes with some outliers scattered between them: those who view it as a Christian parable and those who view it as an anti-Christian parable.<sup>1</sup> But how can a single short story be proffered as both an apologetic for Christianity and a polemic against it? Or is it that Christianity *itself* hospitably accommodates a multitude of interpretations and expressions, and “Babette’s Feast” is an example of how a single text can both oppose and embrace it? Given the story’s open receptivity to a variety of interpretations, it can be seen (or manipulated) to say just about anything the reader wishes it to say. (Not even Dinesen herself corners the market on the presentation of Christianity in the story, but

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<sup>1</sup> Here it is interesting to note that each find a purported ally in Babette.



rather shares the interpretive space with many.) This means that no interpretation of the story is neutral, but rather each is vulnerable to reflecting the writer's own preexistent convictions or prerogatives. In this regard, Dinesen's writing has an almost polarizing effect: virtually all interpretations of the story appear to fall along the spectrum of these two potentially antithetical views: either critiquing or embracing Christianity. And a look at the very *existence* of this spectrum of interpretations of a story that is so undeniably steeped in Christian mythos reveals something more. It suggests that Christianity is robust enough to accommodate even those arguments that are formed against it.

The second axis is the answer to the pivotal question that confronts all who behold the feast and discover, in the story's final pages, the surprise of Babette's identity and the real cost of the dinner: *why did Babette do it?* Three general responses can be charted in a spectrum that moves from externally to internally focused motives: from sacrificial gift to artistic self-expression to self-preservation. It is not so important to discern the definitive answer to the question – and indeed the point might be that there isn't one. It is instead important to position various scholars along this axis of Babette's purpose because it orients discussions around the story's ultimate meaning.

With these two axes in mind – the scholar's treatment of Christianity and Babette's motive – a pattern emerges in the scholarly conversation. There is a general (though not absolute) trend for those who read it as a Christian parable to interpret Babette's actions as a sacrificial gift. Babette is typically understood to be a Christ figure who serves a Last Supper and whose sacrifice ultimately leads to the healing and reconciliation of the community (Curry; Gagné; Gossman; Hansen; Mullins, “Deeper Down in the Domain of Human Hearts”; Podles; Rizq; Schuler; Méndez Montoya; Beck;

Loftin). Those who read it as an anti-Christian parable tend to see Babette as a secular feminist heroine - an artist who challenges the restraints of the religious community for the sake of brave self-expression (Bunch; Hansen and Kynoch; Barr; Pallesen; Stambaugh; Aiken), or otherwise a survivor who overcomes oppressive forces by making the meal for her own sake (Rashkin; Shapiro; Waldron).

Not surprisingly, those scholars who see Babette as a Christ figure either downplay or completely ignore those aspects of the story that do not conform to their interpretation. For example, Podles, Rizq, Méndez Montoya, and Gossman all emphasize the eucharistic imagery and Babette's power to transform others through her ultimate sacrifice. Méndez Montoya eloquently images her as a "cook par excellence whose superabundant edible gift is the very source of *caritas* that creates and sustains the world while inviting humanity to share this same... divine gift with one another" (116). Indeed, Dinesen describes Babette using Christological imagery, including calling her the cornerstone that was nearly rejected (37). But these scholars downplay that this direct biblical reference to Christ is undermined by the next, quite mysterious claim, that the cornerstone is "somehow related to the Black Stone of Mecca" (37).

Those on the other extreme who trend toward an anti-Christian interpretation are predominantly feminist<sup>2</sup> in their vision of Babette and deconstruct Babette's Christ-like persona in order to build her up as a witch (Stambaugh 81; Hansen and Kynoch 80). But this seems to confuse Denisen's portrayal of the sisters' fearful *impression* of Babette with who Babette *actually is*. They make much of small details that can be more

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<sup>2</sup> While it is true that anti-Christian readings are virtually unanimous in seeing Babette as a feminist heroine, this does not preclude Christian readings from also viewing Babette in feminist terms.

satisfactorily explained in other ways. Stambaugh, for example, argues that Dinesen “makes clear that [Babette] is a proper witch” even though Babette is a self-described Catholic. She substantiates her claim with the observation that Babette’s feast features thirteen people, the same number as a coven (81). But the Last Supper *also* featured thirteen people, and it is commonly believed that the number of witches in a coven is a mere parody of the Last Supper (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia). This weakens Stambaugh’s argument that Dinesen is necessarily referencing a coven with her use of thirteen people – she is more likely referencing the Last Supper, an interpretation that is consistent with the rest of the Christian imagery worked into her story. Hansen and Kynoch falter the same way. They note that Babette “is characterised by the colour black” and knows her way around the kitchen and home, and tie these observations to the archetypal witch (Hansen and Kynoch 80). But these are also characteristics of pietistic women of the time. Classifying Babette as a witch on these grounds is problematic. Regardless, according to this view, it was not God who miraculously manifests in the feast but rather the demonic who assists Babette in victory (Hansen and Kynoch 75). In another anti-Christian reading, Aiken credits Babette with inciting a secular alternative to religious transcendence, which she describes by borrowing heavily from the Christian lexicon but empties each word of its religious significance. Interpreting Babette’s sacrifice as a feminist “festive transubstantiation” that bears witness to the “miracle” of “flesh, quite literally, made word,” she concludes that “the meal is at once a resurrection and a kind of secular Eucharist... the celebrants experience a kind of psychological ‘millennium’ that heals old wounds and reconciles deeply-entrenched differences in a ‘heavenly burst of laughter’” (22). For these scholars who read “Babette’s Feast” as an

anti-Christian parable, flesh conquers spirit, seduction overcomes religion. The clear Christian parallels in the story are either ignored, emptied, or else written off as ironic.

In both camps, those who claim a Christian apologetic and those who claim a Christian polemic, scholars do not seem to honor the entirety of Babette's character as revealed in the text. Certain aspects of her identity and actions are valued more than others, depending on the scholar's reading of Christianity in the story and consequent leveraging of Babette to bolster their case. She is not taken as a harmonious whole.

Like the interpretive noise that surrounds it, the story itself is upheld by an elaborate scaffolding of tensions. Hansen and Kynoch speak almost ominously about the "sharp irony and dangerous forces [at] work," suggesting that there is more happening in the story than what first appears and that plumbing the tensions can be key to discovery (62). Mickelsen aptly calls the story "a relentlessly binary narrative" of "a whole series of oppositions" which, he believes, are ultimately "[complicated] rather than [resolved]" (34). As Babette the renowned chef encounters the pietist Lutheran community, most scholars identify the clear tension between the sensual and the spiritual (Pallesen 188), the body and the mind (Gagné 226), or scarcity and abundance (Schuler; Méndez Montoya 115). Ron Hansen names this tension as that between hedonism and holiness, self-denial and ecstasy (147), while Gossman calls out "the strict Puritanical rejection of any enjoyment of [food and drink] as luxuries, and the Epicurean enjoyment of [food and drink] for their intrinsic delight" (323). But these readings run the risk of oversimplifying or broadly underdetermining what constitutes the spiritual or religious. They can fail to recognize, for example, that feasting is itself a religious ritual that need not be confined to

the realm of the hedonist or material, or that relational reconciliation holds spiritual significance and need not be reduced to merely psychological or social terms.

As has already been hinted at, there is tension with Babette herself. Babette the Catholic and fighting Communard arrives from war-torn Paris with battle scars and battles still raging. She is, in a word, *shattered*. She has lost everything.<sup>3</sup> Scholars delve into the internal tensions between her past life and her new, her establishment as a chef in Paris and sudden refugee status in a tiny village. Interestingly, Fürst views Babette as one who crosses the borders that exist between these various tensions and worlds, “a modern double working woman, a woman in a position of transition” (447). There is tension not only within Babette, but *about* her. She is called a stranger (Rizq 544; Mullins, “Home, Community, and the Gift That Gives in Isak Dinesen’s Babette’s Feast” 222), a feminist (Barr 25; Aiken 23), a witch (Stambaugh 81; Hansen and Kynoch 80), a revolutionary (Mullins, “Home, Community, and the Gift That Gives in Isak Dinesen’s Babette’s Feast” 222; Goodwin 16; Stambaugh 80), and a Christ (Hansen 161). She is a mystery, about which the naïve and closed off town of Berlevaag knows nothing for certain. And yet, she has a unifying and triumphant presence which no reading of the story can ignore. Whether scholars claim saintly or selfish or serendipitous reasons, or credit divine or demonic or drunken forces, the fact remains that guests at her table *do* experience powerful moments of reconciliation, and Babette is the catalyst or conduit, if not the cause.

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<sup>3</sup> Loftin points out that Babette is not unlike her creator, whose life saw a series of traumatic losses in relationships, material wealth, physical health, and home (311–12).

Thematically, there are many other tensions as well. Time appears to be at odds with itself, as the past of each character challenges the present company as well as future possibility. Mickelsen calls out among the characters a “persistent yearning to make the future coincide with the past” (38). Dinesen both acknowledges and reconciles these temporal tensions during the mystical transformation of the feast, writing that “time itself had merged into eternity” (53). Space, too, is parsed out and held at odds with itself: the “toy-town” village is pitted against war-torn Paris (Hansen and Kynoch 63–64), the transcendent invades the immanent (Rizq 539), and the outside knocks at the door of the inside. The story raises questions about human effort and divine grace (Mullins, “Deeper Down in the Domain of Human Hearts” 31), scarcity and abundance (Schuler 3; Méndez Montoya 115), religion and aesthetics (Bunch 167), among others.

It is here, if the reader will indulge an *amuse-bouche*, that General Loewenhielm shall be brought into focus. The general, sometimes considered the story’s protagonist alongside Babette (Barr 26), embodies the key temporal, spatial, and cultural tensions of the story. As Mullins puts it, he “straddles both worlds, the world of Berlevaag and the world beyond” (“Deeper Down in the Domain of Human Hearts” 29). Strikingly, he is at once a conduit of life and death to Babette: he alone recognizes and appreciates her magnificent artistry, yet his military hands are stained with the blood of her husband. Like Babette, he must reconcile with his past, but unlike our “great artist,” he struggles with regret and feelings of inadequacy. The humbling force of introspection falls upon him as he asks himself a doubt-laden question, one that sweeps across both time and space: “Can the sum of a row of victories in many years and in many countries be a defeat?” (Dinesen 46). Loewenhielm gives voice to the inevitable life tensions that

Dinesen exposes in the story. Langbaum, who personally knew Dinesen and interviewed her for his monograph, offers a small treasure of insight not recorded elsewhere about Loewenhielm. It is *his* speech at the table which unveils “the most ineffable epiphany in all Isak Dinesen,” a certain “triumph of the absurd” in which “Either/Or” is discarded in favor of holding life in an “imaginative apprehension” (253–54). Through Loewenhielm we catch a glimpse of how the author herself came to terms with the tensions that her life, and correspondingly this tale, uncovered.

While it is entirely agreeable that a plethora of tensions exist in the story, they collectively give rise to a controversial question: what happens to them by virtue of the feast? Scholars diverge on this point. Not surprisingly, those inclined toward a Christian interpretation see Babette as a reconciling and healing Christ figure who brings about lasting transformation in the community. Ron Hansen, for example, argues for miraculous and lasting change, that the story “merges incongruities, reconciles the irreconcilable” (147). Langbaum, perhaps the most oft-engaged scholar in the conversation, also takes the view of ultimate reconciliation though from a pluralist perspective that is not endorsing of, or reliant upon, Christianity (253).<sup>4</sup> But those advocating for a critique of Christianity tend to see the story as merely *exposing* tensions, either for the sake of awareness or provocation, and believe Dinesen intentionally left them unresolved in a permanent sense. While they may concur that Babette had a reconciling presence, they are more likely to see this as a temporary act, a “feminist triumph” for sure, but one that nevertheless yields no lasting change in the community

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<sup>4</sup> In this, Langbaum falls short of recognizing that pluralism offers only a superficial unity, which it proffers at the expense of the particular. Newman rightly points out that “the apparent harmony of liberal pluralism rhetoric actually conceals conflict and fragmentation” (139). It is cursory, albeit common, to claim unity on pluralist grounds alone.

(Stambaugh 79–81). Taking this view, and disagreeing with Langbaum’s rather hopeful interpretation, Hansen and Kynoch argue that the story is ultimately a tragedy (92–93). Mullins disagrees with both. Reading through a lens of feminist agency and empowerment, she lauds Babette for giving what Derrida mused impossible – a true gift that cannot be repaid (“Home, Community, and the Gift That Gives in Isak Dinesen’s Babette’s Feast” 222–23). The tensions are not resolved through this gift but “the process Babette sets in motion is ultimately dislocative and open,” creating a space in the community that allows the tensions to exist and be understood in new ways (“Home, Community, and the Gift That Gives in Isak Dinesen’s Babette’s Feast” 218–22).

There is another idea that frequently comes up, which bolsters the usefulness of arranging scholarly discussions along our Christian/anti-Christian axis: “Dinesen’s wrestling match with one of the greatest philosophers in the world” – Kierkegaard (Bunch 173). It is well established through Dinesen’s personal letters and other writings that she was both fascinated with – and at odds with – her fellow countryman and Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (Bunch 2). According to Bunch, she subverted his ideas through “counter-stories” and “Babette’s Feast” can be considered one shining example (2, 156–69). Bunch offers an anti-Christian reading that recognizes in “Babette’s Feast” a subversion of Kierkegaard’s three stages of existence (in ascending order: aesthetic, ethical, religious),<sup>5</sup> as her sensual and sheerly aesthetic meal ironically serves as the means of transformation and self-discovery for the guests. Here, religion fails and

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<sup>5</sup> In his pseudonymous work, *Stages on Life’s Way*, Kierkegaard presents three overlapping but ultimately ascending modes of existence: “The [aesthetic] sphere is the sphere of immediacy, the ethical the sphere of requirement (and this requirement is so infinite that the individual always goes bankrupt), the religious the sphere of fulfillment” (182). The aesthetic life is guided by pleasure, the ethical life by cultural norms, and the religious life by faith in God.



becomes the lowest form of existence while aesthetics is lifted to the highest, the opposite of Kierkegaard's position (Bunch 156). According to Bunch, "Dinesen substitutes God and The Divine Creation with The Poet and Nature as the logical materialistic answers to the omnipotent Christian God" (53). In taking this position, however, Bunch fails to acknowledge the space that is offered within Christianity itself to accommodate all three levels of existence simultaneously. For example, Catholic scholar Méndez Montoya recognizes that the feast is both an aesthetic and ethical offering, and firmly grounds it within a religious feast (120–22). The critique Bunch seeks to make about Christianity can actually be raised and satisfactorily answered from within it. Her view on Kierkegaard is not held by others. Christian-influenced scholars are surprisingly optimistic about Kierkegaard's presence in the story, seeing him portrayed favorably through the character General Loewenhielm (Schuler 2). Whereas scholars such as Bunch see Dinesen as poking fun of Kierkegaard, Schuler sees Dinesen as an artistic ally who puts some of Kierkegaard's philosophical ideas into inspiring tale. Consider this rosy and reconciliatory conclusion that Schuler reaches after an analysis of Kierkegaard and the story: "Freedom, sorrow, and also joy hang together in this delicate balance... Here desire, like fine sauce, bubbles loudly; we aren't about to quench desire or diminish its searing effects in our lives. In Babette's kitchen, we hesitantly sit down to feast holding close to the promise of Psalm 85... 'Mercy and truth shall meet. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss'" (9). Again, the conclusion one reaches depends largely on whether one views the story as an apologetic for or polemic against Christianity.

As the scholarly conversation draws on, by now late into the evening, there is a perspective at risk of being drowned out by the sheer volume of the other voices:

Mickelsen's. He contends that the majority of the other analyses are missing the mark by focusing on the feast, a bold position to take considering the *feast* is the story's namesake. Seeing the feast as a ruse or distraction, he thinks that the true meaning of the story is to be found in the monotony of everyday life in Berlevaag. He invites "readers [to] profitably look askance at the singularly appealing – but misleading – centerpiece of the narrative, the feast, and attend instead to the dull, richly repetitive margins" (37). He sees a breakdown in the biblical parallels often cited, noting subtle ways that Dinesen alters details such that the reader is left with "an invitingly suggestive but imprecise framework" that "wobbles" with the weight scholars try to put on it (37). Highlighting the patterns of repetition and reticence that pervade the story, he goes so far as to call it an "anorexic text, because to enter the realm of the everyday is to approach the realm of silence or oblivion" (37, 42). Mickelsen's anomalous perspective is intriguing but unconvincing. The prolific Eucharistic imagery is strong enough to sustain whatever artistic license Dinesen exercised in writing her parable without undermining the Christian mythos that informs it, and the climactic centrality of the feast is too significant to displace it in favor of the story's marginal details. Still, Mickelsen's view underscores Rizq's claim that the story is best treated as a parable – open to many potential interpretations.

