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DEVOURING LOSS

A Recipe for Mourning in “Babette’s Feast”

While grief is fresh, every attempt to divert only irritates. You must wait till grief be *digested* . . .

—Samuel Johnson in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*

When director Gabriel Axel’s film version of “Babette’s Feast” hit American movie screens in 1988, restaurants in major cities around the country offered the chance to enjoy the sumptuous feast served up in the movie.¹ For a hefty price, filmgoers could complete the cinema experience by heading off to a restaurant and savoring the delights of turtle soup, Blinis Demidoff, and *Cailles en Sarcophage*, accompanied by Veuve Clicquot champagne and Clos de Vougeot burgundy. These well-attended dinners became rich fodder for some social observers, who critiqued them as an example of 1980s yuppie self-indulgence. While film reviewers debated the problems of translating Dinesen’s narrative for the screen and discussed the aesthetic issues of the plight of the artist and the transformative power of art, these pundits considered the diners’ response symptomatic of the me-decade’s materialist culture of conspicuous consumption.² Once again, they lamented, excessive disposable income was serving the insatiable and emptily narcissistic desires of a thin slice of society. While there is no concrete evidence to suggest that readers of Dinesen’s short story have indulged in similar acts of consumption over the years, the possibility should not be dismissed out of hand. After all, the story was first published in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in June 1950 when Dinesen, in need of money and eager to break into the lucrative American magazine market, took the advice of a friend who urged, “Write about food. Americans are obsessed with food.”³ If the story is

indeed “about food,” we may ask precisely what it says about food, and whether what it says invites a different reading of the collective “eater-response” of a segment of the moviegoing public.

Dinesen scholars, while certainly not ignoring the culinary aspects of the tale, have tended to concentrate their analyses on the question of artistic creation, on the conflict between the aesthetic and the ascetic, and, more recently, on the specificity of the woman as artist and creator. Food has tended to be viewed allegorically in the story as representing, for example, the schism between the ethical, Norwegian, puritanical sect of Protestantism, nurtured on split cod and ale-and-bread soup, and the aesthetic, sensuous inclinations of French Catholicism, nourished by haute cuisine and epitomized by the master chef Babette. The miraculous dinner Babette prepares at the story’s end serves, in this reading, to reconcile the ascetic with the aesthetic, the spiritual with the carnal.⁴ Another view holds that Babette is an “artist-priest” and benevolent “witch” who heals the dissension in the aging congregation with the “communion feast” or “Last Supper” she prepares, revealing through this Dionysian repast that spiritual fulfillment is obtainable only through acceptance of fleshly values.⁵ Still another, feminist, approach argues that the Quail in Sarcophagus that Babette cooks represents the “woman’s own body that is offered up, in displaced form, through her Eucharistic culinary corpus.”⁶ Babette is exhausted at the dinner’s end because she is “emptied out, . . . in effect consumed by her own artistic production.”⁷ Female artistic creation is considered inseparable from feminine sacrifice, and the production of narrative is understood to imply the author’s “simultaneous self-annihilation and self-creation.”⁸

There is no denying that Babette’s sumptuous feast and its aftermath offer a reflection on religion and on the opposition between the spiritual and the carnal, while also raising the questions of artistic creation and identity. But these issues do not fully represent the text’s concerns. In the close reading that follows, I want to show that the dinner has above all a psychoanalytic function: it allows for a communion in loss by enabling unspeakable loss to be talked about and the process of its mourning to begin. “Babette’s Feast,” in other words, is a story about overcoming an inability to mourn. It dramatizes the effects of a blockage to mourning and writes the prescription or recipe for transcending that blockage. The preparation and consumption of food serve as the medium of transcendence, as the means by which a shameful loss is swallowed and the process of its digestion begins. The feast also functions as a vehicle for articulating a fundamental connection between artistic creation and

bereavement, between literary inscription and psychic memorialization, and between the production of narrative as an aesthetic enterprise and the creation of art as a life-saving act.

PSYCHIC INDIGESTION AND THE UNBURIED DEAD

The story's plot is simple. Martine and Philippa, two beautiful daughters of a Lutheran dean who heads a small ascetic sect in the Norwegian fishing village of Berlevaag in the 1850s, each turn down an attractive suitor—one a young officer, the other a famous French opera singer—in order to remain faithful to their father and his religious ideals. One night, in 1871, with the dean deceased and the unmarried sisters carrying on his religious work in the community, Babette Hersant arrives on their doorstep with a letter of introduction from the French singer, Achille Papin. A fighter in the Paris Commune uprising in which her husband and son were killed, Babette begs for asylum and offers to become the sisters' housekeeper. They hesitantly agree, and Babette becomes a valued member of the household who, for the next twelve years, cleans, washes, and cooks simple meals for the sisters and the poor and sick of the village. When Babette, whose only tie with France during her years in Norway has been her regular purchase of a lottery ticket, wins ten thousand francs, she insists on cooking the one hundredth birthday dinner the sisters are planning in memory of the dean. At the end of the sumptuous feast, which is attended by the congregation and Martine's lost love, now a general, Babette reveals the secret she has kept all these years: she was once the renowned chef of a restaurant in Paris, the *Café Anglais*, and a great artist. Disclosing that she has spent all her winnings on the dinner, she explains that she will not return to France, since the world she knew there is gone anyway, and the story ends with the two sisters moved to tears by the generosity and talent they have just witnessed.

