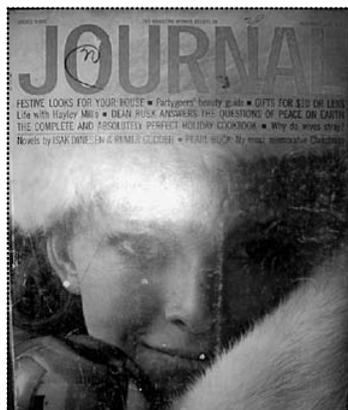


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MISREADING KIERKEGAARD - WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM ISAK DINESEN

Isak Dinesen is the pseudonym of the Danish writer Karen Blixen, née Dinesen (1885-1962), born in Rungsted, north of Copenhagen. In 1914 she married her cousin, Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke, and went to live in British East Africa (now Kenya) on a coffee plantation. After her divorce in 1921 she remained in Africa, returning to her childhood home in 1931. Here she started to write. She wrote both the Danish and the English versions of all her works, and her first book, *Seven Gothic Tales*, was published first in USA in 1934, in Denmark in 1935. *Out of Africa* (1937), which was made into a film, was based on her experiences in Kenya. Blixen's later works include *Winter's Tales* (1942), *Last Tales* (1957), *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), *Shadows on the Grass* (1960), and *Ehregard* (1963).

In the American magazine, *The Ladies' Home Journal* for December 1962 – three months after the death of Karen Blixen – her very last story was published: „The Secret of Rosenbad”, even if it was shorter and somewhat different from the book edition of 1963: *Ehregard*. In the magazine the story was illustrated in the same manner as many other Dinesen stories printed in *The Ladies' Home Journal* and other magazines during the forties and fifties.



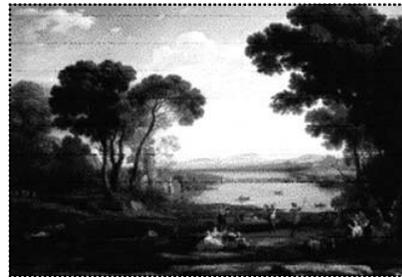
Discussing the title to be used in the magazine, Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen is her pseudonym!) wrote to the editor in the summer of 1962, that „You might call it ‘The Seducer’s Diary’ – which is, of course, a quotation from Kierkegaard, but which is here to be taken ironically and might from the beginning give the reader an idea of the nature of the story.”

Blixen worked on *Ehregard* in 1961 and 62, changed it and improved it, but originally this story should have completed *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), and she had a version prepared already in 1952, in which year it circulated among – and was commented on – by her friends.

Ehregard is the story about an artist and seducer, Herr Cazotte, who works for the Grand Duchess of Fugger-Babenhausen. He is asked to help the dynasty in a severe question of legitimacy: first to make the young Prince Lothar interested in women and *la belle passion*, and – having succeeded a little too much in this – to create a plan to avoid the scandal, because the child of Prince Lothar and Princess Ludmilla would have been born two months too early! Herr Cazotte's solution is to isolate the young couple in the country, at the rococo castle „Rosenbad“.



But his real project is to seduce Princess Ludmilla's *maid-of-honor*, Ehregard von Schreckenstein – chosen cautiously by himself for the purpose. Just as the surroundings – an essential element for any seducer – are created with meticulous care: „Imagine to yourself that you be quietly stepping into a painting by Claude Lorrain.“ (p. 31).



The point is that he does not intend to seduce her in the good „old-fashioned manner“ (p. 54). The reason is, he claims, that he is an artist, so he wants to see her blush, but in a fundamental way, which is not even mentioned in the register of different kinds of feminine blushes in Kierkegaard's *The Seducer's Diary*. Johannes the Seducer lists 1) „the coarse brick-red blush“, 2) „the delicate blush“ – priceless in a young girl and 3) „The passing blush produced by a happy idea ... It

is a gleam of lighting, the heat lightning of the spirit“.