In all of the scholarly conversation, hospitality is hinted at and often assumed in the background, but rarely is it brought to the foreground as the central message of the text.<sup>6</sup> This study asks what the story and its manifold tensions can articulate about

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<sup>6</sup> Méndez Montoya is a shining exception. His view of "Babette's Feast" through a Catholic/Eucharistic lens relies heavily on hospitality and has profited this study greatly. This present work finds its seat at the table near his, contending for many common ideas but coming from a different perspective and offering new insights.

Christian hospitality, offering a vision of Christianity that has been misread or underread by other scholars. There are those who risk misreading, seeing an anti-Christian parable and failing to recognize that the criticisms they (and Dinesen) raise can be coming from within Christianity itself, and there are those who risk underreading, seeing a Christian parable and not appreciating that what is being criticized in the text is *also* Christian. Having situated the existent conversation about the story, our attention now turns to the hospitality that animates its pages.

### Chapter III.

#### Hospitality According to Elizabeth Newman and Jacques Derrida

Hospitality is one of those idyllic concepts that has suffered much in its pilgrimage from abstract theory to actual practice. In the hands of polite society, it has been civilized into mere entertainment, a sentimental matrix of etiquette that encourages superficial conversation around decadent tables (Newman 27). Given over to the market, it has been industrialized as a means for mere profit, a commercial enterprise that grants comfort-seeking consumers welcome, service, and experience in exchange for money (Newman 28). Exposed to the transience of our increasingly mobile society, hospitality has been uprooted from a sense of home and largely abandoned to the “placelessness” that characterizes modern times (Newman 35). Spoken with a Southern drawl or famously cultivated in a contentious middle eastern landscape, it has too often been exploited as a euphemism for bigotry, a veiled practice of welcoming only those who are alike while excluding those who are different. And thrust into the contested spaces that are borderlands, those places where scarcity, fear, and difference dominate the subconscious, hospitality has largely been ignored for the sake of self-preservation.

Indeed, hospitality as a theory-turned-praxis in the human story bears its share of distortions. Any meaningful understanding of hospitality requires that it first be freed from the baggage that distorts its shape. Hospitality requires a redemptive definition. But the task of defining it rests on contested ground. Intriguingly, Derrida claims that we cannot know what hospitality actually is (“Hostipitality” 6). He sees evidence of it in

anecdote and myth, deconstructs it into warring parts, illuminates it as inevitablyaporetic, locates it within the margins of difference, but ultimately resigns to give no definition at all (“Hostipitality” 5, 14–15; Derrida and Anidjar 362). He does, however, raise it confidently as a question: “The question of hospitality is also the question of ipseity” (“Hostipitality” 15). Here, Derrida keenly links hospitality with self-understanding and self-identity, which takes us to the heart of his contention and refusal to define it. To offer hospitality is to be a host; to be a host is to assume oneself a master; to be a master implies mastery over someone or some things. A claim to hospitality is therefore also a claim to self-understanding and an imposition of a certain power. He argues that the act of giving hospitality is ultimately violent,<sup>7</sup> going so far as to call it a “collusion of violence and power” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 55), because it necessarily presupposes that the host has something which is his own to either give or withhold, delineating the host from the guest and rendering unconditional welcome impossible (“Hostipitality” 4). For Derrida, there can be no pure expression of hospitality due to these inescapable dynamics:

[There is n]o hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one's home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence. Injustice, a certain injustice, and even a

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida’s use of the word “violent” in this context assumes, in line with the larger school of postmodern thought, that the claim to own or control something – the establishment or defense of certain boundaries – is an exercise of power which inevitably oppresses and is therefore violent. But testing this theory against the litmus of real life immediately challenges it. Consider, for example, the vast difference between torturing a prisoner and defending one’s home against a burglar. Both are manifestations of a claim of control over an independent object and can therefore be labeled “violent” by the common postmodern definition of the term. But the former is an act of physical assault while the latter is an act of defense. It cannot be taken as a given that *all* claims to master something or assert boundaries are violent claims, as postmodernism could assert. This over-usage of “violence” is problematic because it collapses very different forms of control into one another, flattening expressions of power without sufficient nuance, and should be taken with a grain of salt.

certain perjury, begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality. (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 55)

Pressing the inherent paradox even further, Derrida etymologically links the words *hospitality* and *hostility*, *host* and *hostile*, and notes that hospitality “carries its own contradiction incorporated into it... allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite” (“Hostipitality” 3). He craftily coins this “*hostipitality*” (Derrida and Anidjar 419). And this tension is not limited to the question of mastery or control, but extends to our felt responsibility for another. As Nietzsche put it, “If one would have a friend, then must one also be willing to wage war for him: and in order to wage war, one must be *capable* of being an enemy” (63).

According to Derrida, hospitality (as classically and imperfectly practiced) withholds even as it gives, erects walls even as it opens its door. But radical (pure and perfectly practiced) hospitality is impossible. Reading Derrida, it is as if hospitality is capable of taking on the mystery of quantum physics – there and yet not, evidentiary yet intangible, detectable only until the moment one tries to grasp it. In his own words, hospitality “deconstructs itself – precisely – in being put into practice” (“Hostipitality” 5). Grounding his rather ethereal idea in more accessible terms, consider that the gesture of welcome presumes that the one welcomed is not already at home. *If* hospitality is about a host welcoming a guest, then the most radical form would result in the guest being just as home as the host, erasing any distinction between them. If there is no longer a distinction between the guest and host – no longer a sense of “otherness” – then there is no one to offer or receive hospitality. All are simply at home. Radical hospitality, in Derridean terms, ceases to exist in being carried out.

In a foundationally different view, Christian scholar Elizabeth Newman goes to great lengths to elucidate the particularity, depth, and universal significance of hospitality as a way of being and living. According to Newman, it functions as both a theory and a praxis, as a means of understanding the world and actively engaging in it (22). At a foundational level, Christian hospitality acknowledges that all things are a gift from God which are offered and received through the orienting roles of host and guest. This ongoing drama of giving and receiving – this “circulation of gift” – is the central means by which a person enters into, and is shaped by, the reality of the transcendent Kingdom to which Christian eschatology points (107, 113, 141). According to Newman, hospitality evidences the trinitarian nature of ultimate reality and locates humanity within it. In short, “[h]ospitality’ names our graced participation in the triune life of God” (14).

But this “participation in the triune life” – and the mysterious dynamics of the Trinity itself – should not be romanticized as ever-pleasant or even safe. Timothy Keller has rightly pointed out that multiple encounters with God in the Bible are actually dangerous and quite terrifying (3:44-5:00). Consider Jacob’s wrestling with God that left him with a permanent limp, Job’s penitent confrontation with God in the whirlwind, or Joshua’s humbling encounter with the commander of the Lord’s army. God is not to be conjured, predicted, or controlled.<sup>8</sup> The Bible presents an encounter with God as a perilous and transformative thing, and any invitation to participate in the triune life of God should be weighted with the reality of His omnipotence and holiness.

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<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis makes this potentially disconcerting idea winsomely accessible through his fiction classic. Throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia*, he presents God as wild, not tame (194). When Lucy asks Mr. Beaver if Aslan (God) is safe, he retorts, “‘Safe?... Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King I tell you’” (146). God is good, yes, but He is not safe.

Furthermore, a trinitarian framework does not preclude every form of violence but does afford certain forms of violence a transcendent purpose that yields ultimate good. Newman can be critiqued for focusing so much on the peace and unity of the Trinity that she fails to give due attention to this. The Passion is evidence that the Trinity willingly endured a purposeful violence, as Christ experienced the physical, emotional, and spiritual tortures of crucifixion that would have been no less torturous to the Father and the Spirit. (The Godhead would not be unmoved at the suffering of the Son during his time on the cross.) This shared suffering and violence, however, was motivated by ultimate love to yield ultimate reconciliation and life. While it is beyond the scope of this work to exegete this passage of Scripture, Colossians 1.19-20 connects the violence endured by Jesus to its reconciliatory effect: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making *peace* by the *blood* of his cross” (*ESV Study Bible*; emphasis added). In other words, the blood (violence) was purposed to establish peace between God and creation.

Newman’s articulation of Christian hospitality as an invitation to participate in the triune life of God must be nuanced, therefore, so that it is not romanticized as merely pleasant or wholly safe. God is holy, undomesticated, unfathomable, and uncontained. And there is a permitted expression of violence even amid the Trinity – that mysterious relationship between Love, Shalom, and Life - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can draw from this that Christian hospitality accommodates certain forms of *purposeful* violence even as it heralds peace.



It is this trinitarian framework that imposes the greatest distinction between her and Derrida's views. Whereas Derrida sees power differentials in all claims to otherness (and this is his basis for problematizing hospitality), Newman sets forth the trinitarian ideal of an otherness that exists outside of power differentials, opening the space for otherness to be a blessing rather than a problem. She envisions hospitality within a transcendent frame,<sup>9</sup> practiced not only within the divine Trinity but also among the Creator and created. This means she is not concerned with a radical hospitality that necessarily self-erases because hospitality is not confined to hosts welcoming guests and does not cease to exist when guests find themselves at home. Rather, *all* people are other; all people are, first and always, guests of their Creator/Host. People are only able to give hospitality to others because they have first received. Any practice of hospitality among people abides in the shadow of the trinitarian hospitality, the eternal circulation of gift and welcome of other that is ever-unfolding and expressed between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There is perhaps little that Derrida and Newman would readily agree on, but each helps to nuance a useable definition of hospitality for purposes of this study. A good friend is fond of saying, "Contrast is the mother of clarity" (Guinness). Newman and Derrida position themselves in points of contrast, together clarifying the concept of hospitality and helping us to better appreciate the ways "Babette's Feast" serves to articulate it. Building upon what's already been suggested about otherness, key points of divergence between their views include their dissonant ontologies, treatment of the

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of the transcendent frame is taken from Taylor's *A Secular Age*.

concepts of truth and power, approach to the roles guest and host, suppositions about gift, and ultimate conclusions about identity formation.

### Ontological Differences

Ontology is a fitting starting point. The endlessly deconstructive foundation (anti-foundation?) on which Derrida's theory rests assumes a complex economy of "originary violence" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 110). Life is suspected to be a zero-sum game; to have is to take. Power is therefore "the driving and structuring force of society" (Pluckrose and Lindsay 35). Milbank notes that these assumptions "[raise] the spectre of a human world inevitably dominated by violence" and indeed necessitate "an ontology of violence" (*Theology and Social Theory* 278–79). But Derrida would likely resist the idea of an *ontology* of violence and instead insist on an "an original, transcendental violence" (Derrida and Bass 125) that hinders one's access to that which is pure. He sees the liminal space between self and other as necessarily occupied by an economics of violence, which is an ever-present and dynamic force between them irrespective of the way the other is received:

This transcendental violence, which does not spring from an ethical resolution or freedom, or from a certain way of encountering or exceeding the other, originally institutes the relationship between two finite ipseities... these necessities are violence itself, or rather the transcendental origin of an irreducible violence, supposing, as we said above, that it is somehow meaningful to speak of preethical violence. For this transcendental origin, as the irreducible violence of the relation to the other, is at the same time nonviolence, since it opens the relation to the other. It is an *economy*. (Derrida and Bass 128–29)

In this economy of engagement, every instance is ripe with the possibility of an assertion of power, every interaction is embedded with the potential for a Darwinian sense of

conflict, every action or utterance is incapable of being pure.<sup>10</sup> This conflict is inherent and inevitable and can be traced all the way down to the core of being. As Derrida wrestles with hospitality, he wrestles within this framework of transcendental violence. And this violence is intrinsically present, therefore not unidirectional. Considering what it means to be a host, he explains, “to be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken... to be surprised, in a fashion almost violent, violated and raped [*violée*], stolen [*volée*]...” (“Hostipitality” 361). It has already been noted that Derrida views hospitality as an act of violence against the *guest*, but here we can also see his insistence that it is an act of violence against the *host*. This helps explain Derrida’s overarching concern that hospitality is capable of smuggling in injustices despite its veneer of generosity.

In contrast, Newman argues for an ontology of freedom marked by an “assumption of superabundance” (106–07, 115). Drawing upon the theological work of John Zizioulas, she points out that an “understanding of creation ex nihilo, out of nothing, freed the world from an ontology of necessity... Because God did not have to create but freely desired to, creation is not a necessity but a gift” (96). And by creating other, God opens the space for otherness and the love that transcends otherness to arise together. Whereas Derrida raises for us a sensitivity to ways in which our existence can be corrupted by the prioritization of having or taking, Newman prioritizes giving and receiving (101). From here, Newman examines the “excess and superfluity” that characterizes many of Jesus’ miracles recorded in the Gospels and concludes that the nature of the reign of God which “Christian hospitality seeks to embody is marked by an

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Derrida’s thinking along these lines is not inconsistent with the Christian insistence that humanity lives in a fallen, broken world. He adds to this line of thought a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which human brokenness (expressed as violence) manifests in expressions of being, self-understanding, language, and interaction with other.

economics of abundance, surplus, excess, and surprise” (100–01). According to this view, the universe came to be out of a freely made, divine choice to create and is marked by an overflow of freely given provision which is, in turn, to be generously shared.

A challenge arises here as to how one is to live out this belief in the face of the readily perceivable scarcity and conflict that mars human existence. Newman concedes this difficulty and asserts that we live in a liminal time in which the Kingdom is here but not yet manifest completely. She challenges Christians “to live ‘as if’ the kingdom of God, a reign marked by excess and superfluidity, is now present, because it *is* now present, though not in its fullness” (102). This echoes the biblical mandate to live by faith. Newman argues that the more Christians practice generosity, the more they will “embody an alternative” (Newman 103) to the economics of scarcity that dominates the current sociopolitical imagination. Only through the actual practice of hospitality will Christians come to recognize and experience the excess, abundance, and surprise that so enchanted the life of Christ.

Even Christ, who articulated and modeled this distinct possibility of living in the abundance and freedom of a Kingdom come, did not gloss over the realities of pain and brokenness of life on earth. His promise in Mark 10:30 to his disciples to experience the abundance and joy of God – in the form of hundreds of brothers and sisters, houses and fields – is weighted with the searing reality of the promise of persecutions (Newman 103). He led the way, enduring the incomprehensible alienation and suffering of the cross in the hands of those he sought to save. From these, and many other examples from the life and words of Christ in the biblical texts, we can gather that the Christian vision of God’s reign, which is to be manifest in the liminal time and space between now and the

eschaton, embraces pain as a present reality permeated with promise. Newman realistically presents suffering as inevitable but not ultimate, granting that “hospitality is not a hedge against pain and suffering but sees Christ present with us in our suffering, even as we acknowledge that such suffering does not have the last word” (103).

Newman offers a constructive ontological orientation of freedom and abundance, one that flows from the foundational belief that the Creator chose to create, not out of necessity but out of joy and desire. She calls us to reenchant our imaginations with this understanding as we seek to live lives of generosity and gratitude. Derrida offers a sobering critique that underscores the present realities of violence and injustice that can plague even basic human institutions such as language, especially if left unexamined. His concept of originary violence leaves hospitality vulnerable to corruption, and he calls us to be vigilant in practice, aware that hospitality is complex and fraught rather than simple and pure. Whereas Derrida’s view taken to extreme might paralyze someone of good intent, who seeks to practice hospitality but does not want to inadvertently harm, Newman opens a space in which the possibility of generosity and abundance is possible, even in light of real pain and suffering.