It is not readily apparent from this brief summary of "Babette's Feast" that the first five chapters of the twelve-chapter story recount a series of losses. Moreover, virtually no critical attention has been paid to the fact that each loss is associated with an inability or refusal to speak. When, in the first episode, the young officer, Lorens Loewenhielm, tries to tell Martine of his love, words fail him. Seated beside her and the dean, he feels suddenly unworthy and can "find nothing at all to say."⁹ Despite repeated visits to her home and attempts to "communicate his feelings to

Martine” (6), Lorens, who has always found it easy “to tell a pretty girl that he loved her” (7), finds this time that “the tender words stuck in his throat” (7). Concluding that “fate is hard, and that . . . there are things which are impossible” (7), he returns to his army garrison and is “silent” (7) on the affair, resolving “not . . . to think of it at all . . . , to forget what . . . happened to him . . . [and to] look forward, not back” (7–8). Martine reacts similarly. When her younger sister, Philippa, attempts to turn “the talk to the handsome, silent young man [who] had so suddenly disappeared” (8), Martine “answer[s] her gently, with a still, clear face, and find[s] other things to discuss” (8).

The idea of the silenced or suppressed voice is the even more explicit concern of the following episode. When the great Parisian singer Achille Papin hears Philippa sing in church during a visit to Berlevaag, he recognizes her magnificent voice and offers her singing lessons. Overwhelmed by her talent, he tells her of the great future she will have in opera, prospects she keeps secret from her father and sister. One day, as the two finish singing the seduction duet from *Don Giovanni*, Papin seizes Philippa’s hands, kisses her, and then lets go, for “the moment was too sublime for any further word or movement” (11). Philippa responds by asking her father, without any explanation, to write Monsieur Papin and tell him she no longer wishes lessons. While Papin laments the world’s loss of “its nightingale” (11) and his own loss as an artist whose career would have been renewed, Philippa says nothing about her lost opportunity. The narrator intimates that Philippa was “surprised and frightened” (12) by something the kiss awoke within her, but the incident and its effects are silenced: “Of this visitor from the great world the sisters spoke but little; they lacked the words with which to discuss him” (12).

This pattern of loss borne in silence continues in the next two chapters when Babette, “almost mad with grief and fear” (4), arrives on the doorstep of the home of the two sisters in 1871, fifteen years after Philippa’s saga, with a letter of introduction from Achille Papin. Seeking asylum from Paris, where she “lost all she possessed” (13), including a husband and son shot in the Communard uprising in which she herself participated, Babette is taken in by the sisters and adapts readily to their ascetic life. But this “speechless stranger” (17), who lives with the sisters for the next twelve years, “never learn[s] to speak the language of her new country” (16) and “[h]ardly ever . . . refer[s] to her past life” (17). When the sisters gently “condol[e] her upon her losses” (17) in the days after her arrival, she responds stoically, “It is Fate” (17). Sometimes when talking to her they “get no answer” (18) at all, and they realize that

Babette harbored “memories and longings of which they knew nothing” (18) and of which, for some reason, she would not or could not speak.

If Lorens, Martine, Philippa, and Babette stifle all speech about their losses, words are miraculously recovered at the end of Babette’s dinner. Lorens suddenly speaks of his enduring love for Martine, who subtly acknowledges her own feelings. Babette finally reveals that she was a great chef in Paris and describes the life she lived and lost there. And “deep, forgotten chords vibrat[e]” (47) in the heart of Philippa, who recognizes her lost life as an artist by consoling Babette with the same words Achille Papin used to lament his and the opera world’s loss of Philippa’s beautiful voice. Somehow the feast has loosened all these tongues and enabled them to speak of loss and suffering. It has allowed silences to be filled and memories recalled. To understand why this occurs, it is helpful to review briefly some of the theoretical literature concerned with the metapsychology of mourning.

In his earliest writings on the difference between mourning and melancholia (1917), Freud described “normal,” nonpathological mourning as a process involving the gradual, painful withdrawal of libidinal attachments from a lost object, which may be a loved person or “some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”¹⁰ The work of mourning consists in recalling “each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object” (“Mourning,” 245) and, through reality testing that reveals the object no longer exists, slowly detaching the libido from the object, ultimately freeing it to attach itself to other objects. As defined in “Mourning and Melancholia,” the specificity of melancholia lies in the fact that the libidinal attachment to an object-choice is ambivalent and narcissistic in nature. This attachment means that the libido cannot be readily withdrawn from the object and displaced onto another when the object is lost. Instead, the libido “is withdrawn into the ego [and serves] to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object” (“Mourning,” 249; Freud’s italics). An object-loss is thus transformed into an ego-loss, and the melancholic subject’s typical self-deprecation and self-criticism are understood to apply not to him or her but to the object brought into the ego. As Freud’s views on the process of identification evolved, he concluded (in “The Ego and the Id,” 1923) that the process of setting up a lost object inside the ego is a very “common and . . . typical” one that plays a major role in “determining the form taken by the ego and that . . . makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its ‘character’.”¹¹ Mourning, like melancholia, was now

seen to involve a “setting up of the object inside the ego. . . . It may be that by this introjection . . . , the ego makes it easier for the object to be given up or renders that process possible. It may be that this identification is the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects” (“Ego,” 29).¹²

Partly as a corrective to Freud’s blurring of the distinction between mourning and melancholia, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok endeavored to reinstall their difference and to offer a new way of understanding the related concepts of fixation and fantasy. They did this in their essay “Mourning *or* Melancholia: Introjection *versus* Incorporation” (1972), by first reinstating what they considered the lost distinction between introjection and incorporation.¹³ Recalling that Ferenczi, the originator of the term “introjection,” identified it as a normal process by which libidinally charged objects are gradually included within the ego, which is thereby enlarged and enriched, Abraham and Torok elaborated, explaining that it is also the process by which a necessary alteration in the ego’s topography is effected so that the reality of a loss may be integrated within the psyche.¹⁴ They further proposed that the conversion of a loss into language is a critical sign of its introjection and of the psyche’s accommodation of that loss. They held that an early paradigm of this process is found right after birth in the infant’s experience of an “empty mouth” (“Mourning *or* Melancholia,” 127). The absence of the maternal object (the breast) leads to crying and howling, and these eventually give way to speech addressed to the mother as a partial replacement for absent satisfactions of the mouth. Ultimately, the mother’s presence itself is replaced by words.