But Herr Cazotte wants Ehregard to be shaken up to a greater degree, so he chooses a more dramatic natural phenomenon as metaphor, „Alpen-Glühen“ (‘alpine glow’, so to speak):

After the sun has set, and as the whole majestic mountain landscape is already withdrawing into itself, suddenly the row of summits, all on their own, radiate a divine fire, a celestial, deep rose flame, as if they were giving up a long kept secret. After that they disappear, nothing more dramatic can be imagined: they have betrayed their inmost substance and can now only annihilate themselves. Black night follows. (p. 37).

This phenomenon is a miracle to Herr Cazotte, and yet, he claims, it is „but a pre-*age* of my adventure with Ehregard“. His plan is to make her betray her „inmost substance“ in exactly the same way.

This is always the core in Blixen's blush metaphors: the person in question blushes

at the very moment she becomes aware of her instincts and sexuality. For Cazotte, when he succeeds in bringing Ehrengard to this point, it will be the triumph of his artistic carrier. Ehrengard will be his work of art, just like Johannes the Seducer appoints Cordelia to be his „handiwork”.

Herr Cazotte is a disciple of Vicomte de Valmont in Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and Kierkegaard's Johannes the Seducer, i.e. he is a reflective seducer, in contrast to Don Juan, the immediate seducer who „lacks time in advantage in which to lay his plans, and time afterwards in which to become conscious of his act.” So Herr Cazotte makes a plan – he creates the necessary surroundings and situations for the seduction (Rosenbad); and he uses the reflective seducer's typical weapons: the glance and the word – just as Valmont and Johannes do.

But in the end it is Ehrengard who makes Herr Cazotte blush. His „blood was drawn upwards, as from the profoundest wells of his being, till it colored him all over like a transparent crimson veil. His brow and cheeks, all on their own, radiated a divine fire, a celestial, deep rose flame, as if they were giving away a long secret.” (p. 109). Pure *Alpen-glühen*.

In 1954 Aage Henriksen sent his doctoral dissertation on „Kierkegaard's novels” to Blixen. In her response she wrote:

Very much occupied by your book, I have read Søren Kierkegaard again, that is to say, the „Diary of the Seducer”. I have not come further in this reading of Kierkegaard. And in order to make a story of it (and because I, as you know, think that Cordelia must be permitted to exist and be a human being [...]), I have imagined or the imagination has occurred to me: I am now Cordelia, or this time Cordelia is speaking.

Johannes is dead, Cordelia is old, she has inherited from her aunt and does now possess her own house. Then comes a young devoted nephew, a student and poet, and brings her (without an inkling of connection) the „Diary of the Seducer”, which has just been published (historically incorrect). She reads it and recognizes the letters, the conversations, the situations. And with the weight of the many years she is older now than he was when the diary was written, she now thinks [...]: „If I had known this!” And at the very last as she compares her sorrow to his: „Oh most unhappy! Could I have saved you? Could I have done more for you than I did?” An echo reaches Johannes' spirit and he thinks...”

End of quotation – and end of Blixen's letter to Aage Henriksen. Just like her stories, this letter ends in a blank page, open for the reader's further thoughts and interpretations. But what she writes here is exactly what she did in Ehrengard. At the end she – or Ehrengard – tries to save the artist Herr Cazotte by making him blush – for blushing is always, in Blixen, a positive reaction, an expression of a happy and mature new gained consciousness; with Aristotle: *anagnorisis*. The problem is that Herr Cazotte escapes as quickly as possible, afraid of what might be revealed „from the profoundest wells of his being”, his „inmost substance”.

From a feministic point of view the story *Ehregard* has always been regarded as a victory for the female sex. And surely Blixen manages to accept Johannes' challenge, when he claims: „I imagine a young, vigorous girl of spirit who conceives the extraordinary idea of avenging her sex upon me. ... That is just the girl for me.” Johannes doesn't doubt for a second that he will manage to seduce this girl as well. But Ehregard beats him to it!