### Truth and Power

The second key point of divergence between their perspectives concerns each’s treatment of the concepts of truth and power. Newman’s interpretation of hospitality is sustained by a Christian framework that affirms the existence and discoverability of truth. Drawing upon an understanding of “[p]ractices as *ways of knowing*,” she concludes that hospitality is a praxis, “a way of being in space and time that induces certain disclosures” of truth (21–22). While Christian hospitality functions to reveal truth, she critiques

pluralism (which she offers as a common alternative to hospitality) for functioning to conceal truth by trivializing real difference. We must be careful here. It is not that pluralism does not concede irreconcilable difference – it most certainly does – but her contention is that it underreads the significance of those differences as they play out in real life or are followed to their rational end. She laments that “the apparent harmony of liberal pluralist rhetoric actually conceals conflict and fragmentation” as it is put into practice (139). She bolsters this claim by turning to Alasdair MacIntyre, who writes in *After Virtue*:

Marx was fundamentally right in seeing conflict and not consensus at the heart of modern social structures. It is not just that we live too much by a variety and multiplicity of fragmented concepts; it is that these are used at one and the same time to express rival and incompatible social ideals and policies and to furnish us with a pluralist political rhetoric whose function is to conceal the depth of our conflicts. (214)

She then turns to postmodernism, which she critiques for its insistence that “since we have no common foundation, we ought to at least tolerate, if not aesthetically embrace, our plurality and so ameliorate the potential for domination. Such a position, however, is itself inherently violent” because it “inevitably and destructively reduce[s] all ways of life to consumer choices” (106–07). Her use of the term “consumer choices” here is intended to portray a sense in which a person decides what to believe or how to live based on what works best for that person. In other words, the question being asked is not “What is true?” but rather, “What works for me?”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> It would perhaps be better to reject Newman’s use of the phrase “consumer choices” here in favor of something more nuanced, such as “personal preferences based on evolving, subjectively derived, critical self-reflection.” This would more fairly capture the ethos of postmodern thought which she is seeking to critique. That being said, her use of the term “consumer choices” does profitably carry within it an accurate criticism of our oft self-absorbed contemporary society in which so much priority is given to consumerism, commodification, and personal choice when discerning how to live.

As an alternative to systems that trivialize differences or reduce differences to conflicts, Newman suggests that differences be received as gifts. She exhorts the Christian “to give and receive from the ‘other’ (or stranger) as Christ would” (144). This makes the practice of Christian hospitality “at once more receptive and more active than tolerance, receptive in that it sees the other as gift and active in that it seeks lovingly to live, speak, and hear truth in any given situation” (144). Power is here drained of its divisive effect and infused with humility, expressed as a “theopolitical power of *caritas*” (Méndez Montoya 116). This is “a power that integrates plenitude of desire; it is the paradoxical force of sacrifice on the cross; it is the humble power of bread broken into pieces for the purpose of sharing... the power of giving one’s life for the other” (Méndez Montoya 115–16). In broad terms, Christian hospitality, operating within the trinitarian framework, functions to elevate truth and humble power.

Derrida cannot conceptually separate truth from power, but rather sees truth as obfuscated within a matrix of power. For him, “language operates hierarchically through binaries, always placing one element above another to make meaning” (Pluckrose and Lindsay 40). It would be easy to conclude that Derrida’s poststructuralism reduces truth to a function of power, but Derrida’s thinking is, as always, more complicated than that. Pluckrose and Lindsay explain that Derrida sees meaning as “always relational and deferred” and “exist[ing] only in relation to the discourse in which it is embedded” (40).<sup>12</sup> These discourses are the grid through which power flows and exercises dominion over meaning, therefore necessarily subjectivizing truth claims. Glazier explains that “[t]he importance of power for subjectivation is paramount. Power is everywhere, on this

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<sup>12</sup> Note that they are referring to *meaning*, which is not the same as truth.

account; not just located in structured [institutions]... but is rather dispersed, mobile and injected throughout society and put into practice via various discursive regimes” (243). Concerns about the interaction of truth, meaning, and power motivate Derrida’s deconstruction, as he seeks to dismantle a given phenomenon in order to understand, critique, expose, and question how its underlying pieces function together within a given discursive power matrix. But doubting as he is about truth claims, it would be wrong to conclude that Derrida was dismissive of truth altogether. He laments this common misreading of his work in an interview: “I never said ‘there is no truth’, but I would say that the concept of truth as it is available, understood, accredited, this concept of truth does not correspond [*répond*] to what I’m looking for, to what we’re looking for in deciphering. That is to say that there is no access to a stabilizable and true meaning at the end of deciphering” (Derrida et al. 16). In other words, truth exists but is presently inaccessible to us. Pushing back on the labeling of Derrida as nihilistic, Tacey helpfully clarifies that deconstruction “is a way of doing truth, of keeping things authentic and open to the possibility of transcendence. [Derrida] wanted to unravel and deconstruct, not to arrive at nothing, but to affirm a sacred reality that he sensed was undeconstructible” (3). He confesses that “the question of truth torments me in a thousand ways” (Derrida et al. 16). Never able to arrive at it, ultimately dismissing even ontology in favor of what he calls “hauntology” (Glazier 242), Derrida is left with the Sisyphean task of deconstructing layer upon layer of truth claims in order to expose the hierarchical power structures embedded in the language that dared bring them forth.

Newman and Derrida both recognize truth and power in their articulation of hospitality, albeit in decisively different ways. Newman ultimately argues that hospitality



functions to disclose truths and requires a certain self-emptying of power that enables harmonious and authentic community. Derrida is concerned that hospitality is corrupted as yet another institutional means through which power conceals truth and keeps it ever outside of our grasp. As we seek to shape our own definition of hospitality, we can glean from Newman a vision of hospitality as a means to uphold truth and from Derrida a warning about the corrupting potential of power.

### Roles of Guest and Host

So far, we have discussed Derrida and Newman's respective ontological assumptions and their treatments of truth and power. Our focus now turns to a third key point of divergence between them as they relate to hospitality: their approach to the roles of guest and host. While all hospitality forms share the basic roles of guest and host, Newman's interpretation identifies these roles with the Divine while also recognizing them to be fluid and necessarily interchangeable among everyone present (68, 107). These are critical distinctions which frame and inform the rest of her holistic vision of hospitality as a way of living and being.<sup>13</sup>

God is understood to be the primary host and giver of all that is circulated, meaning Christian hospitality images a communal table in which all people are guests who have received whatever they have from God. But God is also an ever-present guest who seeks to be welcomed and let in, thereby dignifying people by signaling that they have something of value to offer their Creator.<sup>14</sup> (A vision for the transcendent circulation

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<sup>13</sup> Newman does not restrict hospitality to the welcoming of guests into a home or other private space. Rather, she proposes and defends a uniquely Christian hospitality that encompasses economics, science, ethics, education, politics, and every other aspect of living and being in a society.

<sup>14</sup> For more insight into the dignifying impact of giving to God, see Bailey 200-16.

of gift among Creator and creation emerges here, to which we shall return later.) God as both host and guest is expressed and modeled poignantly in Christ, whose life, ministry, and miracles all took place within various contexts of hospitality in which he seamlessly moved between guest and host roles. Pohl shares the impact of Christ on the Christian practice of hospitality:

Jesus makes hospitality more complicated for Christians. We offer hospitality within the context of knowing Jesus as both our great host and our potential guest. The grace we experience in receiving Jesus' welcome energizes our hospitality while it undermines our pride and self-righteousness. The possibility of welcoming Christ as our guest strengthens our kindness and fortitude in responding to strangers. (105–06)

This signals the second distinguishing aspect of Newman's view on guest and host roles – that they are fluid and necessarily interchangeable among everyone present (68). The fluidity of roles underscores the mutual interdependence that is to characterize the Body of Christ, and also wisely guards against potential imbalances within a community. Speaking not merely of the possibility, but the *necessity* of the interchangeability of the roles, Newman explains that a person who is always a host risks oppressing and “controlling others,” while a person who is always a guest misses the opportunity to give and share what he or she has to offer (68). Thinking along the same lines, Pohl explains that “[a]n important transformation occurs when people without power or status have the opportunity to be more than guests, when they, too, can be hosts. It is a time when their contributions can be recognized and when they are not defined first by their need” (121). There is, therefore, space for those who are consistently marginalized, estranged, or alienated to be dignified as hosts *even as* they exist, and might always exist, as guests. It is the calling of all who come together in this context to be mindful of this necessity of the fluidity of roles, and to creatively and proactively seek

out ways in which the otherwise marginalized would be able to serve as hosts in perhaps unconventional but always intentional ways. Being mindful that we are “all guests of the divine host [adds] a certain richness and paradoxical complexity to the human guest/host relations” (Pohl 114). Asserting that God is the primary Host and that His ways are marked by “abundance, surplus, excess, and surprise” (100–01), Christian hospitality assumes that all people have the dignity of serving as host because all have something of value to offer others, even as all people are humbled to be guests, having nothing apart from that which has been given. These dynamics serve as an equalizing and inclusive force among people.

While Newman sees the guest/host roles as transcendent and fluid, Derrida sees them as complicated and potentially corrupted, with each posture haunted by the other, each position having been determined and reinforced by dynamics of power. He does not see them as fluid, or even seem to contemplate this as a real possibility. Rather, he asserts that hospitality requires the host to “[remain] the patron, the master of the household” and to “[maintain] his own authority in his own home, that he looks after himself and sees to and considers all that concerns him” (“Hostipitality” 4). Here, Derrida presents the host as one who defends, preserves, and controls that which is in his or her possession. The moment he ceases to do this, he is no longer a host. The guest, by default, is the one who stands to receive at the benevolence of the host. The moment this ceases to be the case – the moment the host shares so fully with the guest that there is no longer any distinction in their possessions or power differentials between them – is the moment when the two roles dissipate, and hospitality ceases to exist.

While not necessarily interchangeable, guest and host still present a fascinating interrelation in Derrida's view, which forms part of the basis of his dilemma. The French word "*hôte*," derived from the Latin "*hospes*," signifies both guest and host (Derrida, "Hostipitality" 3–4). While the guest and host are, on the one hand, separated indefinitely by possession and performance – as having/not having and giving/receiving – they are also, on the other hand, so closely connected that they are identified by the same name. The tension between them, which Derrida likens to war, rape, and violence, could be veiled in this etymological sharing. There is a certain risk taken on by both guest and host within the context of hospitality – the risk of being overtaken, of being laid bare, of succumbing to and reinforcing power structures. He goes to great lengths to expose the unspoken dynamics between guest and hosts, figures that for him stand separated by a chasm of difference and yet enjoy an ironic intimacy of oneness of name.

Once again, Newman offers a constructive ideal and Derrida offers a heavy critique. Let us glean from Newman her understanding of guest and host roles as fluid and interchangeable while not losing sight of the tension Derrida notes between guest and host roles and the ways in which each position is imbricated by the other, such that there is ever a complex interplay between them that obfuscates any understanding of either role in pure form.

#### Understandings of Gift

Our fourth point of divergence between Newman and Derrida pertains to the concept of the gift. As has already been explained, Newman's theory is premised on the belief that all of life is gift, enchanting the practice of hospitality with "the generosity of God, who gifts us with our lives and with the ability to respond freely to others in love"

(97). We are to respond not only freely, but also humbly, as there is no place for pride in the knowledge that everything we have was given to us. We are to view our “existence as gift” (96) and allow this knowledge to permeate our interaction with self, others, the world, and God. Milbank sees this epitomized in the “[p]erpetual eucharist: that is to say, a living through the offering... of the gift given to us of God himself in the flesh” (“Can a Gift Be Given?” 152).

The ontological priority Newman places on gift is complicated by Derrida’s conviction that there can be no pure gift at all (except, *possibly*, time) (“Given Time” 165–67). Rather than experiencing humility in recognizing existence as gift, a dangerous pride of assumption is at work, namely that we have something to give because we took, and our taking (and even claiming to have) is a form of violence. Furthermore, our very acts of giving are a function of economics, of giving with expectations of receiving. Explaining the problem that reciprocity presents to pure giving, he argues that “[i]f there is a gift, the *given* of the gift... must not come back to the giving... It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure” (“Given Time” 166). Derrida’s wariness about gifts is that he believes there is always a hidden, contractual angle to them – one gives with the expectation of being thanked, or being given a gift in return, or being rewarded in some way tangible or intangible. He insists that a pure gift will not come back to the giver. Milbank explains that “Derrida takes an extreme line here: not simply gratitude for a gift on the part of a recipient, but even acknowledgment of the gift cancels the gift by rewarding the giver with the knowledge that he is a giver” (“Can a Gift Be Given?” 130). It is not that the

gifts themselves are “bad” but that even our more noble acts such as the giving of gifts is haunted by our frailties and failings. For Derrida, the circulation of gift is contaminated by the very fact that there is a circulation, and circulation reengages the ever-present, ever-problematic forces of power that must be deconstructed at every turn.

Again, Derrida is concerned with the potential for injustice to be smuggled into what otherwise appears to be a benevolent act. Milbank uses the phrase “circulation of blood” to describe the way nihilism narrates the fate of “truth-finding to admit that there are no truths, and therefore no objective goods” (*Theology and Social Theory* 284). While Derrida is not nihilistic, this phrase is fittingly applied to Derrida’s narration of truth and power, and subsequent denial of pure gift. The dynamics of power which delineate guest and host and root Derrida’s poststructuralism in originary violence can be likened to a “circulation of blood” which undermines the possibility of a pure gift.

Here, othering or difference once more emerge as an important theme. In the case of gifts, othering can be expressed by distance. Recall that Derrida is concerned with the distance between the guest and host, a distance forged by power and possession that would, in the face of true hospitality, necessarily erase itself. For Derrida, a pure hospitality and a pure gift will eliminate distance or othering. But Milbank calls on the work of Jean-Luc Marion to argue that it is precisely *distance* which makes the gift (and by extension for our argument, hospitality) possible. He believes that “the distance of the other [must remain] in place” when receiving a gift, otherwise there is no gift (“Can a Gift Be Given?” 132). The point of contention in examining gift turns out to be the same point of contention in examining hospitality overall: whether or not “othering” is necessarily bad or if it holds a space of possibility to be constructive or good.

Turning back to Newman's trinitarian frame of reference, on which any understanding of Christian hospitality rests, the belief that otherness can exist outside of power differentials and therefore can be good, is sound. Viewing life as gift and calling for the exchange of gifts as modeled by the Trinity is what mobilizes hospitality as a way of living and being.

### Identity Formation

At last, this brings us to our final important divergence between Newman and Derrida: identity formation.<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, their points of departure are gift and power, respectively. Newman draws on a trinitarian understanding of ultimate reality to assert that our primary identity is given, rather than constructed. Considering how identity is expressed within the Trinity itself, she observes that "God's own life involves the circulation of gift. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit give and receive without remainder, such that their identities are entirely constitutive and therefore dependent on each other" (142). From the Trinity flows an understanding of identity that is to be discovered – not created – by the individual who lives within the context of transcendent community. An undue existential load is to be lightened upon realizing that "[t]he initiative always belongs to God; we are first of all guests in God's good creation. Such reception is a lifelong journey, one in which we learn that we do not have to generate our own identity but are free to the extent we receive ourselves from the hands of God" (112). Méndez Montoya takes this further, showing that the divine circulation of gift not merely allows us to discover our primary identity but also transforms us in a way that

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<sup>15</sup> For purposes of this study, "identity" refers to one's self-understanding within a given socio-political, temporal framework unless the term is otherwise expressly qualified.

reunites us with God, ourselves, and others: “from sin to redemption and deification, from scarcity to superabundance, from individualism to communion” (114–15). We are “individually and communally crafted by the gift that never ends” (Méndez Montoya 122). Our primary identity, like everything else, is gift. And beyond this, our *additional identities* – those given to us by virtue of our relationships with others and the roles we play in life – are developed and expressed best when our primary identity in God is foundationally understood and embraced.

But this grates against modern notions of self-actualization, self-determination, and self-identity. Newman does not deny this accusation. Rather, she argues that the idea that our primary identity *must* be created, and cannot be seen as given, is actually restrictive and coercive, as it places the entire burden of creation on the individual, and results in individuals who are isolated from others and fragmented within themselves (109, 139). She argues that “choosing” is “a modern piece of fiction that has blinded us to all the giving and receiving that constitutes our lives” (121). She laments the fragmentation that plagues contemporary theories of identity, arguing that they burden the individual to construct an identity without offering a coherent story within which to orient oneself.<sup>16</sup> “The ‘self’ today is more likely to be fragile and fragmented. The decontextualized self (‘man in the infinite’) has no story” (37). Highlighting the importance of coherent story, she draws on master storyteller herself, Isak Dinesen, who said, “‘all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them’...[implying] that an unstoried self cannot bear sorrows” (Newman 37). From another perspective, one evolutionary scientist has argued that we are “storytelling

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<sup>16</sup> Religion, broadly understood, offers such stories of orientation. For a more robust treatment of religion as orientation, see Charles Long’s “Religious Interpretations of America.”



animals” (Konnikova). What these thinkers are suggesting is that we need coherent, orienting story to help make sense of ourselves and our world. We locate ourselves within narratives. To the extent that we cannot share a cohesive story with one another, we will be increasingly fragmented and lost. According to Newman, Christian hospitality offers a satisfying and orienting story, where “[i]nstead of a fragmented and empty self... hospitality draws us into a richer context” that allows us to first “make sense of ourselves as ‘guests’ and ‘hosts,’ acknowledge our dependence on others, and learn to live with gratitude” (37–38).