The absence of objects and the empty mouth are transformed into words; at last, even the experiences related to words are converted into other words. So the wants of the original oral vacancy are remedied by being turned into verbal relationships with the speaking community at large. Introjecting a desire, a grief, a situation means channeling them through language into a communion of empty mouths. This is how the literal ingestion of foods becomes introjection when viewed figuratively. The passage from food to language in the mouth presupposes the successful replacement of the object’s presence with the self’s cognizance of its absence. Since language acts and makes up for absence by representing, by *giving figurative shape* to presence, it can only be *comprehended* or *shared* in a “commu-

nity of empty mouths.” (“Mourning or Melancholia,” 128; Abraham and Torok’s italics, translation slightly modified)¹⁵

This linking of normal mourning with introjection and the conversion of a loss into speech resonates strongly with the pattern I’ve just identified in “Babette’s Feast” where a character’s refusal or inability to speak about loss gives way to an articulation of loss through a form of “communion” with bereaved others. Abraham and Torok’s idea that the literal ingestion of food can function as a figure of the introjective process specific to nonpathological mourning also seems highly pertinent since the transformation of loss into speech in Dinesen’s story occurs following the consumption of a feast. I would indeed propose that we read the repeated absence of language about loss in the narrative as a sign that the process of introjection has been blocked, that normal mourning has for some reason been obstructed for the characters, and that the literal consuming of the dinner somehow facilitates the removal of this obstruction.

The text itself confirms the link between introjection and ingestion, between unstated or unmourned loss and the inability to digest food, in the description of Lorens Loewenhielm’s life during the thirty years following his encounter with Martine. He has become a general, married, and led a busy life at court. Reflecting on his accomplishments, however, he is still not happy. Feeling that “[s]omewhere something had been lost” (33), he is troubled by a “deep-seated, invisible thorn” (31) on which he cannot quite put his finger, and, most disturbingly for a man “who valued good food highly in life” (32), he is pained by “indigestion from which he sometimes suffered” (32). It would not be an exaggeration to say that “Babette’s Feast” is fundamentally a story about indigestion—physical and psychic—and about a dinner whose ingestion effectively “cures” the dyspeptic. Before explaining how the dinner performs this cure, we must first determine the etiology of the illness. We must ask what would prevent the losses experienced by these characters from being mourned and their suffering from being put into words.

Achille Papin’s letter on Babette’s behalf makes clear that her departure from France was hasty and traumatic. A fugitive fleeing for her life, she was unable to bury her husband and son properly or to say goodbye to friends and places that made up her world in Paris. With no time to absorb her losses before plunging into an ascetic life likely to magnify any preexisting sense of loss, Babette is forced to forestall or suspend mourning in order to survive. There is another reason, however, for

Babette's suspension of grieving: her losses conflict with each other. Both her husband and son die for the Commune at the hands of General Galliffet and the aristocracy, the very people who recognize Babette's great talent and make it possible for her to live and practice her art. The desire to mourn her husband and son thus conflicts with the desire to mourn those who, while responsible for her family's murder and her own flight for survival, were the *sine qua non* of her life as a culinary artist in Paris. She reveals this at the story's end when she is finally able to speak of her past and tell the sisters that she will not be returning to Paris:

"What will I do in Paris? They have all gone. I have lost them all, Mesdames. . . . The Duke of Morny, the Duke of Decazes, Prince Narishkine, General Galliffet, Aurélian Scholl, Paul Daru, the Princesse Pauline! All!" . . .

"But all those people . . . , [Philippa] said, "those princes and great people of Paris whom you named, Babette? You yourself fought against them. You were a Communard! The General you named had your husband and son shot! How can you grieve over them?" . . .

"Yes . . . those people . . . were evil and cruel. They let the people of Paris starve; they oppressed and wronged the poor. Thanks be to God, I stood upon a barricade; I loaded the gun for my menfolk! But all the same, Mesdames, I shall not go back to Paris, now that those people of whom I have spoken are no longer there." . . .

"You see, . . . those people belonged to me, they were mine. They had been brought up and trained . . . to understand what a great artist I am. I could make them happy. When I did my very best I could make them perfectly happy." (45–48)

To mourn her husband and son would mean recognizing that the society for which she lived and that gave her life and love as an artist was oppressive and murderous. To mourn the loss of this society and of her position as a culinary genius within it would be to express her love for those who murdered her husband and son and wronged the poor. Caught in an impossible, unspeakable double bind where mourning is tied to shameful love, Babette's solution during her twelve years in Berlevaag is to mourn no one: to keep secret the drama of her loss, and to exclude from language any expression of her suffering.