However, Blixen herself is not simply Ehregard, she is also Herr Cazotte, the artist. You could say – in Julia Kristeva's words – that using the two protagonists in the story is the result of the writing-subject in process, the result of which is „the reconstitution of a new, plural identity. This new identity may be the plurality capable of manifesting itself as the plurality of characters the author uses.”

But these two figures must be understood in relation to a third character, namely the old storyteller who – in the setting of the text – expressly brings up the question as to whether the story is a comedy or a tragedy. This could be an allusion to Kierkegaard's *Concluding unscientific Postscript*, in which the pseudonym, Johannes Climacus states: „the difference between the tragic and the comic consists in the relation of the contradiction to the idea.”

Let us assume that the idea is life (life is in the Hegelian system the immediate form of the idea) – or in Blixen's universe: love. Now, according to Johannes Climacus, „the comic interpretation produces the contradiction or allows it to become apparent by having in mente the way out; therefore the contradiction is painless.” This is Ehregard's standpoint, virtue of her worthiness, her pride and courage. From a feministic point of view the text is a comedy with Ehregard as the heroine: you have to rejoice in and gloat over Herr Cazotte's defeat.

„The tragic interpretation,” Climacus continues, „sees the contradiction and despairs over the way out.” Herr Cazotte's despair is shown in his escape to Rome where his „acquaintances smilingly alter his name to that of Cazzanova.” (p. 111). His way out would have been to learn from the lesson Ehregard gave him making him blush – he could have recognized his own „inmost substance.” From Herr Cazotte's – the artist's – point of view the whole story is a tragedy.

But from another level in the text you hear a sad female voice, asking: „Could I have done more for poor seducer-artist, not capable of loving?” This is a question, which corresponds with Blixen's choice of a humoristic way out – since humor has a tragic side, with which it is reconciled with the pain.

I will develop this further. But first I would like to underline the fact that Blixen very intentionally misreads Kierkegaard, not only in the proposed title to *Ladies' Home Journal*, but also in the story *Ehregard* – and in her works – in general. An ironic and „creative” misreading, which makes her suggest that: „I could throw my arms round Shakespeare's neck and kiss Heine, but I would certainly affront Kierkegaard.”

Harold Bloom argues that 'anxiety of influence' is the reason why poets misread their precursors. He operates with different techniques that can protect the author. A relevant one in relation to Blixen could be „Daemonization – a movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, in reaction to the precursor's Sublime,” i.e. Kierkegaard's. (p. 100).

However, my point is that anyone who reads the poets should misread them as well, after having demonstrated your proper loyalty and respect, of course. Not exactly to protect yourself, but to make them relevant and meaningful, in fact – to do them a favor. This pertains especially to Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard claims that „the total thought in the entire work as an author is this: becoming a Christian.” (*The Point of View for My Work as an Author*). This is the point of departure – and the conclusion! – for the traditional philosophical-theological interpretations of Kierkegaard’s works, which in my opinion blocks the *jouissance*, the enjoyment of reading Kierkegaard. Some scholars have suggested the term *Christian modernism* for Kierkegaard’s position and his strategy of communication. It does not make it any funnier!

If you cannot take that gravity, if you cannot become reconciled with Christianity at all, why then read Kierkegaard? Well, Blixen did read him – with the same skepticism towards Christianity, if not to say blasphemy – because he somehow tormented her (‘anfægtede hende’). And certainly Kierkegaard still is a challenge, also to modern secularized people. If you misread him properly!

So that is what I am going to try to do, very shortly, following the aestheticist A in *Either-Or*, who cheerfully proposes that one reads only a *third* of a book. „Thus you ensure yourself a very different kind of enjoyment from that which the author has been so kind to plan for you.”

This is the way out of Christianity in Kierkegaard – even the Christian modernism – the way out of his system, his stages. The way out of his works, and the way into his texts. (Note Roland Barthes’ distinction between works and text). You could call this way of misreading – humor! (Not one of Bloom’s techniques!).