The orienting story to which Newman consistently points is a biblical metanarrative about the nature, purpose, and eschatological aim of existence. This functions well within a Christian framework but is immediately problematic when viewed through Derrida’s poststructuralist lens, which is inherently suspicious of, or outright opposed to, the imposition of metanarratives. Derrida would not be amenable to Newman’s view that primary identity is given by a Creator and must be discovered by a person on pilgrimage. He would also critique Newman’s apparent underreading of the present reality that certain given aspects of our identity, such as race, gender, and culture, do place us into systems of power or injustice that can hurt or harm. Rather than rest on givenness, he relies on a view of identity as necessarily constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed, lacking a fixed orientation of space and time or eschatology. Identity is, in part, asserted by those in power and forced upon those without. It is also not singular, but necessarily plural. *Identities* are multiple, negotiated within a complex and sometimes nebulous matrix of variables and conditions. Derrida speaks of dismantling,

dispossession, and dislocation which yield fragmented or multiple identities, but also calls into question whether identity in a general sense can be firmly grasped at all:

At the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought, which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being, and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession...this thought summons us to a dislocation of the Greek logos, to a dislocation of our identity, and perhaps of identity in general. (Derrida and Bass 82)

Derrida himself seems to embody his deconstructive commitment. He is seen as almost elusive, never particularly cohesive or easy to pin down. As Tacey insightfully observes, “[Derrida] is not a unity, not all of a piece, but a plurality of voices and fragments. What else should we expect of the author of deconstruction?” (15).

Both Newman and Derrida would agree that our identities are articulated in relational terms, but they immediately part ways in their assessment of those relational differentials as edifying or destructive. In short, Newman sees identity as primarily something given, and Derrida sees identity as primarily something asserted or expressed, and both would find the other’s view problematic based on their metaphysical presuppositions. Divergent as they might be, Newman and Derrida each offer ways of thinking about identity formation and expression that are useful. We can take from Derrida a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which temporal, spatial, cultural, sociological, and other shifting and subjective factors do influence the way in which our identities are articulated and expressed. We can be humbled and grounded by Newman, who opens our eyes to the ways in which much of who we are and what we experience is actually given to us, and not constructed by us, thereby freeing us to view the core of our identity as given and stable.

## A Tentative Definition of Hospitality

A robust understanding of hospitality necessitates that there be room at the table for both Newman and Derrida to speak. Newman starts with an ontology of freedom and an economics of superabundance. Hospitality functions to disclose truth and taper power. The roles of guest and host belong firstly to God and are expressed interchangeably among people. She emphasizes the givenness of all creation and the gift of our identities, seeing Christian hospitality as having an orienting and unifying effect by placing people within a grander story. Otherness is embraced as a gift with redemptive potential. Derrida begins with an “originary violence” and assumption of scarcity, which alerts him to ways that injustices might be smuggled into the practice of hospitality. He sees truth as obfuscated by power – an unfortunate reality that hospitality risks concealing rather than revealing – and sees guest and host roles as determined by power. Gift, too, is viewed with suspicion and identity is thought to be constructed and asserted rather than given. Otherness is a problem because it allows space for power differentials to wreak havoc in both overt and obscure forms.

Newman can be critiqued for being idealistic – there really is scarcity of resources, violence in the world, and rampant abuse of power that risks corrupting hospitality. Derrida works to expose those risks which Newman is vulnerable to understate. But he ever deconstructs and critiques without offering a constructive framework that can be usefully lived out. And while Newman does not dwell on evil, she also does not deny it. Instead, she subordinates evil to a secondary role, locating it in the margins of a grander story whose central figure is Christ. She does not *accept* evil as a dominating presence, but rather “overaccepts” evil by “placing our lives in the wider

story of the triune God” (113). Her trinitarian view of ultimate reality allows her the space and resources to offer something constructive in light of the realities of brokenness in which we live. Her work is to uncover a redeemed vision for hospitality as a way of living and being within a cohesive worldview. She usefully draws on Christianity, which, as Milbank has offered, “seeks to recover the concealed text of an original peaceful creation beneath the palimpsest of the negative distortion of *dominium*, through the superimposition of a third redemptive template, which corrects these distortions by means of forgiveness and atonement” (*Theology and Social Theory* 423).

When the constructive helpfulness of Newman’s vision and the sobering warnings of Derrida’s critique are taken together, there emerges a refined articulation of Christian hospitality that is recognizable in “Babette’s Feast,” one that does not gloss over the bloody realities of war or turn away from the scars of brokenness and conflict, but also does not ignore the transformative potential of the truth, beauty, and goodness that imbues our world with hope and meaning. It is a vision that sees light shining ever brighter in the darkness, ever brighter *because of* the darkness. This Christian hospitality offers the possibility of living – communally and individually – as the imperfect circulation of gift, facilitated by a grace that at once upholds and transcends difference. This is the Christian hospitality that “Babette’s Feast” articulates and defends.

## Chapter IV.

### The Chef's Gift: Reading Christian Hospitality in "Babette's Feast"

It is high time for *le plat principal* to be served. "Babette's Feast" expresses a livable vision of Christian hospitality that displaces scarcity with abundance. It gracefully maintains the givenness of all things while holding space for creative autonomy among its participants. The fluidity of guest and host roles – and particularly the capacity of the marginalized to become meaningful hosts while those with social, spiritual, or material capital are guests – allows for identity formation that transcends power structures or oppressive forces. Viewing all of life as the circulation of gift reconciles the story's perceived tensions by celebrating difference for its real and potential beauty rather than fearing difference for real or perceived oppression. Evil, pain, and suffering are not downplayed but are at once exposed and contained within a larger, transcendent frame that imbues them with redemptive purpose. A potential for wholeness emerges inasmuch as one is able to recognize the transcendent givenness of all things, rooted in a reality of superabundance from a gracious and sovereign God. Returning to the five points of divergence explored in Chapter III between Newman and Derrida, we shall examine how "Babette's Feast" articulates a more spacious, robust definition of Christian hospitality.

### A Clash of Ontologies

The story narrates a clash of ontological assumptions – an encounter made inevitable by the proximity that hospitality demands of its participants. Gathered around the table, the villagers' deeply entrenched conviction of self-denial and scarcity is

disrupted by the freedom and abundance that Babette represents. Here, the true test of unity in diversity or meaningful coexistence comes to the fore.

Isolated as they were in their “toy-town” hidden between two mountains (Dinesen 21), the villagers had settled into an ontology as closed off to the world as they were. Their beliefs echo Gnosticism, denying the possibility of material good and locating ultimate reality in another world. Unable to accommodate both the spiritual and the material, they saw “the earth and all that it held” as “a kind of illusion, and the true reality was the New Jerusalem toward which they were longing” (21). Ironically, their fear of material excess manifested in *more excess*: their mission to escape the excess of “vain illusions” (54) that mar the world could only be enforced by an excess of restrictions and suspicions. Consequently, the pious villagers deny the world around them while also denying the world within them. Fearing indulgence, they indulge in religiosity; fearing pleasure, they relish scarcity; fearing pride, they boast in lowliness... Indeed, they seem to prove the dangerous irony that hubris has the clever capacity to cloak itself in humility.

Village houses are painted an array of colors (21) and yet life in Berlevaag is shaded a somber gray. Babette disrupts their quotidian existence when she knocks “violently” at the sisters’ door and faints (29). She appears as a pierced and fractured earthen jar and yet somehow, unbeknownst to her startled hosts, contains the bright expanse of the whole world hidden within. By the end of the story, it will be said of the villagers that “the vain illusions of this earth had dissolved before their eyes like smoke, and they had seen the universe as it really is” (54) – not merely the *world*, but the *universe*. It is Babette who pries open this revelation as she hosts them at her luxuriant

table, dissolving the material/spiritual divide that had, until then, fenced their existence. But how?

Her revelatory power begins with her embodiment of an ontology of freedom and abundance, reminiscent of Newman's Christian ontology. Her way of life affirms and embraces the material world as good, and her artistry expressed in the feast echoes the story of a Creator who chooses to create freely and generously – not out of need but out of desire. Resting upon ontological assumptions of freedom and abundance, Babette is liberated to sacrifice her livelihood for the sake of living out and defending her beliefs – not once but *twice*. She sacrifices her life in Paris for the sake of the revolutionary cause and defense of her people, and she sacrifices her entire sum of wealth for the sake of her art and the ability to welcome those who were her “other” as her guests.

Recall that Newman identifies Christian hospitality with “abundance, surplus, excess, and surprise” (100–01). The abundance, surplus, and excess feared by the villagers is undoubtedly the hallmark of Babette's table. But what's more interesting is the way Babette's story underscores the prominence of Newman's fourth descriptor, *surprise*. Her arrival and true identity are obviously surprises, as are her capacities to multiply resources, effectively serve in the home, and cook so well. But these are surprises to the sisters, for whom any break in monotony would be a wonder. The surprise that presently warrants our attention is Babette's, and it comes in the form of provision for the feast. The ingredients are not purchased with hard-earned money or produced by her tilling the soil, and the meal is certainly not conjured or created *ex nihilo*. Rather, provision comes to her as an unexpected and extravagant gift from a place long-lost and far away: a winning lottery ticket from France. Her feast therefore

constitutes as much of a surprise for Babette as it does for her guests, having arisen from an ongoing circulation of gift that transcends time and distance. In making the feast, she accepts the unspoken, divine invitation to participate in creativity and generosity for the benefit of herself and others, having first received the same as a surprise gift. Her actions are immersed in “divine caritas, which is expressed with a radical gesture of kenosis, reciprocity, and concrete communal practices” (Méndez Montoya 115). In this, she embodies an understanding of ultimate reality as relational and overflowing, imbued with a lavish grace that frees her to grace others. As Méndez Montoya explains, “[h]er art and her caritas do not impoverish her, but, on the contrary, her gesture only reveals the reality of superabundance, which is the gift that knows no end” (121).

The sisters struggle to accept or appreciate this from the outset because of the restrictions they have placed on their existence. This is one of Dinesen’s many critiques of the villagers’ sect of Christianity. Viewing luxury as “sinful,” they want all their food “as plain as possible” and seem to imply that food should not be enjoyed (32). They keep a simple diet of “split cod and an ale-and-bread-soup” which they share with neighbors in “soup-pails and baskets” (34). It is no mistake that they eat fish and bread shared in baskets. Dinesen leverages the gospel miracles of Jesus’ multiplication of the fish and the bread to expose the irony in the way the villagers have hindered their intake despite espousing the God of such abundance found in their scriptures. When Babette enters the picture, the miracles of the fish and the bread are lifted from the villagers’ black-and-white Bibles and made manifest in their very midst. True to Jesus’ miracles, the food is multiplied and takes on an unprecedented capacity to nourish the people: “When Babette took over the housekeeping its cost was miraculously reduced, and the soup-pails and



baskets acquired a new, mysterious power to stimulate and strengthen their poor and sick” (32). They are no longer merely reading of miracles, but actively metabolizing them from the mysteriously gifted hands of Babette.

Scholars who read this story as an anti-Christian parable could conclude that Babette is undermining the divine multiplication in the Bible by accomplishing the same effect with mere technical skill. But Dinesen herself does not strip these incidents of their divine mystery, nor does she signal that Babette is subverting Christ. She borrows charitably from the Christian miracle accounts and in doing so makes a direct connection from Babette to Christ. Her issue is not with Babette or the miraculous, but with the villagers’ and their misguided religious practice. And as Dinesen goes to great lengths to mock the denseness of their restrictive ways, the voice of a Christian icon from years before her seems to join in her criticism. Lamenting the way abstinence had eclipsed love as a Christian virtue, C.S. Lewis penned words that precede and stand alongside Dinesen’s: “[I]t would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures... like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased” (26). In this, we start to see that Dinesen’s critique is not original, but has been raised and answered from within Christianity itself.

Not surprisingly, the sisters are suspicious of Babette and the abundance of gifts she brings into their world. Just before the feast, they stir up suspicion in their neighbors in a worrisome attempt to defend the boundaries they have placed around their way of life. Dinesen’s critique of their Christianity continues here. She depicts the sisters’ faith as closed and naïve by portraying them predominantly confined to their small house – a

manmade structure intended to provide shelter from the rest of the world. Their view is limited to what they can perceive from the windows or glean from their deceased father's old teachings. This means they not only fail to appreciate the fullness of creation that Babette brings forth, but also respond with suspicion and denial to the novel realities that cross their threshold. Only when Babette enters the home and embodies the very miracles of Christ are the rooms "filled with a heavenly light" and the windows thought to shine "like gold" (53). The sisters had refused to leave their house, but in a powerful illustration of unmerited grace, the divine came to them and entered their world regardless. And through the transcendent brilliance of these golden-hued windows, the sisters are finally able to catch a glimpse of the world outside their own.<sup>17</sup>

It is possible that, in spite of the incredible impact of the meal, the sisters still fail to comprehend the *both/and*, abundantly generous and overflowing reality of the created world that Babette personifies. Upon discovery of Babette's sacrifice, grasping for words and trying to make sense of the extraordinary in her midst, Philippa declares, "Ah, how you will enchant the angels!" (59). Reverting to this familiar eschatological promise shows that she continues to locate ultimate reality and meaning in the next world, failing to see that the transcendent has broken into the immanent and the Kingdom *has* come (albeit not yet in its fullness), right into her very house.

In this, Babette dramatizes and answers a key challenge in Newman's Christian ontology: how to live out the belief that the Kingdom of God, "marked by excess and

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<sup>17</sup> It is hard not to think of another Dutch work of art, Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. In the famous painter's depiction of the town where he lived in asylum, he painted all the windows as yellow as the stars except for those in the Dutch-style church in the center ("Starry Night by Vincent Van Gogh | Analysis, Description & Facts - Video & Lesson Transcript"). The church windows are dark, suggesting the institutional church of the town had grown dim. But light and divine inspiration were not hidden from the people. When restrained by a given institution, they moved to be manifested in the homes instead.

superfluidity, is now present” (102) despite deep suffering and scarcity in our midst. Babette beautifully embodies the distinguishing freedom and hope of Christian hospitality by living in the liminal space of ‘yes but not yet.’ Writing of the hope embodied in Christian action, Williams expresses it this way: “There is another world, but it is the same as this one’. All [Christian] sign-making is the action of hope, the hope that this world may become other and that its experienced fragmentariness can be worked into sense” (224). The hard line the villagers had drawn between this world and the next yielded an overly simplistic, *either/or* mindset that could spare no room for “other” aside from well-meaning but conditional welcome. They were so focused on nurturing their eschatological hope in the beyond that they neglected the fullness of the present moment. The meal, surprisingly given by someone who was “other” to them, brought the villagers what they least expected - “fulfillment of [their] ever-present hope” (Dinesen 54). Babette’s actions suggest it is possible to rise to Newman’s challenge of embodying the abundance and freedom of the reign of God in the present moment by living generously and with gratitude, and the villagers’ response suggests that doing so can result in transformation of the present.

The effect of consuming Babette’s gifts are renewal, reconciliation, and unity among the people. Their wine-soaked expressions of generosity and gratitude toward one another by the end of the meal spark genuine reconciliation and healing. They sleep late into the next day, digesting all they’ve taken in. But alas, their transformation is not perfect or complete, for they are still on their journey of sanctification. This is noted by their failure to thank the very source of their nourishment and healing: Babette. Like Christ, she is not fully understood or sufficiently thanked for her good works, and like

Christ, she does them anyway. Because it was never about garnering praise, it was always about fulfilling purpose.