A different conflict inhibiting mourning affects Martine and Philippa. Brought up by their father to “renounc[e] the pleasures of this world” (3), these beautiful young women are effectively put off-limits to men by the dean, who makes clear that

to him in his calling his daughters were his right and left hand. Who could want to bereave him of them? And the fair girls had been brought up to an ideal of heavenly love; they were all filled with it and did not let themselves be touched by the flames of this world. (5)

To act upon or even acknowledge their desires for Lorens, Achille Papin, and worldly lives outside the sect would mean “bereaving” or betraying their father and abandoning the ascetic values he preached. In order to satisfy their desire to be faithful to him, therefore, they must deny their worldly desires. Denying these desires means also denying that the desires have been frustrated, that a loss has been suffered. The sisters’ love for their father and wish not to bereave him thus conflicts with their need to mourn lost loves and lives. The result is a silencing of the language of desire and loss, and a blocking of their ability to mourn.

Finally, Lorens never speaks of his loss of Martine since admitting he was dominated by the dean, whose presence and words left him feeling unworthy of his daughter and “a shy and sorry figure” (33), would mean admitting that “a lieutenant of the hussars had let himself be defeated and frustrated” (7) by an old man. Recognizing his loss would also mean acknowledging that he had let his fear of sharing the “sheer misery” (33) of the sect’s ascetic lifestyle cause him to make the wrong choice in life. His shameful defeat in love thus challenges his identity as a brave and knowing soldier, and he responds by removing from language any admission of his loss.

In view of these impediments to mourning and what might be called an involuntary “ascetism of the word,” we can now ask how the dinner served by Babette and consumed by these characters enables them to articulate their losses and begin to grieve. The sisters, let us remember, hold the dinner on the one hundredth anniversary of the dean’s birth because they aim to unite the congregation in recollecting their leader’s life and contributions and in paying “honor to his memory” (27). While not a sad occasion, the meal recalls and commemorates the dead and can be considered a sort of wake or mourning dinner, an idea underscored by

the wreath the sisters hang around the dean's portrait and by the candles they light beneath it. Seen in this context, Babette's emphatic request to prepare a "real French dinner" (22) for the occasion, despite the sisters' reluctance to let her do so, may be read as a desire to recall and commemorate a life that was French and that is now dead *for her*. It may be read as a means of mourning what she herself has lost.

Enacting such a commemoration would first necessitate properly burying her dead, something Babette could not do before fleeing France. Her preparation of a "real French dinner" can be seen as the means of accomplishing just this. It is a way to "bring to life" in Norway—in the form of French foods, wines, pots and pans, tableware, and the like, all of which she has shipped from France—that which she possessed and lost in France so that it can finally be recognized as dead and suitably entombed. If Babette is pleased to learn that a general who lived for several years in Paris will attend the dinner, it is because he represents for her the aristocracy she trained to appreciate her artistry and because his presence will help complete her re-creation of France in Berlevaag.

The burial itself is accomplished through the preparation of the meal and, specifically, through the main dish Babette cooks: *Cailles en Sarcophage*—Quail in Sarcophagus. While one might argue that it is hardly surprising Babette would choose to serve the dish for which she was famous in Paris, the narrative underscores the acute significance of her choice in the explicit parallels it draws between birds and people. When the sisters learn that Babette has won the French lottery, they are saddened to think she may leave them, but cannot blame Babette for departing, since "birds will return to their nests and human beings to the country of their birth" (21). Later, seated at the dinner table among the somber members of the congregation, the general, in his uniform covered with decorations, looks "like an ornamental bird, a golden pheasant or a peacock, in this sedate party of black crows and jackdaws" (30–31).

Since birds are anthropomorphized or assimilated to humans in the text, we must read closely Babette's decision to prepare *Cailles en Sarcophage*. Doing so we hear in *caille* not just the French word for "quail," but also the term of endearment used to refer to a loved one, as in the expression *ma petite caille*, translated as "my beloved, my darling, or my dearest."¹⁶ Although this expression never appears in the written story, it is used in the film when Babette, collecting her shipment of goods from France at the seashore, picks up the cage of live quail and murmurs to them affectionately, "*Allô mes petites cailles.*" Whether actually scripted or an invention of the French actress Stéphane Audran, who plays



Fig. 1.1. *Babette's Feast* (1987): Babette carefully prepares Quail in Sarcophagus



Fig. 1.2. *Babette's Feast* (1987): the beloved quail in their sarcophagi ready to be consumed

Babette, the moment makes explicit what is tacitly yet indisputably at play in the short story. The quail Babette brings from France, kills, and then meticulously entombs in their sarcophagi are not just birds, but her loved ones. The quail function as the fleshly embodiment of her husband, her son, the French aristocracy, and her cherished life in France.

Through their slow, careful preparation as a culinary *pièce de résistance*, she is able to begin to acknowledge as dead those dear to her and to entomb properly what she lost in France. At the same time, the preparation of the *cailles* functions as an initial step toward articulating her loss in language. The word's figurative dimension allows Babette "to speak" for the first time—even if only performatively through the preparation and presentation of the quail—of her dead loved ones. In the same way, her decision to serve Veuve Clicquot with the dinner, while at first glance a seemingly undetermined and logical choice of a famed champagne, can also be heard as a tacit putting into language of her loss and of her identity as a bereaved widow, since the brand name means "the *Widow* Clicquot."