Kierkegaard mentions in *The Concept of Irony* „a work that represents Napoleon’s grave” – in fact a puzzle picture. The editors of the new edition of *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* have found the picture, which is described like this:



Two tall trees shade the grave. There is nothing else to see in the work, and the unsophisticated observer sees nothing else. Between the two trees there is an empty space; as the eye follows the outline, suddenly Napoleon himself emerges from this nothing, and now it is impossible to have him disappear again. [...] There is not one single line that suggests Napoleon, and yet this empty space, this nothing, is what hides that which is the most important.

I will call attention to a text in which this „nothingness” speaks, a text, which furthermore kicks and struggles against the works, „the total thought in the entire work as an author”. It is a fragment in the *Papers*, from 1846, the very year in which Kierkegaard, in *Concluding unscientific Postscript*, tries to make his works a whole – and here he sits down and writes a text, which renounces the whole construction!

The text is titled *Eulogy on Autumn* and it is meant „to be used as a reply by a humorous individual.” It consists in fact of five eulogies, which praise the autumn as respectively the time of longings, the time of colors, the time of clouds, the time of sounds, and the time of recollections. All of them concentrate on the transience. Here we have the speaker who praises the autumn as the time of the clouds:

Consider what you might wish to be – a human being? Such a thought could hardly occur to a human being. An angel? Tiresome. A tree? Takes too long and is too quiet. A cow? Too stolid a life. No – a cloud – in the autumn. Would I were that, and the rest of the year I would stay hidden somewhere – or in nothingness, which could also be expressed in this way: I do not want to be... (Papers, 3, p. 260).

Roland Barthes defines the text as a thing, which moves itself to the limit for the rules for a language utterance (rationality, readability etc.). The speaker who praises the autumn as the time of the colors runs amok in a mixture of a reel off a speech and abruptness:

... Summer is repose. But then comes autumn, and with the autumn come passions, and with passions disturbance (‘Uro’), and with disturbance color, and with passion’s disturbance the shifting and changing of colors. To change color is indeed the expression of disturbance, the disturbance of passions. And autumn changes colors. In contrast to summer, we may say that the distinguishing feature of autumn is that it changes colors. [...] The contrasts during autumn are so intensely in motion every moment that it is like a constant shifting. It is impossible to see all the contrasts at once, and the change appears as one sees the same contrast together with a new contrast and so on further. (261-2).

The text as a whole was meant to be a reply by a humorous individual. That means that there should be an element of melancholy or sadness – or even despair, and certainly there is. For example in the idea of a free and independent existence as a cloud, which in reality disappears into lack of substance, in demonic melancholy and a craving for shifting, which seems to be enforced.

Anyway – this disturbance, this trouble, is the gift any good text offers you. And the one Blixen found in Kierkegaard. It helped her to dissociate herself from Christianity, and she could place herself in the company of for instance her beloved Heine, Kierkegaard’s humorist *par excellence* – a company of „scandalized” (‘forargede’), about whom Kierkegaard – respectfully – says that „they frequently are well informed about the religious – that is, they know definitely that they do not want to have anything to do with it.” (*Stages on Life’s Way*).

In Blixen’s case her humoristic view of life resulted in an appreciation of for instance biblical stories as good tales. What a story *existentially* is for Blixen, that’s another problem, but one thing is sure: in her own stories she warned against mixing fiction and reality. Individuals like Herr Cazotte and Johannes the Seducer, who want to

transform their ideas in real life, to *create* human beings, are poor things. Equally it is dangerous to take the story about Christ on its word – a figure who is supposed to have taken man’s sins on his shoulders. Don’t believe it, Blixen says. You would lose your self-respect – which happened for Barabbas in Blixen’s story *The Deluge at Norderney*. You won’t find *the truth* about life and death in the Bible and the Koran, in Shakespeare and Kierkegaard, but here you find splendid texts, good starting points for new stories, perhaps your *own* story. If you misread them properly.

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