“Babette’s Feast” articulates a more expansive Christian ontology beyond that which the sisters can readily comprehend, one that embraces the very tensions that can be raised against Christianity as critiques. The pious villagers are portrayed as ignorant and foolish, unable to appreciate the material world for their preoccupations with the spiritual. But Babette reenchants the material world and in doing so forces upon them the tangible reminder that all creation – the spiritual and the material – is of the same Creator. One need not choose between them, but rather can embrace them both as intertwined and connected by an eternal circulation of gift that transcends time, space, and realms. Babette arrives to their home, a frightened refugee and unsuspecting jar of clay, bearing within her the very fullness of life that enables her to live “as if” the reign of God has come, because it has.

### Truth, Power, and the Superimposition of Grace

In “Babette’s Feast” we find truth disclosed through hospitality yet imperfectly understood, and power coursing through the story yet subverted by surprise. Dinesen’s treatment of truth and power is neither unrealistic nor skeptical but is imbued with wisdom and anchored in real living. It is at once realistic and hopeful. She treats truth and power as gift circulated by grace, *gift superimposed by grace*, and this is experienced and expressed by various characters in various ways.

First, we shall examine how certain characters reveal and receive truth. Our heroine exemplifies how truth can be disclosed through hospitality by entering the sisters’ “toy-town” yellow house bearing knowledge, experiences, and convictions that would

otherwise prove inaccessible to the villagers. Her presence immediately challenges – and ultimately expands – their understanding of reality and the divine. Still, the sisters lack the capacity to fully comprehend and appreciate all that Babette sets before them.

Chasing caviar with an exceptional glass of 1860 Veuve Clicquot champagne – a pairing synonymous with opulence – the sisters are comedically certain they are drinking “some kind of lemonade” (50). “Many things” they experience during the dinner are “beyond comprehension” (57). The sisters’ inability to fully appreciate or understand Babette’s gifts is important for helping us understand how the story prioritizes grace in its articulation of Christian hospitality. Even though hospitality discloses truth, as Newman claims, the sisters demonstrate that it is in no way certain that those truths will be fully received, appreciated, or understood. But irrespective of receptivity, hospitality allows its participants to taste and see, to draw nearer than they were before, to discover truth – or at least scratch its surface – in ways that would otherwise be inaccessible. It is grace that enables and sustains this truth disclosure.

The sisters’ interaction with truth also highlights the necessity of receiving the ‘other’ as gift. Recall that Newman critiques pluralism for trivializing/concealing difference and postmodernism for reducing difference to conflict.<sup>18</sup> She offers instead Christian hospitality, which receives difference as gift and humbly recognizes that the ‘other’ just might be a divine messenger or vessel of truth. This posture neither trivializes nor reduces difference but dignifies it as something ripe with possibility. At first, the sisters receive Babette in mere fulfillment of a pious duty. They keep a marked distance

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<sup>18</sup> Though her assessment fails to nuance these complex and ever-evolving schools of thought, and can even be discounted as caricature, her broad analysis is still helpful for succinctly positioning her theory of hospitality in relation to each.

from her, fearing her otherness throughout most of the story. Uncomfortable with the difference she has brought, they hope to harmonize their home by converting her to their religion (32). Note that they are not totally indifferent or ungrateful to her – certainly they (along with the other villagers) recognize that she has helped them in countless ways before she ever gives the feast. They even lament the news that she has won the lottery because they long to keep her with them, to continue to enjoy her company and her good works. One can feel the dissonance growing in their hearts as “[t]he country of France... was slowly rising before their servant’s horizon, and correspondingly their own existence was sinking beneath their feet. The ten thousand francs which made her rich – how poor did they not make the house she had served!” (36). Clearly, the sisters appreciate Babette because of her good works and the difference she has made in their lives. But prior to the transformation that her sacrifice brings about, their appreciation for her is tainted by fear of the ways in which she is different from them. As much as they long for her to continue living with them, for example, this does not stop Martine from having a nightmare that Babette would poison them (40). This fear of other and drive to mute difference by imposing conformity festers until it finally implodes at the feast, when they are at long last able to appreciate her for who she *is* (rather than what she does for them) and to recognize that she is, and she bears, *gift*. In coming to appreciate her as a person, they do not compromise their convictions by reducing her differences to mere preference or opinion, nor do they hold out their differences as a source of perceived or potential conflict to be fought on the stage of power. The sisters do not conform to Babette nor does Babette conform to the sisters – *they maintain their difference*, and yet they arrive to a certain unity together. Méndez Montoya would call this the experience of the Christian

ideal of oneness, in which “[d]ifference is not eliminated, but it is brought into a new harmonious and excessive unity (Christ’s Body) that opens up an infinite space for relations of affinity, mutual care (mutual nurturing), and reciprocity” (140). It is only when Babette is beheld as a gift and recognized as divinely gifted that this happens, and they can appreciate her for who she is, albeit imperfectly and incompletely. Grace is proven to be the essential ingredient for enabling truth to be disclosed and upheld in hospitality.

We next examine how Dinesen presents power in the tale. Power dynamics unfold in predictable fashion for a story set in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe... until they don’t. The Dean wields patriarchal power to exercise considerable control over his daughters and the congregation, even years after his death. He sets the boundaries within which his daughters will live and determines the standards to which any new relationship or experience must conform. The sisters inherit the authority that runs adjacent to this power, though to a degree removed from the Dean himself. They seem to have lost some measure of control along the way, with their congregation growing in discord and discontent over time. Still, as heiresses to the Dean’s influence and now matrons, they make every effort to maintain the Dean’s directives and even leverage their authority to rally the villagers to their cause at the outset of the feast.

General Loewenhielm also finds his existence embroiled in power. Once intimidated by the sacrosanct beauty of Martine that was made untouchable by the weight of the Dean’s command in the house (perhaps thought to be divinely ordained), he has gone elsewhere and defined his life within the world’s matrix of power. Having garnered for himself a considerable amount of prominence and influence in his military career, he

arrives to the feast hopeful to see power dynamics reversed, to redeem the pride his younger self lost years ago and to vindicate his decision to abandon a fruitless pursuit of Martine for the wider world – a decision that haunts him still. These manifestations of power are noted but unexceptional.

It is Babette who disrupts the commonplace power dynamics and in doing so exemplifies how power is to function within lived Christian hospitality. From the outset, she is perceived to be the character with the least power. She is a female refugee and widow who does not even know the language of the far-away town where she finds herself, having lost everything in a war which had no bearing or impact on her hosts. The sisters wield a certain power over her that outlasts even the end of the story – at any moment they can deny her their hospitality and reject her presence. Her skillset – the one thing she was able to carry with her on her flight to safety and the only means by which she might offer something of value to her hosts – is undermined and suppressed almost immediately. Although they are assured in the letter from Achille Papin that Babette is a good cook, the sisters restrict her to a regimen of monotonous everyday recipes, stripping her of the dignity of using the fullness of her gifts. Babette arrives misunderstood, underappreciated, feared, and alone. She is by all counts oppressed and her vulnerability is not remedied even by the feast or the story's final pages. And while she does not argue or resist this oppression, she is not bound or victimized by it either. We can see this in the way she flourishes in her new community: “[F]rom the day when Babette took over the housekeeping its cost was miraculously reduced, and the soup-pails and baskets acquired a new, mysterious power to stimulate and strengthen their poor and sick. The world outside the yellow house also came to acknowledge Babette's excellence... She was held



in awe” (Dinesen 32). She enriched and lightened the lives of everyone around her, to the point that they “thanked God for the speechless stranger” (33). Babette successfully navigates the restrictions placed upon her by the power structure in which she finds herself, and her doing so points others to God.

But her vulnerability and others’ response are only part of the story. The complexity of her relationship to power comes in the end, when it is unveiled that Babette was not actually powerless all along, but rather *powerful* and capable of using her power in subversive and edifying ways. Reflecting on her life in Paris and her sociopolitical enemies who were also (ironically) her esteemed clientele, she explains that ““those people belonged to me, they were mine... When I did my very best I could make them perfectly happy”” (58-59). She strips her enemies of power by serving them, claiming for herself a certain authority over them to control their experience and feelings. And when they fall to the very war that divided them, she grieves them. When asked if she will return to Paris, she replies ““What will I do in Paris? They have all gone. I have lost them all, Mesdames”” (56). Dinesen writes that ““there was such an infinite perspective of tragedy in her announcement that in [the sisters’] responsive state of mind they felt her losses as their own, and their eyes filled with tears”” (56). It is left unclear whether Babette is grieving the people themselves or her ability to make them happy, but she likely grieves both. She takes care to name several people specifically and calls them her own, and also reminisces about her artistic endeavors which they alone were trained to appreciate. Her memories of these people and their interaction with her art are imbricated into the texture of her grief, along with her ready confession of her willingness to kill them in war. Her relationship with them is paradoxical and so is her grieving over them.

But the fullest proof of her subversive power is epitomized here, in the audacity she has to grieve for the very men who killed her family.

Not only did she wield her power in Paris over her enemies – by serving them in a way that was edifying to herself and nourishing to them – but she also manifests this same subversive power in the sisters’ house. She despises any hint of pity the sisters may have offered, despises any narrative that would position her as a victim of oppression or circumstance, despises any notion that she is powerless or poor. Instead, she declares with absolute certainty and conviction, ““I am a great artist!... No, I shall never be poor. I told you that I am a great artist. A great artist, Mesdames, is never poor. We have something, Mesdames, of which other people know nothing”” (58). With this secret power, hidden away so deep within her that neither war nor displacement nor grief could rob her of it, she does the unexpected. She flips the power script. Rather than oppress, she edifies. And in edifying others, she dignifies herself.

Babette reminds us once again of Christ and his voluntary surrender of power as he submits to the role of guest to our hospitality. As the sisters could reject Babette, so humanity can reject God. He stands at the door and knocks (Revelation 3.20), lets we his creatures have power over him the Creator, and gives us a choice to welcome or ignore him. But his vulnerability does not undermine his divinity. He uses his power not to oppress but to edify, to usher in a surprising Kingdom where the last are first and the least-deserving are honored guests. Even as our guest, he flips the script to become our host. A folk song delightfully articulates the subversive yet edifying way in which Jesus uses his power within the context of hospitality with us: ““And He invited Himself home

with me / I took a rest, I took a rest / When He comes to dine with you / You are the guest, you are the guest” (Keyes).

In “Babette’s Feast” we find truth disclosed through hospitality yet imperfectly understood, and power coursing through the story yet subverted by surprise. The story illustrates how difference can be received as a gift – enabling unity in diversity – and how power can be used to edify the self and others – enabling flourishing rather than oppression. It hints at the trinitarian ideal of otherness that exists outside of power differentials and which leads to beauty, community, and love. Even as these dynamics are not fully understood by all the participants, this circulation of gift imbued with grace allows them to exist in authentic community with one another. This is the ideal that Christian hospitality upholds.

### The Dignity of Interchanging Roles

Recall that Christian hospitality asserts that all people have the dignity of serving as host because all have something of value to offer others, even as all people are humbled to be guests, having nothing apart from that which has been given. God is the ultimate Host and all are guests at his table, with each person’s existence being derived from the divine circulation of gift that animates and sustains all of life. These dynamics serve as an equalizing and inclusive force among people and are intended to give a cruciform shape to communal life. “Babette’s Feast” bears witness to this, as each character figures some aspect of Christ precisely at the delta where roles shift between guest and host and each experiences some measure of transcendence as a result.

Babette is a multi-layered example. By representing Christ and hosting the feast, she signals that all who are present are guests of the divine.<sup>19</sup> Consider how her story and actions parallel Christ's. She first arrives as a dispossessed stranger, in genuine need of the hospitality and care of her lowly hosts. She quickly grows from needy to capable, embracing her vocation as a chef to bless and improve the household and village that had, not knowing who she really was, received her in as their guest. She did not know the local language at first - her actions and interactions expressed who she was without need for words. She finally reveals her identity with definitive action – a personal and costly sacrifice. The stranger turned guest becomes host of a salvific feast.

As host, she does not merely serve expensive, imported food to her guests, but metaphorically serves *her flesh and blood* to them. The distance between giver and gift is diminished as she offers a deeply personal and performative dish to unsuspecting guests: *Cailles en Sarcophage*. Her signature plate from Paris, quail nestled in a pastry tomb, invites her guests into her unspoken story. Rashkin believes the quail brought from France represent her loved ones and that the preparation and serving of this dish dramatizes her long-held grief (362). Curry poignantly adds that “[t]he plucking and skinning of quail intimates the death of her family at the hands of Gaston Galliffet. Yet, whereas the Marquis’s savagery led only to death, here Babette’s ‘violence’ leads to art and new life” (25). I argue that the *cailles* mean more than that. Given that this dish is her signature dish, it is inextricably tied to her reputation, good name, and past life as chef.

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<sup>19</sup> Intriguingly, the idea of a transcendent host and guest is not limited to Babette appearing as a Christ figure in the story. The Dean’s “presence” as the plot unfolds suggests a form of hospitality that also transcends death. The feast is meant to honor the Dean’s birthday, taking place in the Dean’s house, at the Dean’s table, adorned with a picture of the Dean. Memories, anecdotes, songs, and sayings of the Dean are cited throughout the meal and carry much of the conversation. Taken together, the Dean can be seen as present despite death, a transcendent host of the party and guest at the meal.

Further, Babette forgoes all other possibilities of a new or different life by spending her entire treasure on this feast, meaning her fate and future are just as tied up in the dish as her past. Therefore, the *cailles* represent not just her lost family, but also herself. She, along with all she loved of life, is symbolically sacrificed and entombed, given in the form of real food, to be eaten as a tangible meal that leads to a nourished life and binds her to a certain future.<sup>20</sup> And by serving her *cailles* along with the finest of wine, her meal becomes an unmistakable echo of the Eucharist.

Even more poignant is that she serves the dish to her enemy who is also, in some profound ways, her old friend: General Loewenhielm. He is a contemporary of Colonel Galliffet, the man who lauded her cooking as “a kind of love affair” (50) yet later murdered her family. Loewenhielm has arrived to Berlevaag uninvited and unexpected, and at Babette’s finest hour, she not only makes room for him at the table but serves him with even more graciousness and special care than any of the others.

Finally, having emptied herself into the gifts at her table, her powerful words declare her true self with an *I am* statement that transcends her present circumstance and points to a life beyond here and now: “I am a great artist!” (58). She then remains with the villagers, who have been transformed by her sacrifice, now not merely staying as a guest but as a friend and neighbor. Her choice to sacrifice her winnings for the feast is in effect a choice to dwell with those for whom she sacrificed. Revealed in fullness, she makes her home with them.

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<sup>20</sup> Going deeper, the quail offers a two-fold Christological reference. In addition to being placed in a tomb and therefore representing Christ’s buried body, the quail also reminds us of the quail that accompanied the manna from heaven in Exodus 16.

Readers of the Gospels will see how Babette parallels the life of Christ. Entering the story in lowly circumstances, he was completely vulnerable as an infant and in genuine need of the care and hospitality of Mary, Joseph, and his community. He grew into his vocation as a rabbi and spiritual leader, first revealing himself through actions – as a young student of the Hebrew Scriptures growing “in favor with God and men” (*ESV Study Bible* Luke 2.52), then through his first miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana (John 2.1-12), followed by many examples thereafter. Like Babette, his actions and character precede his express words. He finally reveals who he is with language, declaring a series of charged “I am” statements, all of which point beyond the present circumstance to something far greater (John 6.35, 20, 48, 51; 8.12, 24, 28, 58; 9.5; 10.7, 9, 11, 14; 11.25; 14.6; 15.1; 18:5). His claims are substantiated by ultimate sacrifice, but not before offering a climactic and history-making feast. He is not only the host but the meal itself, offering as his feast his flesh and blood (Matthew 26.26-28). And he serves this meal to disciples who do not fully understand who he is, along with Judas, whom he personally feeds though Judas has already betrayed him to death. Finally, he returns to all those who are transformed and reconciled by his sacrifice. He promises the gift of the Holy Spirit and His eternal presence: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28.20). Christ, the Word made flesh, fluidly moves between roles of guest and host throughout scriptures and ultimately makes his home with those who choose life with him. Babette’s story, small by comparison but beautiful nonetheless, sits comfortably in his shadow.