The film's depiction of Babette's careful, one could say *respectful*, preparation of the dinner, which is only briefly recounted in the written narrative, properly emphasizes the ceremonial, mournful nature of this undertaking. It accurately illustrates the idea that Babette's artistry in the kitchen is dedicated not only to the preparation of a meal, but also to the preparation of the dead for burial. In cooking the dinner, in other words, Babette performs the triple role of a great chef, a gifted mortician, and a knowing doctor. She prepares the dead bodies of her loved ones or *cailles* for entombment so that they may be literally consumed (by others) and thereby introjected (by her), making possible a cure for her "psychic indigestion."¹⁷ At the same time, she writes or inscribes the prescription for this cure in the very dish she creates as her remedy.

Indeed, the sarcophagi she prepares convey the message that the dead are not just to be buried, but must be consumed for her remedy to work. This message is conveyed by the word *sarcophagus*, which is Greek for "flesh eating" and is the name of the "stone reputed among the Greeks to have the property of consuming the flesh of dead bodies deposited in it, and consequently used for coffins."¹⁸ Babette's dish of *Cailles en Sarcophage* is thus itself a narrative of sorts. It is a text that cryptically tells of the need to bury the dead in such a way that they can be psychically devoured and digested and hence transformed into a tomb or memorial to their own disappearance: into a monument—which is what a sarcophagus, with its embellishing sculptures or inscriptions, is—that marks their absence and that not only permits, but also invites the memorialization or recollection of their presence in and through language. The live turtle Babette has shipped from France and makes into soup, and that looks "like some greenish-black stone" (25), can be read as yet another gastronomic vehicle through which she writes and fills the prescription for her own cure. This animal, which can be said to live in or

carry with it its own “tomb” or “sarcophagus,” leaves behind, once the body within has been devoured, a kind of monument to its own memory. The turtle soup thus combines with the *Cailles en Sarcophage* and the *Veuve Clicquot* champagne to tell the tale of how healthy digestion of a loss is to proceed and of how memory of the loss may be constructed and rendered palatable.¹⁹

We can now understand why Babette appears at the end of the dinner “as white and as deadly exhausted as on the night when she first appeared and had fainted on [the sisters’] doorstep” (44). Through her entombment of the dead and her psychic ingestion of them (via the congregation), this culinary magician has performed a temporal shift. She has traveled (mentally) back in time to the moment, twelve years earlier, when she first suffered her loss and was unable to mourn. Having re-created through the feast her former existence and having brought together, buried, and monumentalized her husband, her son, and “her” aristocracy, she is at last able to transcend the blockage to mourning, to convert her suffering into words, and to reveal the secret she has kept about the life she lived and lost in France. Thus, when the sisters learn that Babette has spent all ten thousand francs of her lottery winnings on the dinner and Philippa says softly, “Dear Babette . . . , you ought not to have given away all you had for our sake” (46), Babette responds with a deep glance of “pity, even scorn” (46) and retorts, “For your sake? . . . No. For my own” (46). Babette’s sumptuous recreation of a dinner for twelve at the *Café Anglais* does not have as its principal goal allowing her to practice her art one last time or to reaffirm her identity as an artist in a gesture of nostalgic self-sacrifice or self-annihilation. This re-creation is the means by which she finally buries “France” and begins her new life in Norway. It is not an act of selflessness, but of self-rescue and self-preservation. It is an act of survival.

The end of the story suggests that Babette will indeed survive and may ultimately thrive. Before the dinner, she had cooked only for the sisters and prepared a soup that had the “power to stimulate and strengthen” (16) the poor and sick of the community, a “medicinal” gesture that can be construed as an initial but inadequate attempt at self-cure. Babette’s feast, on the other hand, enacts a recipe for self-cure that works. The moment she is able to say to the sisters, “I was once cook at the *Café Anglais*” (44), is the moment she finally separates the past from the present and is, in effect, “reborn in Norway.” Now, finally, she will be able to reconcile herself to the ascetic world in which she has existed for twelve years. Now, at last, she should be able to share wholly in the

simple pleasures and self-denial of these people, all of which she has borne stoically these past years, but has never made her own. And now, finally, she will probably learn to converse with a community whose language she “never learned to speak” (16), and her “broken Norwegian” (17) may well become fluent.

These changes do not mean that Babette will henceforth be immune to feelings of loss, longing, and sadness. On the contrary, she will now mourn normally; she will spend years, perhaps the rest of her life, slowly digesting and making a part of herself the shame and loss she has suffered. While doing so, however, she will be able to live and find pleasure in the present and move forward in life. She no longer will spend her time “lost in the study” (18) of her recipe book and conjuring meals she could only confect in the past. When, at the very end of the story, Philippa puts her arms around Babette and feels “the cook’s body like a marble monument against her own” (48), it is because Babette, through the feast, has become herself a living memorial for the dead. She has become a sarcophagus of sorts, a living tomb who carries within her the trace or inscription of an unspeakable loss she can now recall and mourn at will.

FOOD THAT SPEAKS, ART THAT HEALS

Babette’s feast serves not only to cure her own inability to mourn, but that of General Loewenhielm as well. Recognizing the *Cailles en Sarcophage* before him as the specialty of the Café Anglais in Paris, he speaks of the woman chef there, the “greatest culinary genius of the age” (38), who could turn a dinner into “a kind of love affair . . . in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety” (38). Given his initial perception of Martine as a “golden-haired angel” (6) and as a “vision of a higher and purer life” (6) who reminds him of a Huldre or “female mountain spirit” (5) of Norway, the general’s conflation of the bodily and the spiritual takes on precise significance. It suggests that we read the dish before him in “spiritual”—psychic or figurative—terms; that we see the Quail in Sarcophagus, which provokes his comments, as the fleshly incarnation—for him—of his lost but never buried or mourned “love affair” with the spiritual, angelic Martine. For the general, literally swallowing the flesh of the quail is equivalent to “swallowing” figuratively and beginning to digest psychically or “spiritually” the loss of *his petite caille*, of his angelic, “winged” beloved.

