

A STORK FOR AN INTRODUCTION

Karen Blixen recounts a story that she was told as a child. A man, who lived by a pond, was awakened one night by a great noise. He went out into the night and headed for the pond, but in the darkness, running up and down, back and forth, guided only by the noise, he stumbled and fell repeatedly. At last, he found a leak in the dike, from which water and fish were escaping. He set to work plugging the leak and only when he had finished went back to bed. The next morning, looking out of the window, he saw with surprise that his footprints had traced the figure of a stork on the ground.

At this point Karen Blixen asks herself: 'When the design of my life is complete, will I see, or will others see a stork?'¹ We might add: does the course of every life allow itself be looked upon in the end like a design that has a meaning?

Apparently we are not dealing with a design that has been foreseen; it is not projected or controlled. On the contrary, the poor man, called to action by external circumstances, runs and stumbles into the darkness. He works hard, and only when the disaster is under control does he return home. He never loses sight of his purpose, he never abandons the aim of his course; rather, he brings it to completion. His journey mixes intention with accident. While he is subjected to many trials and tribulations, his steps nonetheless leave behind a design; or, rather, a design results from his journey – one that has the unity of a figure. The significance of the story lies precisely in the figural *unity* of the design, and in this simple '*resulting*,' which does not follow from any projected plan. In other words, the design – which does not consist simply of confused marks, but has the unity of a figure – is not one that guides the course of a life from the beginning. Rather the design is what that life, without ever being able to predict or even imagine it, leaves behind. The stork is only seen at the end, when whoever has drawn it with his life – or when *other* spectators, looking from above – see the prints *left* on the ground.

Blixen's text bears the printed design of the stork on the same page as the story. When she was a child, the person who told her the story traced for her the

A STORK FOR AN INTRODUCTION

development of the design that sustains the narration. Rather than simply being an effective, didactic device, it was a gesture that grasped a fundamental truth of the fable. Precisely because the design is the story, rather than just accompanying the story or illustrating it, the design coincides with it perfectly – in the sense that the pattern that every human being leaves behind is nothing but their life-story. ‘All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them,’ writes Blixen; and Hannah Arendt comments: ‘the story reveals the meaning of what would otherwise remain an intolerable sequence of events.’²

For the man in the fable, the meaning is represented by the stork. It could obviously be another animal, tree or object. The meaning that saves each life from being a mere sequence of events does not consist in a determined figure; but rather consists precisely in leaving behind a figure, or something from which the unity of a design can be discerned in the telling of the story. Like the design, the story comes after the events and the actions from which it results. Like the design – which is seen only at sunrise from the perspective of whoever looks at the ground from above without treading on it – the story can only be narrated from the posthumous perspective of someone who does not participate in the events. ‘When the design of my life is completed, will I see, or will others see, a stork?’ The figural unity of the design, the unifying meaning of the story, can only be posed, by the one who lives it, in the form of a question. Or, perhaps, in the form of a desire.

It is not by chance that the child’s story, animated by the movement of the design, narrates a stork. The stork – protagonist of a folklore, which, in the West, has no boundaries – brings babies and narrates them fables.³ No one knows where the migrating stork, with her long wings and benign face of mystery, comes from; or from whence come the babies which she brings or the fables that she tells. The stork does not ‘make,’ but rather brings, transports and hands down. She is a narrator, not an author. Like Karen Blixen, she is a *storyteller*: she tells stories.⁴

In any case, the design traced by the life of Karen Blixen could never be the same stork that the man in the fable saw at sunrise. Every human being is unique, an unrepeatable existence, which – however much they run disoriented in the dark, mixing accidents with intentions – neither follows in the footsteps of another life, nor repeats the very same course, nor leaves behind the same story. This is also why life-stories are told and listened to with interest; because they are similar and yet new, insubstitutable and unexpected, from beginning to end. They are always ‘anecdotes of destiny.’⁵

According to Hannah Arendt, Blixen’s ‘philosophy’ suggests that ‘no one has a life worthy of consideration about which a story cannot be told.’ It does not follow, however, ‘that life could be or rather should be lived like a story, that what must be done in life must be done in such a way that a story comes after

A STORK FOR AN INTRODUCTION

it.⁶ Life cannot be lived like a story, because the story always comes afterwards, it results; it is unforeseeable and uncontrollable, just like life. If the man of the fable had voluntarily run through the night in order to trace the design of a stork, he would not have fulfilled the story. A different story would have resulted from his actions: the strange tale of a man who spent the night tracing a stork with his footsteps.

The man of the story is, of course, privileged. The magic of the fable, which is capable of concentrating an entire life into a single night, allows him to see the design on the following morning. Doubting that she will enjoy the same privilege, Karen Blixen cautiously asks herself if, instead, there will be *others* who will be able to see a stork when the design of her life is complete. If life is a 'run-around' that responds to events without being able to transcend them; if it consists simply of acting and reacting without prefiguring its own traces, then this is probably the case. In other words, the one who walks on the ground cannot see the figure that his/her footsteps leave behind, and so he/she needs *another* perspective. It is no accident that the one who understands the meaning of the story is above all the narrator, who, tracing the stork on the page, accompanies the story with the design.

Narration, as is well known, is a delicate art – narration 'reveals the meaning without committing the error of defining it.'⁷ Unlike philosophy, which for millennia has persisted in capturing the universal in the trap of definition, narration reveals the finite in its fragile uniqueness, and sings its glory. Karen Blixen knows this well, and, like a modern Scheherazade, she entrusts her existence to the passion of telling stories – the stories of others, like Esa, her African chef; or invented stories, stories which branch off into thousands of other stories. 'No one could have told her life-story as she herself would have told it,' observes Hannah Arendt.⁸ The fact remains that she never told it as a design, not even in the semi-autobiographical pages of *Out of Africa*. Evidently Karen Blixen knew that she could not see with her own eyes the design of her life. She knew that, outside of the child's tale, it is always another who sees the stork.

As the fable teaches, the design lasted only for one morning. The footprints on the wet ground will disappear with the first rain or, perhaps, will lose their form under the trampling of other shoes. The stork is fragile; it is the fleeting mark of a unity that is only glimpsed. It is the gift of a moment in the mirage of desire.

There is an ethic of the gift in the pleasure of the narrator. The one who narrates not only entertains and enchants, like Scheherazade, but gives to the protagonists of his/her story their own stork. If leaving behind a design, a 'destiny,' an unrepeatable figure of our existence, 'is the only aspiration deserving of the fact that life was given us,' then nothing responds to the human

A STORK FOR AN INTRODUCTION

desire more than the telling of our story.⁹ Even before revealing the meaning of a life, a biography therefore recognizes the desire for it.

According to Karen Blixen, the question: 'who am I?' flows indeed, sooner or later, from the beating of every heart. It is a question that only a unique being can sensibly pronounce. Its response, as all narrators know, lies in the *classic rule of storytelling*.¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa* (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 201.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, 'Isak Dinesen: (1885–1962)', *Daguerrotypes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. xx.
- 3 Cf. Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 58–65.
- 4 [TN: 'Storyteller' is in English in the original.]
- 5 [TN: *Anecdotes of Destiny* is the title of a work by Karen Blixen (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).]
- 6 Arendt, 'Isak Dinesen (1885–1962)', p. 170.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 10 Karen Blixen, 'The Cardinal's Tale,' in *Last Tales* (New York: Vintage Press, 1975).