For Babette, the fluidity of guest and host roles also signals the dignifying and empowering reality of Christian hospitality. She is dignified as a giver and given the

opportunity to be recognized as one who has real blessings and talent to share. This is not so only in Berlevaag but also back in Paris, where she and her political enemies dignified and esteemed one another, enjoined as they were in a dance of appetite, artistry, and affluence at the Café Anglais. In the midst of political upheaval and mass social injustice, other roles, identifiers, ambitions, and tensions that otherwise would have divided them necessarily faded into the background at her grand Parisian table. There, the circulating roles of guest and host took prominence and enabled those who would otherwise stand apart draw together on common ground. They needed, nourished, and sustained one another. Here we see that not just benign otherness, but even difference that manifests as violence or hostility, can be received as a mysterious blessing and a gift.

General Loewenhielm also sees transformation precisely at the moment when roles change. His first dinner at the Dean's house is marked by timidity and frustrated speechlessness. Staring at the water set before him, he cannot muster the words he needs to break past the impenetrable social boundaries guarding the Dean's daughters. He cannot reach Martine as she sits vexingly close at the table and cannot escape his social paralysis except in the imagined refuge of youthful daydreams kissing her (Dinesen 24). At Babette's feast, Loewenhielm sits down not to water but to wine, which appears to free him from his inhibitions. The words that once eluded him suddenly come pouring out involuntarily, almost inevitably: "[I]t was as if the whole figure of General Loewenhielm... were but a mouthpiece for a message which meant to be brought forth" (52). As he rises to give this speech, he rearticulates words the Dean had previously spoken but imbues them with new insight, and in this moment unveils "the most ineffable epiphany in all Isak Dinesen," a certain "triumph of the absurd" in which "Either/Or" is

discarded in favor of holding life in an “imaginative apprehension” (Langbaum 253–54). Dinesen writes that “the sound of well-known and cherished words had seized and moved all hearts. In this way, after thirty-one years, General Loewenhielm succeeded in dominating the conversation at the Dean’s dinner table” (53). He would not have had the opportunity to serve as host if he had not first entered as guest, signaling once again that the roles of guest and host are interdependent and fluid, and that one need not choose between them but rather can, and should, enjoy them both.

It is also worth noting that Loewenhielm’s transformation is cleverly enriched with the biblical symbolization of water and wine. By suggesting that the key to his experience of revelation and freedom is mere intoxication, Dinesen appears to be continuing her comedic critique of the villagers’ Christianity. However, I would argue that there is more at play in the text. It is *Babette* who replaces the Dean’s water with her own French wine, further establishing her as a Christ figure and signaling an undercurrent of divine activity in his experience. The General’s speech cannot be reduced to intoxication, as comedy might suggest, because he does not blabber mindlessly as a drunk but speaks clearly, inspired with a wisdom that seems to seize him for its own purposes. The General partakes in Babette’s cup and becomes a conduit of wisdom and revelation, and the result is the transformation of everyone at the table. The religious references are too rich to write off as comedy.

What’s more is that the wine itself signals transcendence. In the Bible, wine symbolizes joy in the completed work of Christ (Leithart), which humanity can partake in by means of his grace. The General – undeniably complicit in Babette’s greatest tragedy – encounters divine grace in the wine and experiences a newfound sense of freedom,



peace, and rest. He expresses it this way: “[G]race is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it with gratitude... For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another!” (Dinesen 52). In his youth, he had left the Dean’s table frustrated at himself and ashamed: “For I have learned here that Fate is hard, and that in this world there are things which are impossible!” (24). But he leaves Babette’s feast with a radically different understanding that echoes Matthew 19.26: “For tonight I have learned, dear sister, that in this world anything is possible” (54). Here, we see not merely a reconciliation between the General and his secret love Martine, but also with himself, and finally with God. The transformation of water into wine at Babette’s table parallels the General’s transformation by grace, and this is made possible precisely at the point where his role changed from guest to host.

The sisters also experience transformation in the shift of roles from host to guest, which is fraught with resistance until they are finally able to receive Babette as a gift. Through their struggle, we learn that it is not sufficient to accept the fluid roles of guest and host, but we must be willing to embrace this fluidity with gratitude. We must not see the other as a threat but humbly and gracefully receive the other as a gift. This unlocks empathy and a sense of genuine community and oneness. When the sisters are eventually able to do this, they find themselves – for the first time – grieving Babette’s “losses as their own” (56).

“Babette’s Feast” presents a livable expression of Christian hospitality that demands humility and embraces the other as blessing. The humbling, liberating reality of the divine Guest and Host circulating gifts among Creation is a belief that is

performatively affirmed through the fluid, interdependent roles of everyone. By grace, the interchangeability of roles fosters a sense of oneness that closes the chasm of difference otherwise separating guest and host, reconciling at last the etymological tensions of Derrida's *hôte*. While the fluidity of roles and recognition of divine presence is by no means perfect, they are still a means of transformation and reconciliation.

### The Imperfect Metabolism of Unending Gift

The circulation of gift in "Babette's Feast" is the lifeblood that courses through the story's pages, making profound claims about the nature of reality and the human condition that impose a paradigm shift upon jaded minds: everything is gift; we are fools to believe we can live outside of its circulation; gift has redemptive, transformative potential; and gift declares the mysterious reality of superabundance in our midst. These audacious claims flow crimson and alive, circling ever back to the wellspring from which they came: Christian hospitality. It is through these claims about gift that the Christian hospitality of "Babette's Feast" is unlocked.

### Everything is Gift

The first claim that the story makes about gift is that *all* of life is gift. General Loewenhielm's revelatory speech suggests a mysterious giving of all things which traverses human choice and free will: "See! [T]hat which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us" (Dinesen 52). The sisters grant the gift of hospitality, which opens the door to them receiving Babette's gift of the feast. The villagers give and receive the gift of forgiveness. They seem to experience the gift of tongues. Philippa has the gift of song and gives Papin the gift of

hope (one she promptly takes back upon his gift of a kiss, but that short-lived hope is a temporary gift nonetheless). Circulation of gift is plentiful in the story. This, of course, aligns with Newman, who treats the givenness of all things as foundational to her theory of Christian hospitality. She finds good company with Milbank, who traces the Christian belief in gift all the way down to the core of being. In his argument for a trinitarian metaphysic, he goes so far as to posit an “absolutization of gift exchange,” seeing in “the logic of Creation” an “ontology of the gift” (“Can a Gift Be Given?” 137). Méndez Montoya similarly argues that “divine gift is... inherent in creation. All creation is a gift: its ‘isness’ is as much a gift as it is gratitude... The sophianicity of Being is the gift-character of all that ‘is’ by virtue of being nourished by God’s Wisdom and Love” (147-148). Interestingly, even those who are sympathetic to Derrida’s suspicion of gift and his hardline stance of its virtual impossibility can still read *Babette* and find a gift in her. Note how Mullins finds a way to admit the existence of gift without betraying her consistency with Derridean thought: “The meal Babette prepares is a gift because, paradoxically, it is not a gift... The gift is outside any system of reciprocity or circularity” (“Home, Community, and the Gift That Gives in Isak Dinesen’s *Babette’s Feast*” 225). Gift is inescapably present and foundational. Though it is nowhere expressly stated that God is the ultimate giver of the gifts in “*Babette’s Feast*,” Dinesen integrates ample Biblical references that point to God’s active giving to Creation, such that crediting God as the ultimate giver in the story is a reasonable and fitting conclusion.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The wedding in Cana, the Eucharist, crimson sin washed white as snow, walking on water, the gift of tongues, and multiplying the fish and the bread are all prominent in the story, among several other Biblical references. Each of these references points to God’s creative acts of giving.

From this assertion radiate three edifying truths: We can justify no posture other than humility; we are freed to embrace otherness as a blessing; and the material and spiritual are both good. Knowing that one has nothing to give other than that which has been given is inherently humbling. As Méndez Montoya puts it, “human reception, initiative, and creativity... always [depend] on God’s primary source – that is, divine *caritas* as nourishment” (126). Even our imaginations, though hubris might like to consider them unbounded, are tethered to original givenness. Our most fantastical and other-worldly thoughts are still the composite product of a myriad of experiences and observations that find their origin or inspiration in that which already *is*, that which has been given.

Flowing naturally from this posture of humility, the view that all of life is gift allows us to receive the other as blessing. Recall that Loewenhielm represents a very real threat to Babette at her table. He is not just “other”, but his presence is potentially dangerous and even traumatic. His link to Babette’s past life in Paris and her family’s murder is paraded in front of her by virtue of his full military uniform and commanding presence. Yet she serves him her utmost, even giving him special attention,<sup>22</sup> and it is he alone who truly appreciates her, ultimately giving voice to the miracle transpiring at the table. Here we see that potential threat is not erased but is embraced and transformed, and difference becomes a potential source of beauty, opportunity to learn, or way of enrichment. Babette, herself “other”, illustrates how “[t]he ‘alien other’” can be “the one who becomes a gift of unity and transformation... in the context of the gift exchange” (Méndez Montoya 125). When there is space for real difference and those differences are

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<sup>22</sup> As Babette ensures Loewenhielm’s glass remains full, one can recall the way Christ himself fed Judas bread at the Passover Table/First Communion. For Christ, an “enemy” is not beyond loving.

not feared but are recognized as gift, the possibility of unity upholding diversity emerges as a reality. This is a unity that is made possible without flattening difference to mere preference. Tensions created by these differences become places of curiosity and exploration, opportunities for learning and growth.

With it being possible to embrace tensions as gift, the scaffolding of tensions that uphold “Babette’s Feast” becomes ripe with purpose. It declares, despite the beliefs of certain characters, that the material and the spiritual can both be considered good, and one is freed from having to choose between them. The story’s central tension is that between the spiritual and material, epitomized in the pleasure-denying, gnostic-swayed spiritual life of the pious villagers and the passionate, bourgeoisie-catering sensualities of Babette’s life in Paris. This tension is best expressed in their respective treatment of food. Identifying the feast with the Eucharist, Méndez Montoya articulates how the food functions to unify both sides, bridging the spiritual and the material: “[Food is] a material – as much as it is also a divine – sign of relationality, interdependence, and sharing of life eternal” (114). Milbank describes this as the “[p]erpetual eucharist: that is to say, a living through the offering... of the gift given to us of God himself in the flesh” (152).

#### We Cannot Live Outside of Gift’s Circulation

Dinesen wrote “Babette’s Feast” as a comedy (Cate 127). Ambitious, multi-textured, and brilliant, yes, but a comedy, nonetheless. Some argue that the comedy is her proffering of Christianity as absurd (Shapiro; Bunch; Stambaugh; Hansen and Kynoch) while others see a subversive victory of the material over the spiritual (Pallesen; Bunch; Barr). But I would argue that the real comedy can be found in the sisters, particularly Martine, who demonstrate how fear and pride bid to stop the inevitable circulation of gift

that constitutes life. This is the absurdity in the story, the preposterous idea that floats comedic adrift the deeper beauty and truths that constitute it.

Since everything is ultimately gift, we are necessarily interdependent and cannot live outside of its circulation. Even the act of giving still requires a certain measure of receiving, because the giver must first receive audience or proximity from the receiver (Loftin 315). Complications arise in this dynamic exchange as fear and pride throw up obstacles to the task of properly responding to gifts. Milbank exposes an etymological tension that hints at some of the difficulties of receiving gift. In “old English the word *gif*... can indicate both gift and poison” (“Can a Gift Be Given?” 121). This points to an awareness that there are certain risks inherent in receiving gifts, similar to the risks of hospitality that Derrida rightly heralds. Méndez Montoya also recognizes a certain risk in giving gifts, noting the receiver’s autonomy in reacting or responding to what’s been given: “The giving of the gift does not annul or inhibit the recipient’s creativity and innovativeness, which are displayed in the process of receiving or digesting the gift” (143).

“Babette’s Feast” offers a comedic yet sobering critique of humanity’s place in this cosmic, inevitable circulation of gift that highlights the way our internal brokenness hinders our capacity to properly respond. Schuler makes an observation about the villagers that exposes a suspicious, economics-based disposition common to the human condition at large: “It was the gift freely given that disturbs them” (8). The sisters, holding fear and pride they dare not confess, naïvely believe they can stifle the circulation of gift, and for this they come across as fools. They are so beholden to an economics of scarcity and life of self-denial that they resist the abundance that is set

before them. This is all the more ironic, or foolish, when one places their lived beliefs into the context of their spoken beliefs. Consider the words to one of their common hymns, “*May my soul in deed and word give thanks for all things to the Lord*” (Dinesen 48). They ritually sing of cultivating a gratitude for *all things* to God, but they live with fear and a stifled perception of reality which actually prevents them from living this out.

Martine’s fear of the turtle makes for a comedic case in point. She imagines a witch’s cauldron cooking up such exotic an animal as a giant turtle imported from France (42), but tries to comfort herself with the words to another common hymn, “*Wouldst thou give a stone, a reptile to thy pleading child for food?*” (44). The answer to her sung rhetorical question appears to be a surprising *yes*, for she is indeed served that reptilian stone in a soup. But for the mercy of ignorance, it goes unrecognized, and she enjoys it, relieved by the end of the feast that the turtle was nowhere in sight (56). Her fear-induced difficulty with accepting these uncomfortable gifts outlasts and ultimately distorts even the remarkable revelation of Babette’s sacrifice. After she learns of the true cost of the feast, her mind fitfully carries her off to a horrific missionary tale in which a chief’s grandchild is sacrificed and served as a feast to express gratitude (57). Her distorted reaction to Babette causes her to “shudder,” a stark contrast to her sister Philippa, whose “heart was melting in her bosom... with an unforgettable proof of human loyalty and self-sacrifice” (57).

The sisters’ divergent reactions to Babette’s revelation underscore the imperfect, at times outright broken, reception of gift that constitutes the human experience. They hold a mirror to us, reminding us that we are fools to believe we could stifle the circulation of gift that makes up life.

## Gift has Redemptive Potential

Gift is not just inevitable, it is redemptive. We see this in General Loewenhielm who, like the sisters, had once resisted what was offered to him (47), but unlike the sisters, now has the wherewithal to regret it. Loewenhielm is unique in the story. He occupies the liminal space between the disparate worlds that hospitality bridges together. He is at once an enemy to Babette even as he is her most esteemed guest. It is possible that he serves as an avatar of sorts for Dinesen, allowing her to enter into her imaginative tale in order to work out the tensions and questions that complicate her real life. He arrives to the dinner in a crimson uniform, emblematic of his prominent place in the wider world and his role in the war that tore Babette's world apart. Military decorations aside, he struggles with internal doubts about the path he has chosen, and fears that "the sum of a row of victories in many years and in many countries [could] be a defeat" (46). He alone wears scarlet, and the others are clad in black, giving an ironic image that he alone is living while the others have already resigned to a certain death. He alone seems conscious of the sins and shortcomings that he brings to the table. And he alone understands the artistry, quality, and extraordinary refinement of the feast, inspiring him alone to make that famous speech, that "ineffable epiphany" (Langbaum 253), in which he finally understands that grace has and will carry him, irrespective of his shortcomings or choices.

While these truth-bearing events unfold inside, snow falls gracefully outside. The snow signals unmistakably a moment of cleansing and reconciliation. The crimson-colored uniform heralding Loewenhielm's place in the world and war, and all that it



represents, especially the violence that it represents against Babette, is washed white as snow as he sits at the table, with Babette the Christ figure serving herself in every dish.

Not only Loewenhielm, but everyone seems to benefit from the grace that falls fresh over dinner. The snow impacts everyone, as “[t]he guests from the yellow house... were covered with snow, as if they had indeed had their sins washed white as wool, and in this regained innocent attire were gamboling like little lambs” (Dinesen 54). This is a clear allusion to Isaiah 1.18: “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” The villagers “become as a small child” (Dinesen 54), alluding to the words of Christ, that one must become as a child to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18.3). A vision of shalom emerges from these frolicking, childlike, unsuspecting guests: “What was broken is suddenly repaired, and what was wounded is miraculously healed” (Méndez Montoya 119). The effect of Babette’s sacrificial gift is cleansing, freedom, forgiveness, and redemption.