The narrative makes clear that this process of ingestion marks the beginning of mourning and involves the conversion of a loss into language. It is only after consuming the meal that the general, who had decided before arriving at the sisters' home to "dominate the conversation at dinner" (34), finally speaks "in a manner so new to himself and so strangely moving that after his first sentence he had to make a pause. For . . . it was as if the whole figure of General Loewenhielm . . . *were but a mouthpiece for a message* which meant to be brought forth" (40; my italics). The quail and its tomb devoured, the general's entire body is transformed into a mouth, the meal's flesh is made word, and he admits for the first time that he had once trembled in fear: "Never till now had the General stated that he trembled; he was genuinely surprised and even shocked at hearing his own voice proclaim the fact" (40).

A humiliating event he has kept secret for thirty-one years is now put into words. His fear of the dean, which had dissuaded him from pursuing Martine, is voiced, albeit discreetly, for the first time. And as the general speaks about grace, mercy, and amnesty—"grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty" (40)—he in essence grants them to himself and his former adversary. He forgives himself as the young Lorens, who trembled and lost a beloved. He grants amnesty to the dean, who had dominated the dinner conversation long ago and prevented him from expressing his love for Martine. And he implies that what had been lost has now been recovered, through language, as that which can be mourned. In fact, the last sentence of the general's speech consists of the dean's own intimidating words: "See! that which we have chosen is given us," the general proclaims, "and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us." Then, quoting the dean, he concludes: "For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another" (40–41). With the dean's words filling his mouth, the general at last swallows the saga of his loss. As he departs the sisters' home at evening's end, his once silenced voice now speaks to Martine of love, carnal and spiritual appetite, and the mourning process he is about to begin:

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

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

"And," he continued, "I shall be with you every day that is left to me. *Every evening I shall sit down, if not in the flesh, which means nothing, in spirit, which is all, to dine with you, just*

like tonight. For tonight I have learned, dear sister, that in this world anything is possible.” (42; my italics)

Lorens provides here his own recipe for mourning. He will spend the remainder of his days reliving this dinner as the main ingredient of his introjective process. He in essence says to Martine, “I will spend the rest of my life digesting a loss that will slowly become a part of me. I will live my days adjusting and enlarging my spiritual or psychic being, through my memory of ingesting this meal, so as finally to digest and absorb your absence and make your memory an integral and savoured part of my life.” With the general’s last words, Isak Dinesen makes clear that this story about food is a story about mourning. It is a tale that portrays blocked or suspended grieving in terms of silence, secrecy, and physical indigestion, and that prescribes as a cure for these symptoms filling the mouth with food that “speaks,” with nourishment whose literal ingestion figures the conversion of loss or emptiness into speech and the transformation of unutterable pain into the language of bereavement.

If the general’s ability to speak the dean’s words marks his transcendence of a blockage to mourning, Philippa’s last utterance signals her initiation of the same process. When Babette reveals her true identity as an artist, she invokes Achille Papin as someone who also sought to perform to his utmost and whom the sisters remember as having openly “grieved” (14) for Philippa’s lost voice in his letter introducing Babette. In that letter Papin consoled himself with the thought that her voice would indeed be heard again in Paradise: “There you will be the great artist that God meant you to be,” he wrote. “Ah! how you will enchant the angels” (14). Upon hearing Babette finally give voice to her losses as a wife, a mother, and a great chef following the dinner, Philippa finds her own silenced voice through the words of Achille Papin:

Philippa went up to Babette and put her arms round her. . . .

For a while she could not speak. Then she whispered:

“Yet this is not the end! I feel, Babette, that this is not the end. In Paradise you will be the great artist that God meant you to be! Ah!” she added, the tears streaming down her cheeks. “*Ah, how you will enchant the angels!*” (48; my italics)

By assuming as her own the aggrieved Papin’s words and addressing them to a woman artist who finally acknowledges suffering a loss,

Philippa assumes for the first time her own identity as a bereaved woman and artist. Through Papin's words, she gives voice to her own loss of a lover and a singing career and, we may presume, sheds tears not just for Babette but also for herself as well. Babette's feast and the Quail in Sarcophagus thus function for Philippa as they do for Babette, the general, and Martine. Ingesting the entombed "bird" becomes a figurative means of swallowing the loss of *her* beloved, her *petite caille*, Achille Papin. At the same time, it allows her to swallow the loss of her birdlike voice, thought by Papin to be that of a "nightingale" (11), and to fill at last her empty mouth with the language of mourning. By the story's end, moreover, the entire congregation has joined in this communion of grieving mouths. Since the dean's death, the congregants had become increasingly afflicted with a dissension "like a poisoning of the blood" and "a deep-seated, festering splinter" (19). At the dinner, however, they begin to talk with each other. Although having vowed not to say a word about the food in deference to the sisters' fears that something frightening like "frogs or snails" (27) might be served, the guests found "somehow this evening tongues had been loosened" (36). Though silent about the meal itself, the brethren seemed for all else to have "received the gift of tongues" (41).