#### Gift Reveals the Reality of Superabundance in Our Midst

The fourth audacious claim that the story makes about gift is its capacity to reveal a reality of superabundance in our midst. The most unlikely of feasts in the most unlikely of places drives this claim home, again underscoring Newman’s theory that “Christian hospitality... is marked by an economics of abundance, surplus, excess, and surprise” (100–01). Méndez Montoya places Babette’s sacrifice within this same belief:

Her art and her caritas do not impoverish her, but, on the contrary, her gesture only reveals the reality of superabundance, which is the gift that knows no end... the one who gives self to others will never experience poverty but rather a rich recompense and self-assurance that the gift is never impoverishment but superabundance, and that the gift of caritas is

the transformative plenitude that in one way or another always returns.  
(121)

Seen this way, gift is not merely a necessary outworking of interdependence or a polite act of kindness, but can be a dramatic statement of protest, a rebellion against the narrative of impoverishment and scarcity that dominates contemporary living. To be generous is to trust in the divine provision that ever-circulates and will surely return again. To receive a gift from another, even from an enemy, is to recognize the divine agency of that person and his or her role in the grander order of things. It is to believe that evil can be “overaccepted” as Newman claims, placed within a larger, redemptive story that has a transcendent, porous frame. It is to live with hand opened rather than fist clinched shut.

But this reality can only be recognized if practiced. Recall that Newman challenges Christians “to live ‘as if’ the kingdom of God, a reign marked by excess and superfluidity, is now present, because it *is* now present, though not in its fullness” (102). Babette seems to embody this conviction through her actions. And the fact that her gift is a feast – something that can be consumed - is where the story unveils yet another gem of wisdom. It is not enough for a gift to be offered or perfunctorily received. It must be consumed, metabolized, made a part of the receiver. The feast is not just served, it is *eaten*. Imperfectly, ignorantly, and reluctantly – yes – but eaten nonetheless. “Babette’s Feast” calls for the metabolism of gift. To say that a gift is metabolized is to say that a gift is digested and reincorporated into the whole body, that it would in some way energize and motivate the receiver, becoming a part of the self. As Derrida links hospitality to ipseity (“Hostipitality” 15), so the story offers the circulation of gift within

the context of hospitality as a metabolic process in which the giver, receiver, and gift feed into one another.

But the fact that this sacrifice is eaten signals more than just the metabolism of gift. It also means that it is consumed and cannot be eaten again. Babette has no more money. She cannot prepare this meal in this way again. The villagers cannot eat this meal in this way again. Their “one hour of the millennium” will not be repeated like this. On one hand, the finitude and unrepeatability of the gift gives it heightened significance and value. On the other hand, its unrepeatability calls into question whether there really can be a reality of superabundance, when the means by which the gift is given will not regenerate and Babette must return to the poverty and dependence of her life in Berlevaag before the lottery winnings. But this objection to superabundance is only reasonable to the extent that one limits measures of “abundance” to material wealth. Yes, it is true that money spent is money gone. But when money is spent on a transformative, sacrificial gift, by someone living “as if” the Kingdom of God is in their midst, there are virtually infinite possibilities for how that gift will be received, digested, and returned in the form of other provisions, other gifts, other expressions of abundance. Beyond material wealth, one might experience replenishment in the form of deepened relationships, greater joy, spiritual growth, mental or emotional freedom, more wisdom, or any number of non-material forms of wealth that signal, in their own ways, the reality of superabundance of the Kingdom of God. Babette seems to be aware of the multiplicity of wealth and is not bothered by the spending of her winnings or the resultant material poverty she now faces. She rebukes any pitying notion that she is poor, declaring confidently that “[a] great artist... is never poor,” insisting that they “have something... of which other people

know nothing” (Dinesen 58). She has given all, and has received back some form of abundance, a mysterious but personally edifying replenishment, which she enjoys and does not expect or need others to comprehend. This echoes the mysterious replenishment experienced by Christ when he ministered to the woman at the well. When the woman left, he declined the disciples’ invitation to eat because he had already been supernaturally fed by ministering to the woman with “food” the disciples “[knew] nothing about” (John 4.32). The more generosity is practiced, the more the reality of superabundance is experienced in creative, mysterious, and incremental ways among its participants.

“Babette’s Feast” upholds gift exchange as the basis of ultimate reality and lived experience, a means to encounter the divine by participating in a trinitarian metaphysic that is itself caught up in an eternal circulation of gift (Méndez Montoya 154–55). There is a “perpetually ecstatic exchange” among “the giver, the given, and the giving” that animates existence (Méndez Montoya 145). But the story also cautions that in this world, our encounters and interactions are imperfect. Fear and pride can stifle or distort the circulation of gift and prevent us from recognizing the reality of superabundance that forms our world.

#### Identity as Self-Understanding, Given and Created

Adding to the story’s signature abundance of tensions, we find identity straddling the notion of being both created and given. While the story speaks of identity in terms favorable to positionality and constructivism – it also dares to suggest that there exists an abiding, core sense of self that is given and stable. At this point, the story flirts almost

scandalously with essentialism, that kryptonite which contemporary scholars are so anxious to avoid.

Before this conversation can carry on, we must pause and nuance our language, as “identity” undefined is too broad to be analytically useful. “Identity” is a ubiquitous term, casually trafficked through the humanities, social and political sciences, psychologies, and popular culture, malleably conforming to any number of discordant and nebulous meanings. So much has been said of it these days that some scholars have questioned whether it is a useful category at all (Brubaker and Cooper 1–2). There are many common uses, which muddles the clarity an analytical term should carry:

[T]he term "identity" ... is used to highlight non-instrumental modes of action; to focus on self- understanding rather than self-interest; to designate sameness across persons or sameness over time; to capture allegedly core, foundational aspects of selfhood; to deny that such core, foundational aspects exist; to highlight the processual, interactive development of solidarity and collective self-understanding; and to stress the fragmented quality of the contemporary experience of "self," a self unstably patched together through shards of discourse and contingently "activated" in differing contexts. These usages are not simply heterogeneous; they point in sharply differing directions. (Brubaker and Cooper 8)

At risk of using a problematic word “so infinitely elastic” as to be meaningless (Brubaker and Cooper 11), an examination of how identity is broached in “Babette’s Feast,” must begin with a functional definition. To which of the usages offered by Brubaker and Cooper does the story point? A case could be made for any or all of them. But we shall restrict our definition to one which aligns best with both Newman and Derrida’s placement of identity theory within their respective articulations of hospitality.

Recall that Newman sees identity as given and potentially stable and Derrida sees it as created, contingent, and fluid. But interestingly, *within the specific context of hospitality*, Newman sees the *roles* of guest and host as fluid and interchangeable while

Derrida would see them as a determined function of power, determined to the extent that the host has power which the guest does not. Both Newman and Derrida are concerned with roles and speak to ways in which a more robust understanding of hospitality, particularly a heightened awareness of one's role(s) therein, can affect one's self-understanding. Both also give space, albeit from different angles, for there to be consistency across change: Derrida specifically links hospitality to ipseity ("Hostipitality" 15) and Newman believes Christian hospitality liberates the subject from the burden of self-creation by accepting identity's givenness (109-110). With this in mind, self-understanding appears to be the most appropriate definition of identity to use. Self-understanding opens the requisite space for constructiveness, fluidity, and contingency that Derrida demands, but it need not always exist in flux – the term allows for stability of identity that Newman favors as well (Brubaker and Cooper 17–19).

I contend that "Babette's Feast" conveys a spacious expression of Christian hospitality that is large enough to encompass both givenness and creative agency, all the while empowering the subject (such as our heroine, Babette) to transcend external circumstance. It does so by elevating the fluid roles of guest and host above other social, cultural, or political identifiers such that the individual is empowered with dignity despite external circumstances that might otherwise victimize, stigmatize, or oppress. "Babette's Feast" suggests that identity formation is a dynamic exchange of givenness and creativity, where that which is given – by others, Creation, and the Divine – is metabolized to form a negotiated and fluid self-understanding that is, at its core, stable. Furthermore, by recognizing the interactive role of God as both Guest and Host, "Babette's Feast" suggests that identity has a certain liminal quality – that is, it can be

rooted in another space, another time, and another realm, all the while tangibly manifest in the present moment. Hospitality exists in the chasm created by difference, allowing difference to be embraced as blessing. And all of this is communicated through a story that turns on one woman's hidden-then-exposed identity, the medium itself suggesting that identity as self-understanding is substantiated and reinforced through narrative.

The claim made about identity formation that is perhaps the most ripe for objection is its givenness. This assertion, scandalous or unpalatable as it may be, flows logically from the story's contention that all of existence is gift. This givenness is what allows there to be a stable core – that one can change places, seasons, communities, or lifestyles, but there remains something inherent or internal which simply *is*. There is something stable at the core of self-understanding and this is what allows Babette to declare, even as her world is irreversibly changed, that she is a great artist to the very end.

Dinesen further underscores a certain stability in identity by distinguishing between *others'* perception of one's identity and one's own. This can be seen most clearly in Babette's journey to Berlevaag and the sisters' fearful preoccupations about her. Babette arrives as a displaced war refugee and widow, whose entire life had been shattered through no fault of her own. And though a renowned chef had crossed their threshold, the sisters fitfully imagine her to be a witch with bubbling cauldron (42), a bottled demon (39), a "dark Martha" (33) about whom nothing could be truly known. These unmerited judgments form part of Dinesen's critique of a pietism that fearfully rejects the material good that abounds so obviously within reach, but they also form part of the story's defense of a stable core of identity. Babette does not allow tragedy or ignorant judgments to define her. She remains a capable chef and artist whether at home

or homeless, whether rejoicing or grieving, whether recognized or misunderstood, whether appreciated or judged. With this continuity despite change, Babette's identity is freed from the ever-shifting forces of external opinion and circumstance. Identity is presented as divine gift.

But identity is also presented as *created*. Yes, Babette was given talents and opportunity that led to her vocation, but she had to cultivate those gifts to become a chef. She had active, creative control and agency in the process of forming her identity and she could have chosen otherwise. This empowers her to chart her own course, give direction to that which is under her control. Despite the chaos and political forces at work that displaced and grieved her, despite all the external circumstance she could not control, she maintained mastery over what she could: her self-understanding. She knew herself to be a great artist despite the opinions of others. She could choose to give with generosity and grace despite her guests' inability to fully appreciate her. She could choose to pour herself into her festal art and knew that she could pour all of herself out but never be empty. She had tapped into a generative, transcendent source - the Divine Giver who ever replenished her. Identity is *created* by personal agency, using the gifts that are *given*.

The story suggests that identity is both given and created, and that the interaction between these two dynamics is a metabolic process – the metabolism of gift. Méndez Montoya argues that gift must be metabolized, “broken apart and consumed until it enters our very flesh, and further transforms itself into energy, words, and deeds” (144). While his primary focus here is on the Eucharist and ways in which the Body and Blood of Christ become a material-spiritual reality for those who partake, we can extend his line of thinking about metabolism to include identity as well. Stated another way, gift – all that



is given by divine or creaturely sources – is internalized and consumed by us and forms not just our actions and language but also our self-understanding, our identity. Babette was able to take in all that was given to her and internalize it, metabolize it, deconstruct and reintegrate it into her self-understanding so that she could emerge all the more confident and sure of herself as an artist and a chef, a woman with dignity and fullness of life. Rather than being fragile and fragmented, Babette is a woman solid and whole.

We can glean from the story that identity is formed via a metabolic process of gift exchange that occurs within a cosmic scale of hospitality, one that recognizes transcendent gift as the source of identity even as it heralds constructivist agency in shaping it. This is possible due to the interchanging roles of guest and host, which enjoy privilege or precedent over other social identifiers.

#### “Babette’s Feast” Serves Up a Livable Definition of Christian Hospitality

It has been argued by other scholars that Dinesen sought to subvert a certain pietistic expression of Christianity through a comedic, narrative critique. Be that as it may, her story expresses a spacious Christian hospitality that invites the reader into a liberating way of thinking and living in a fallen world. By embodying sacrificial generosity, Babette reenchants the material world with spiritual significance, showing that hospitality works to uncover – even if imperfectly or temporarily – the reality of superabundance that is otherwise at risk of being hidden or concealed. The story hints at a trinitarian ideal of otherness that exists outside of power differentials and nourishes an awareness of the true, the good, and the beautiful. It defends Newman’s thesis that guest and host roles are interchangeable, underscoring the humbling, dignifying, and ultimately edifying dynamics of Christian hospitality that are realized when it’s put into practice.

The story confesses some of the risks inherent in practicing hospitality, all the while heralding its redemptive, transformative potential. Importantly, the story does not gloss over the bloody realities of war or turn away from the scars of brokenness and conflict, but also does not ignore the transformative potential of gift exchange that imbues our world with hope and meaning. Evil is “overaccepted” into a grander story that is written on a foundation of ontological freedom. The story declares, in glorious feminist protest, a certain personal freedom from oppressive forces and refusal to be defined by external circumstance or victimhood. It allows for self-understanding that is not a nebulous, fragmented constellation of external factors but is instead a function of divine givenness and interdependent creativity. Christian hospitality offers the possibility of living – communally and individually – as the imperfect metabolism of gift, facilitated by a grace that at once upholds and transcends difference.

## Chapter V.

### The Chef and the Concubine Meet

The full weight of hospitality as a redemptive, formative theory and praxis is brought into greater clarity when Babette is introduced to the woman who troubled Derrida, someone whose story also unfolds within the context of hospitality, though with a tragically different ending: the voiceless, victimized concubine of Judges 19.<sup>23</sup> When their stories are juxtaposed, they appear to be a mirrored inversion of one another, opposite in respects that underscore – albeit by horrific contrast - the theory of Christian hospitality as the imperfect metabolism of gift. But they also share certain unmistakable commonalities which, when linked together, reveal a cruciform-shaped invitation imbedded in both. Derrida asks if we are heirs to a hospitality that is violent and leads to personal and communal fragmentation. The chef and the concubine come together in this study and respond, revealing that hospitality's transcendent circulation of gift opens a distinct possibility to be known and to be whole.

The woman of Judges 19 is nameless, voiceless, and often taken to be powerless. After discord with her Levite husband, she goes to her father's house only to be sought out and made to return home.<sup>24</sup> On their return journey, the Levite and the woman seek shelter in a Benjamite town. Though the townspeople fail to offer hospitality, a foreigner

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<sup>23</sup> The entire narrative spans Judges 19 through 21, though for sake of brevity of reference, the term "Judges 19" shall be used for the duration of the text.

<sup>24</sup> There is a dispute among scholars about the precise problem between the man and woman. Some translations suggest that the woman is guilty of adultery while others portray that she was merely angry at him (Hamley). Irrespective of the position taken, the effect remains that a certain discord caused the woman to leave the man for her father's house.

living among them does, and receives the couple into his home. As the evening darkens, men of the town arrive and demand the Levite's body for sexual exploitation. The host offers the mob his virgin daughter and the concubine instead, though only the latter is finally condemned to the people's hands. After a night of violent rape and lascivious acts, she is released at dawn to the host's home. She collapses at the door.<sup>25</sup> When the Levite finds her in the morning, he is enraged (at what, exactly, is a matter of debate). He takes her body home, dismembers her, and sends her pieces to the other tribes of Israel in a grotesque rallying call to war against the tribe of Benjamin. A civil war ensues, which ultimately leads to the kidnapping and rape of hundreds more women. The story is framed by a haunting diagnosis: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21.25).

### Mirrored Women on Common Ground

Why should the chef and the concubine be brought into conversation? Consider the common ground they walk. Both stories feature women who protest something and then journey from home to another place, arriving at night, where they become dependent on the hospitality of another. Babette's journey begins at her Parisian table where, apart from her role as chef, she protests sociopolitical injustices as an infamous *pétroleuse*. The concubine's journey begins in Bethlehem, "the house of bread" (Avnery 241), where she protests by leaving her Levite husband. These actions can be interpreted as distinctively feminist – and also scandalous – within their respective cultural contexts.

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<sup>25</sup> The text is not clear whether she dies at the door or merely collapses, and then dies in the hands of her husband.

Both women offer a sacrifice that saves or blesses others. Babette sacrifices her lottery winnings (and consequently, the possibility of a different life) to give her utmost artistic gift to the people of Berlevaag. Her feast becomes transformative and redemptive, bringing renewed life to both herself and others. The concubine is also sacrificed to preserve the lives of the Levite and the others in the house, though this is tragically done against her will (Matthews 10). The concubine clearly lacks the agency that Babette enjoys, but her (involuntary) sacrifice nonetheless yields some form of good for others as does Babette's.