The feast thus appears to have "cured" the congregation along with Babette, the general, Martine, and Philippa. It would be a mistake, however, to think the congregants suffer in the same way as the others. The silence that gives way to their gift of tongues is not a symptom of suspended mourning. The congregation's comical intoxication by the fleshly pleasures of good food and wine and their emergence from stern, discordant asceticism into ebullient and harmonious well-being—a shift readers have generally taken to be the principal aim of the dinner and the "lesson" of the story—needs to be read instead as an accompaniment to the central dramas of mourning of the four main characters. The congregation, in other words, functions in the story as something of a Greek chorus that echoes the main theme of the conversion of suspended mourning into normal grieving, but only in its most basic notes or themes of silence giving way to speech, internal discord yielding to harmony. At the same time, the congregants' amusing refusal to speak about food and their ability to speak about the loss of a loved one (the dean) serve as a figural counterpoint or chiasmus of the story's central trope in which the inability to speak about loss is cured by food "that speaks" or is transformed into speech.

In light of the foregoing, we can now reassess the idea, shared to some degree by most interpreters of the text, that the feast is a Eucharistic banquet or Last Supper in which twelve members participate in a ritual celebration of (Babette's) sacrifice.²⁰ I want to suggest that, if the banquet has a Eucharistic dimension, it has less to do with selfless sacrifice and the granting of grace than with the psychic process of mourning. That is, the feast is readable as the Last Supper if the latter itself is read as a trope of introjection, as a symbolic meal in which the physical ingestion of bread and wine figures the psychic swallowing and digestion of a lost beloved (Christ). Put another way, if we can interpret Babette's feast as representing or mirroring the Last Supper, it is above all because the narrative implicitly suggests that we read the Last Supper itself as a proleptic act of mourning, as a "wake before the fact" at which the loss of the soon-to-be-dead is symbolically integrated within the self through the literal ingestion of food. The dean's and sisters' comical hesitancy to allow "Papists" (Papin and Babette) into their home and the theme of "Protestant Puritanism versus worldly, carnal Catholicism," which is gently woven through the story, can hence be read as signs informing the reader that the feast in the text requires a puritan or "Protestant" reading. The "Eucharist" of Babette's dinner, in sum, is a Protestant one in which the literal ingestion of bread and wine is understood as a symbolic or metaphorical communion with the flesh and blood of the dead. In this form, it is distinct from the Catholic Eucharist in which the bread and wine are believed to become the actual flesh and blood of Christ. Babette's is a ritual where the mouth is literally filled with food so that a silence about loss can be filled with words and so that an absence can be celebrated in and with language about absence.

"Babette's Feast" can therefore be described as a text that uses a religious context to reflect upon the psychic dimension of the creative act. It links artistic creation with psychic suffering, and it shows how the specific psychopathology of blocked or suspended mourning can be transcended or "cured" through the production of a particular work of art. The tale thus articulates a psychoanalytic aesthetic in which artistic production is readable as a symptomatic response to an unspeakable trauma that poses an obstacle to being, and as a performative attempt at self-cure that aims to overcome such an obstacle. The creation of the feast as a work of art to be ingested, in other words, serves as both a telltale symbol of impeded mourning and as the means by which figuration, as the mode of surmounting that impediment, is reinstalled. The production of

art makes possible the work of metaphor as both a figure and an instrument of introjection.

The idea that the feast “speaks,” through its ingredients, of what has not been said or mourned and thereby mediates and enacts the metaphorization of loss becomes clearer if understood in contrast to the dynamic of incorporation, which subverts or denies metaphorization. Incorporation occurs in response to a narcissistic loss that cannot be articulated in language because the subject shares with the lost object a shameful and therefore unspeakable secret whose revelation threatens to annihilate them both. In order for the subject to safeguard the secret as unspoken, preserve the innocence of the lost object, and protect the precarious stability of the subject’s own self, the subject pretends to have had nothing to lose in the first place. This pretense is sustained by the fantasy of incorporation, which functions by effecting a false introjection or simulated “swallowing” of what has been lost. Instead of the loss being introjected and the ego’s topography rearranged to accommodate the object’s absence, the lost object itself is magically taken into the psyche and preserved alive in an “intrapsychic crypt” (“Mourning *or* Melancholia,” 130) or vault lodged within the ego but resistant to the ego’s mechanisms of assimilation. The structure of the crypt simultaneously prevents the psyche from integrating the loss (and thereby potentially disintegrating the subject), protects the secret from exposure, and maintains the (fictitious) integrity of the debased object, thereby allowing the subject to deny that a loss ever occurred.

In incorporation, the words associated with the loss cannot be used figuratively to express or convert loss into language, as they are in normal mourning, since the tainted secret must not be shared in a communion of other mouths. The rhetoric of mourning, in this instance, could be called a pathological rhetoric because it consists of the subject’s literalizing or demetaphorizing the words associated with the lost object’s shame as a means of undoing or nullifying that shame. A core figure of this rhetoric is what Abraham and Torok call “antimetaphor” (“Mourning *or* Melancholia,” 131), which in its most dramatic form manifests itself as the “fecalizing” of the lost object: the subject will literally swallow excrement or engage in coprolalia, for example, as a way of saying that the lost object is not filthy or vile, but good, edible, even delectable. The shame associated with the loss is thus denied by one’s destroying the metaphoricity of words, by vitiating their “capacity for figurative representation” (“Mourning *or* Melancholia,” 132). Examples of this can be

found in the writings of the Marquis de Sade and in the films of John Waters. I will discuss a complex instance of incorporation and the rhetoric of demetaphorization and the crypt in the next chapter on *Last Tango in Paris*.

As opposed to what I would term the pathological psychoanalytic aesthetic that emerges from this form of psychic disturbance, the effect produced by “Babette’s Feast” comes from what could be called a curative psychoanalytic aesthetic. This produces a sublime, uplifting affect, which announces the transcendence of a psychopathogenic trauma. Babette does not incorporate her loss as an unspeakable secret within an intrapsychic crypt. Rather, she suspends verbalization just as she herself is suspended in a metapsychological double bind between two incompatible alternatives of speech that render her acknowledgment of one part of her loss an implicit denial of the other part. This suspension does not lead her to avoid or void metaphor through a radical literalization of her trauma of loss. It prompts her instead to create a comestible artifact whose very ingestion gives itself to be read as a metaphor of introjection and whose readability as a trope unblocks speech and opens the way to the symbolization of loss. Babette’s culinary art, in short, does not aim to demetaphorize language or flatten out the figural in order to nullify its threat to silence. Her artistic creation functions as the vehicle for a metaphorization of loss that has resisted language. It serves as a medium of figuration that gives voice to the unmourned, unstated grief that has effectively left her mute for twelve years and prevented her from living life as her own. The aesthetic production of the feast can therefore be construed ontologically and metapsychologically as a psychic response to a blockage to being, as a symbolic narrative created as a means of filling in the gap in Babette’s speech that has prevented her self-realization. The feast, to put it another way, is readable anasemically, via a hermeneutic movement back toward earlier significations that lie beyond immediate perception, as the symptom produced as a means of transcending a trauma that has arrested figuration, impeded mourning, and obstructed Babette’s ability to live as a subject in and of loss.

As it reflects upon the connection between aesthetic production and psychopathology and upon the curative effects of art, “Babette’s Feast” also demonstrates the possible psychic impact of art on those who receive or “consume” it. It presents a “theory of reception” that explains how a work of art, created in the course of one individual’s struggle to be, may—even if only unconsciously—be “read,” “used,” or “consumed” by others in their own attempts at self-cure and symbolization.

This consumption, moreover, is not limited to the fictional characters of the narrative; it extends to larger sociocultural contexts as well. While Babette's feast serves as the medium through which she, the two sisters, and the general all surmount an inability to mourn, it seems also to serve at least some readers—or viewers—in a similar fashion. I want to suggest, in other words, that the “eater-response” of moviegoers discussed at the beginning of this reading cannot be explained solely as a materialist or consumerist response to a clever marketing strategy. It is also symptomatic of at least some viewers' desires to share or commune in a process of mourning. The fact that many of those attending the pricey replications of Babette's feast were yuppie baby boomers indicates not only that they had ample income of which to dispose, but that they were also of an age, thirty- or forty-something, at which they had begun to experience if not accumulate traumatic losses in their lives. Their attendance at these dinners may therefore be seen as the unconscious expression of a wish to mourn, to participate in a “wake” or “Last Supper” of sorts through which they might grieve for their own losses. While some diners may well have sought merely the pleasures of good food, others, I would propose, unwittingly yet happily paid dearly for an opportunity to mourn: for a chance to swallow or further digest the loss of their *petite caille*. For these consumers, watching the film and ingesting the dinner afterward was a therapeutic experience that afforded solace as much as pleasure. The fact that the cost of these dinners, served by fine restaurants in cities around the country, was roughly equivalent to the cost of a psychoanalytic session in those same cities bolsters this conflation of the gastro-nomic and therapeutic.²¹

To what extent, I want to ask in conclusion, might the writing of “Babette's Feast” have been a therapeutic endeavor for Isak Dinesen? Several critics have noted the ironic contrast between the story and Dinesen's plight in 1950 when, suffering from the advanced syphilis that had attacked her digestive system, she was unable to eat normally and was in fact slowly starving to death. (She died of emaciation in September 1962.)²² While the short story might be viewed as Dinesen's mordant commentary on her physical condition, the link between text and author can be understood quite differently if seen in terms of the connection the story itself makes between artistic creation and mourning. As Karen Blixen, her pre-authorial self and owner of a coffee plantation in the British colony of Kenya, Dinesen suffered losses not unlike those of Babette. She too had been forced to leave the country and people she loved (when the plantation failed); she too had lost a husband, whose

incessant philandering resulted ultimately in divorce. She also lost her lover, Denys Finch Hatten, who died in a plane crash. Upon returning to Denmark, Dinesen suffered anguished feelings of loss and grief. When asked in 1934, upon publishing her first story collection titled *Seven Gothic Tales*, whether it would not have been more natural for her to write her first book about Africa, she replied that it would have been as easy to have turned immediately to that subject as to have written “about a child the day one buried it. One must have things at a distance.”²³ If Africa was for Dinesen a “child she had buried” and could only talk or write about from a distance, and if “Babette’s Feast” is all about the creation of a work of art as the therapeutic medium for “talking” about loss, I would suggest that Dinesen, too, like the sisters, the general, and a portion of the restaurant-going viewers of the film, “used” this narrative for her own therapeutic needs. “Babette’s Feast,” in sum, is readable as Dinesen’s tacit rewriting or “second volume” of *Out of Africa* in which she linguistically inscribes the loss of her own *petite caille* (Denys Finch Hatten) and her own *Café Anglais* or *coffee* plantation in *English* Kenya. Created as a symptom of her need to grieve, as a vehicle for facilitating the grieving process, and as a subtle commentary on the intricate relationship between writing and bereavement, “Babette’s Feast” can ultimately be read as a text that humorously and poignantly tells the tale of Dinesen’s own recipe for mourning.