Both stories hinge on war: Babette arrives to Berlevaag because of civil war and the concubine's tragedy instigates a civil war. They each hold important roles in these wars, with Babette serving as a part of the resistance and the concubine becoming the very medium that carries the message of the war cry.<sup>26</sup>

In both cases, there is a violation of an established hospitality norm by a foreigner while the locals resist or deny the hospitality that is their responsibility to give. By insisting on serving as host, and giving a lavish, foreign meal no less, Babette grates against the established hospitality norms that had restrained and muted the pietistic, self-denying house. Her guests resist her offer and actively plot against fully receiving her gift. In Judges 19, a sojourner – and not the locals of the tribe of Benjamin – offers hospitality to the Levite and the concubine. This violates the established hospitality norms of the Israelites of the time because the locals had the express responsibility to meet and welcome the travelers but failed to do so, and the foreigner in their midst had no obligation to welcome them in a land that was not even his but he did (Matthews 3, 9).

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<sup>26</sup> It is worth contemplating, though beyond the scope of this thesis, what it means here that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan and Gordon 19).

Both women appear to be vulnerable, unknown, and powerless, and yet surprise the reader with a veiled, deep undercurrent of power and influence by the end of the story that ultimately yields some form of redemption. The preceding pages of this thesis have already expounded upon this claim concerning Babette. But it is a much less obvious claim in the more difficult story of the concubine in which she has virtually no agency or autonomy. Can a woman who has neither voice nor name nor, in the end, a body, truly be thought of as powerful? Scholar Elizabeth Tracy makes an interesting case for the hidden power and redemptive potential of the concubine, arguing that she is “a potential prophet whose presence criticizes on almost every level and brings a special opportunity for redemption to the entire nation” (72). Tracy argues that the concubine is powerful because of her impact on both the immediate and distant future: “The pilegish was a woman unnamed and without a voice. She was not comforted in life but her existence has definite power” (74). She argues that “her death defines murder for the first time in the Hebrew canon” (66), uniting the disparate tribes of Israel to fight (albeit imperfectly) for justice (74), with the ultimate result of holding both individuals and a community accountable (74). She is a reminder of the covenant and can be seen as a “catalyst for potential redemption...for the people of her time [and] also for those who come after” (74). Following this line of thinking, both women can claim noble and dignifying identities that are endowed with layers of meaning: Babette is the great artist who enchants an otherwise somber and bickering town, and the concubine is a potential prophet or subversive judge who (albeit unintentionally) mobilizes an otherwise wayward and disparate nation toward unity.

There are also tragic differences in the details of the two stories. Babette refuses to be victimized or possessed, defiantly declaring that she is an artist who acts for her own sake and dignity, while the concubine is treated as property both in life and death, and is not given a voice to define or defend her existence.

Babette makes choices for herself despite a world of circumstances beyond her control, whereas the concubine's choices are all made for her. The former chooses to sacrifice herself and is metaphorically entombed and served at the table in her signature *Cailles en Sarcophage*, while the latter is sacrificed against her will on an altar of hedonism and, having been denied the dignity of burial, is parsed into pieces as a political prop.

Babette is able to enter the house of her hosts, crossing the threshold and ultimately establishing a new home in Berlevaag where she is eventually welcomed and finally made known. The concubine, however, is denied hospitality and dies at the threshold of the home, not able to open the door that should have ensured her safety. Rather than finding welcome in a home, she is placeless: ousted from her only possible refuge, exposed to violence and hostility in the open night air, and dismembered in death by the very hands that should have protected her.

In this same vein, Babette is given the opportunity to confront and overcome her “enemy” at home, on her own terms, at the table she herself has set, whereas the concubine is cast outside the home and is overcome by her enemies in the vulnerable dangers of unprotected night.

The tragic differences between the two women's stories – those precise places where they are inverted mirrors of one another – signal the respective worldviews that

frame them. “Babette’s Feast” opens with the introduction of a “pious ecclesiastic party” who “awaits a new Jerusalem” (Dinesen 21) and closes with the eschatological hope that Babette will someday “enchant the angels” (59). Babette’s world is fitted with a moral framework that is shared by the community and rooted in divine order. Despite religious difference among the characters, there is still a shared, broad recognition of a transcendent frame, a given order, a certain *oughtness* that derives from a certain *isness* which is common to them all. In contrast, the concubine’s story opens and closes with a lament that the people were estranged from God: “In those days, there was no king in Israel” (Judges 19.1, 21.25). The last verse carries this circumstance to its natural conclusion: “[E]veryone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21.25). The concubine lives and dies in a compromised, fragmented, and disjointed society bereft of a transcendent moral order. It is the rejection of God as ultimate Host and Giver, the failure to submit to moral standards or honor the givenness or potential goodness of the other that enables the callous and avoidable tragedy to unfold as it does. In other words, the former story underscores and embraces the divine circulation of gift while the latter is an exaggeratedly tragic rejection of the same. This is the place of inversion, the line along which these contrasts between the women emerge.

#### Storied Invitations to the Eucharist

Each story forms a socioreligious critique which serves to contextualize an innate desire for acceptance and wholeness. The longings that each story provokes take the shape of a divine, Eucharistic overture, one by giving a tantalizing invitation to regale at such a table and the other by piercing the heart with the longing for the shalom and atonement that such a table enables. It is this shared Eucharistic invitation that ties not



just the stories, but the entirety of Christian hospitality together. The Eucharist, after all, means “thanksgiving” (Newman 170), and thanksgiving is the proper response to the gifts of hospitality.

Teleologically, both stories leverage tensions to form a critique of a socioreligious way of life in a particular time and place. Intriguingly, it is even possible to view both as comedy. Dinesen herself described “Babette’s Feast” as comedic (Cate 127) but can we really make the same claim of the horrors of Judges 19? Biblical commentator Robert Boling identifies a “tragicomic vein of the narrative” (278) which Lasine develops into a thesis that the text is an intentionally ludicrous form of “black humor” that “aims to ‘correct’ a warped perspective toward the social category of hospitality” (Lasine 45–46). According to Lasine, “the serious and even fatal actions cannot be taken as tragic in their ludicrous context... [and] should be viewed in terms of the absurdity of the ‘inverted world’ which characterizes this period” (43). He bolsters his claim that the story is tragicomic by turning to Henri Bergson’s theory of comedy: “Bergson’s general understanding of the comic as the ‘mechanization’ of life leads him to describe the comic character in terms of his callousness, rigidity, absentmindedness, and inattentiveness to life, in particular, to the conventions of social life” (46). He argues that the Levite exemplifies these characteristics in his callousness toward his wife, rigidity in his plans, and inattentiveness to the horrors transpiring throughout that fateful night. Furthermore, Bergson’s theory asserts that “the comic aim[s] to correct one’s obliviousness toward social life” (46). Lasine argues that this intention is evident in the text: “[T]he narrative makes the reader aware of the perverted perspective of those who remain stubbornly oblivious to what is right in the eyes of Yahweh, so that the reader’s perspective can be

'corrected"' (46). He upholds that the text is both entirely tragic and entirely comic (43). But irrespective of whether one concedes his categorization of the story as tragicomedy, the cornerstone of his argument is that "a world in which there is no king in Israel and every man does what is right in his own eyes is an inverted world of absurd confusion" (45-46). In other words, the story's underlying thesis is that a world lacking a transcendent moral frame yields chaos and absurdity.<sup>27</sup> To drive this point home, the story adopts the same reliance on tensions that we've observed with *Babette*. "The tension between interior and exterior haunts the incident," as does the "foreboding" contrast between day and night (Avnery 235, 241). There are also tensions very familiar to us from "*Babette's Feast*," tensions between guest and host roles, welcome and rejection, safety and danger, covenant and betrayal, wholeness and fragmentation. These contrasts all signal – even scream at times – that things are not as they should be.

But did we not say that everything is gift? Our definition of Christian hospitality recognizes life as the imperfect metabolism of transcendent gift, but how can we argue for gift in light of the senseless horrors and abuses in Judges 19? Indeed, part of the immense existential value of this text is its unapologetic refusal to allow us to ignore the jagged and dangerous edges of life in a fallen and disaffected world. It demands that we open our eyes to harsh realities and respond. But the evil rampant in the concubine's story is not gift; it is privation, a voluntary "failure to participate" (Davison 87) in life with God. To make better sense of this, evil as "failure to participate" warrants additional explanation.

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<sup>27</sup> Marx, ironically, seems to have recognized this in his chilling yet poetic foresight. He mused that without certain societal structures in place, "[a]ll that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned..." (16).

Viewing existence as gift, as Christian hospitality does, posits a participatory ontology that sees a necessary, redemptive interplay between the immanent and transcendent, wherein the immanent world is saved by divine participation in it (Sellars 30) and the transcendent world is unveiled by each immanent thing reflecting the “likeness to God proper to it” (Davison 239). Evil, therefore, is lacking where there should be fullness. Davison explains this classical Greek understanding of evil while also happening to underscore one of the central “both/and” themes we’ve discussed in “Babette’s Feast,” the idea that both the material and the spiritual are created by God and intended to be good:

The being of all things proceeds from God, including the materiality of material things, and all things bear some particular creaturely likeness to an aspect of his boundless perfection. God calls each creature to an active fulfilment of its destiny by being the thing he has made it to be, and evil is lack where there should be fullness in nature and in action. Evil is the failure of a person – or thing, culture, or whatever – to live up to the likeness it is called to bear. (239)

With this in mind, the horrors of Judges 19 can be read as the multiple failures of individuals, a society, and a culture to live up to the likeness of God that they should have. Being cut off from God – with no king in Israel – does not mean that they are suddenly outside the circulation of gift that Christian hospitality asserts. Complete separation from God is impossible because their very being is a gift from God that is actively sustained by him.<sup>28</sup> But they “improperly possess” that which has been given them, and a thing inherently and irreversibly has its source in God’s being whether “properly possessed” or “improperly possessed” (Davison 239; Sherrard). God’s gifts,

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Colossians 1.17 and Hebrews 1.3.

and therefore God, are present in the horrific story even if his gifts are marred, trampled, and rejected.

And this is indeed tragic, because the privation yields death when the circulation of gifts should yield life. Judges 19 forms a warning about the dangers of failure to participate in God and choosing instead to do what is right in one's own eyes, which hurts not just the one but the many. Our understanding of Christian hospitality as a theory and praxis is enriched on this point. Christian hospitality bears a high calling upon creatures, who have the meaningful capacity to cultivate life by proper metabolism of gift, or cause death by privation. According to Christian thought, God's Word is intended to guide us in this endeavor. It must not be merely read but taken in, *metabolized*, applied, and made a part of us:

God's Word, that is Truth, is also dynamic, delectable, beautiful, good, and edible as well. And it is a Word that includes human reception, initiative, and creativity... God's edible Word [is] ever dynamic and life-giving. Keeping the commandments and showing reverence to God are ways of right living in accordance with the divine gift-as-nourishment. (Méndez Montoya 126)

The concubine's abuse, followed by the abuse of hundreds after her, is evidence of the evil that breeds in the darkness of privation, when human "reception, initiative, and creativity" go distorted and estranged.

But again, this is not to say that there is no violence in the trinitarian frame upon which Christian hospitality rests. "Babette's Feast" is not void of war, death, pain, and real enemies and neither is the Christian mythos that colors its pages. As in the Last Supper, an "enemy" is even invited to dine at the communal table. But concerning the Trinity itself, violence is properly placed and purposeful. There is violence against evil and sin, manifest in the crucifixion, and this is voluntarily assumed by the Sacred Victim,

the one Being capable of bearing the full sacrifice. Believers are invited to partake in this sacrificial death by way of the Eucharist. And according to Newman, “the Eucharist *is* the hospitality we receive and extend to others” (169). Thus violence, when limited, purposed, and properly placed, ultimately yields wholeness and life. This possibility figures into “Babette’s Feast,” whereas Judges 19 illustrates in graphic detail the effects of violence *uncontained*, needless violence manifest in the unrepentant rebellion of guests estranged from their ultimate Host.

Together, the two stories form a single invitation to fully participate in the Eucharist. The Judges 19 deprivation stirs a deep longing for a shalom-like wholeness and healing, but illustrates how this remains inaccessible in a transcendently alienated existence. Its horrors are intended to startle us awake, to provoke within us a longing for what the Eucharist alone can offer. And the Eucharistic feast that imbues Babette’s story with a reenchanting vision for existence can be read as a fuller participation in God, as metabolizing his gifts and benefiting from the overflow of joy and life that results: “Eating and drinking this divine manna – Christ’s body and blood – is a sign of participation in God’s life, as it is a sign of God’s participation in human life, at the core of materiality, at the heart of the flesh” (Méndez Montoya 133).

These stories illustrate how Christian hospitality, as a lived theory, equips the Christian with means to participate in the Eucharist, to confront and see past the evils that mar human existence, to enter into “another world that is in fact this one” and embody an alternative story that declares abundance over scarcity and mercy over death. Both stories echo a certain refrain, a divine invitation to come to the table and eat. Because the table is

set, even in the presence of enemies, and the cup overflows for those who enter and partake.

## Chapter VI.

### A Parting *Digestif*: Acts of War Transcending the Stories' Pages

It has been said that “feasting and all enjoyments gratefully taken are, at their heart, acts of war” (McKelvey 121). Choosing to gratefully and generously share the good things of life in the fellowship of others – despite the threat of hopelessness that looms ever larger in a broken and despairing world – can serve as “a great hammer blow against that brittle night, shattering the gloom, reawakening our hearts, stirring our imaginations, focusing our vision” (122) on the reality of the Kingdom of God that is and is to come. It is to this profound truth that the embodied, Eucharistic practice of Christian hospitality ultimately points. “Babette’s Feast” and Judges 19 come together to offer the hungry reader a “signal of transcendence”<sup>29</sup> that defiantly “declares that evil and death, suffering and loss, sorrow and tears, will not have the final word” (McKelvey 121). When our mysterious, miracle-inducing chef is introduced to our voiceless, tragedy-laden concubine, we can see how hospitality, rightly carried out, bears within it a certain undercurrent of war. Not the war of host over guest, oppressor over oppressed, or spiritual over material, but the war of superabundance over privation, goodness over evil. “Babette’s Feast” powerfully subverts the war-laden privation of Judges 19 by declaring – through the sacrificial circulation of gift – a very different act of war, one that transcends the story’s pages and finds its impact in our daily lives.

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<sup>29</sup> This phrase was coined by sociologist Peter L. Berger.

Christian hospitality is shown to facilitate grace and bring about redemptive community and self-understanding despite deep brokenness both within and without. It does so with a Eucharistic invitation to tangibly enter into the supernatural reality of freedom and abundance that enchants our present world. This equips us with a redeemed vision for how to live and act in communion with others, ourselves, and the divine. It instructs to live lives of profound gratitude, which frees us to give graciously as hosts and receive freely as guests without an exaggerated preoccupation with other social roles or personal identifiers. It disinherits us from the violence that plagues the concubine and invites us to live in the steadfast assurance of the chef.

Christian hospitality inspires us to metabolize the rich, ordinary, lavish, transcendent gifts that constitute existence, and see those gifts transformed into thoughts, words, energy, and actions that war against privation, that give back to God in the moment of receiving, and receive from God in the moment of giving back. *It invites us to boldly break the alabaster jar.* To live as Babette the great artist. To give all, because all has been given. To embrace the art of generous, cruciform-shaped living that hospitality unlocks:

[T]he confident Christian believing in plentitude does not need to hoard (time, gifts, or possessions) or to live in fear (of the neighbor, stranger, or even the enemy) but is free to live a life of Christlike hospitality. Such a way of life... is not an exact copying of Christ or the saints but rather involves improvisation, like that of an artist, all the while 'trusting the perfect maker of all things.' (Newman 171)

In a world increasingly nebulous, negotiated, and neurotically evolving, Christian hospitality offers a refuge to experience the tangibly good, true, and beautiful – and to war against evil, scarcity, and chaos – through a posture of awe-struck gratitude. It offers the nourishment of good bread and wine, shared among fellow sojourners and strangers,



who are together sustained to continue the journey. It creates space for a trinitarian ideal of otherness that exists outside of power differentials, displacing fear with wonder and possibility. At the table, gifts are metabolized into energy for the next bold expression of gratitude. And in this, we find that we can experience a wholeness that is at once energizing and stilling. A peace that flows abundant and rich as the wine in Cana and reveals the presence of Christ as the bread broken in Emmaus. A gracious invitation that beckons us, wounded and weary though we may be, toward Home.

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