

THE APPEARANCE OF TRUTH
– THE TRUTH OF APPEARANCE
STEEN STEENSEN BLICHER:
PRÆSTEN I VEJLBY

LÁSZLÓ GERGYE

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

ABSTRACT. The paper discusses a piece by one of the most outstanding Danish short story writers of the 19th century, structured around the conventional elements of detective stories. Relying on Jean Baudrillard's simulacra theory, it attempts to demonstrate the process of how the intriguer Morten Bruus, by a successful use of make-believe, manages to incriminate a pastor, Søren Qvist, in a murder although he is innocent. Bruus's manipulative strategy prevails in the end: he succeeds at deceiving both his environment and the judge presiding in the case, and the accused is executed. The truth is revealed only twenty years later when Niels Bruus, long thought to be dead, returns. Drawing on Derrida's legal philosophy, the analysis seeks to expose the problematic nature of justice on earth, and it shows by revisiting certain ideas of Kierkegaard that even in the shadow of death, steadfast faith in divine justice can get us over our fears and the eternal uncertainty deriving from the essence of human existence.

 sciendo

PRESSto.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a little-known fact that the Scandinavian crime mysteries so popular today have a history dating back to the nineteenth century. We find the genre suffusing not just the epic poetry of the period, but the Scandinavian drama of the times as well. Discussing *Hedda Gabler* in her recent Ibsen monograph, Helge Rønning, for instance, points to the obvious similarities between detective fiction and that drama. (Rønning 2006:220–226) *Præsten i Vejlby* (*The Rector of Veilby*, 1829), an early work by Steen Steensen Blicher, who is generally considered to be the greatest of the nineteenth-century Danish short story writers, is an integral part of this tradition: its very

subtitle (*En criminalhistorie – a Danish criminal fiction*)¹ calls attention to its genre. Indeed, the story line reads like a murder mystery. Structurally, however, the novella is composed of two distinct parts: the first is the diary of Erik Sørensen, the newly appointed district court judge, while the second consists of some events noted down years later by the rector of Aalsø. The story that emerges from these two documents can be summarized as follows:

District court judge Erik Sørensen finds himself having to pronounce a death sentence on the rector, Søren Qvist, the man whose daughter he was about to marry. The person responsible for this predicament, the evil genius who set both men up, is Morten Bruus, who had earlier on applied in vain to Qvist for his daughter's hand in marriage. Proud and used to getting his way, the wealthy Bruus decides to avenge himself on Qvist for his humiliation. He talks his younger brother into going to work for Søren Qvist. An ill-natured fellow, Niels Bruus regularly comes into conflict with the quick-tempered rector, who slaps him on the face on one of these occasions. From there on, everything plays into the hands of Morten Bruus. He makes no secret of egging his brother on to further insolent provocations of Qvist. Events take a fateful turn when, following a heated exchange of words between the rector and his hired hand, the rector strikes Niels Bruus with a shovel. Niels falls to the ground but soon recovers, jumps over the back fence of Qvist's property, and runs off to tell his brother. Recognizing his big chance, Morten Bruus makes the reluctant Niels help him dig up the body of a recently deceased servant buried in their farmyard at Ingvorstrup. They dress the body – identical to Niels in size and stature – in Niels's clothes. Then, in the dead of night, Morten Bruus steals Qvist's green dressing gown, puts it on, and buries the exhumed body in Søren Qvist's garden. The very next day, he goes to Sørensen, the district court judge, and accuses the Rector Qvist of the murder of his brother. Erik Sørensen's gut reaction is that the rector is incapable of such a crime, and refuses to believe the incriminating testimony of the witnesses that Morten Bruus brings before him. But when Morten Bruus „finds” the body dressed in Niels Bruus's clothes in the rector's garden, and „recognizes” his dead brother, the judge has no choice but to bow to what appears to be compelling evidence. As for the rector himself, initially he denies the charges. But then he recalls some violent acts he had committed while sleep-walking in years gone by, and becomes convinced that he had, in fact, done the deeds: gone after the wounded Niels in the night, finished him off, and buried him in his garden. In a final desperate effort to save the father of the woman he loves, Judge Sørensen makes arrangements – by bribing the

¹ Steen Steensen Blicher, *Præsten i Vejlbj. En criminalhistorie*. Tekst efter (med indledning og noter) serien ”Danske Klassikere.” (DSL og Bergen) Det Kongelige Bibliothek http://www2.kb.elib/lit/dan/blicher_noveller.dkl/06.htm - Steen Steensen Blicher, *The Rector of Veilbye. A crime fiction*. www.Public-library.Uk/ebooks/81/75.pdf.

jailer – for Qvist to escape, but the rector refuses to avail himself of the opportunity. Erik Sørensen knows no alternative but to condemn him to death. Qvist is beheaded, and the truth of the matter emerges only twenty-one years later, when the „murdered” Niels Bruus shows up at the Aalsø rectory. The story he tells finally sheds light on every detail of the now deceased Morten Bruus’s heinous plot. When Erik Sørensen hears the truth, he has a nervous breakdown. Tortured by remorse, he dies some weeks later. Within a few days, Niels Bruus himself is found dead, sprawled across the Rector Qvist’s grave.

Historians of Danish literature have given particular consideration to this novella for some time now, with Søren Baggesen (Baggesen 1965) being the first to publish a detailed analysis of Blicher’s work. But it is not only literary historians who have focused on the story of the Rector Qvist, legal and religious scholars have done so as well. Henrik Poulsen and Peter Garde, for instance, approached the work specifically from a lawyer’s point of view. (Poulsen 1970, Garde 2007) Interest in *Præsten i Vejlbj* has continued to this day. The theologian Jasper Langballe devoted an entire chapter to the novella in his Blicher monograph. (Langballe 2004) Karen Margarethe Simonsen discussed the work in terms of the problematic practice of judicial murder (Simonsen 2006) while Henrik Skov Nielsen examined Blicher’s story for points of intersection between it, on the one hand, and Kirkegaard’s stages of life theory and Derrida’s philosophy of law, on the other. (Nielsen 2009) Most recently, Maria Jørgensen has given a psychoanalytical interpretation of *Præsten I Vejlbj* drawing extensively on Jacques Lacan’s ideas on error and knowledge. (Jørgensen 2012) I myself shall now attempt an analysis, keeping in mind all the interpretations alluded to above, and Henrik Skov Nielsen’s research in particular.

2. CHARACTER SKETCHES

In part one of the novella, we see the story unfolding through the eyes of the first-person narrator, the district court judge. From this exclusive point of view, Judge Erik Sørensen might, at first glance, appear to be the exact antithesis of Morten Bruus; in fact, however – and in keeping with the Law of Symmetry – the two characters emerge as being mirror images of one another. (Jørgensen 2012:64–69) They have in common the fact that, as rivals for the hand of Mette Qvist, both aspire to having Søren Qvist for their future father-in-law, and share an avowed faith in the putative justness of the law.

Judge Erik Sørensen is preparing to fill his new office convinced that his mandate is directly from God: as he says, “*Hver Mands Dom kommer af Herren.*”²

² “*From the Lord alone come the judgement.*” Proverbs 29:26. This, and all Biblical quotes to follow, are from the King James Version of Bible. Cambridge, 1611, 1769.

No surprise, then, that Sørensen composes his diary entries in biblical terms. He considers himself to be the repository of Mosaic law, a man whose every intellectual move must substantiate the existence and exclusive validity of the symbolic order personified by the Lacanian “*big Other*”, or, in the final analysis, God. (Zizek 2006) The entries that best reflect his personality are studded with paraphrases from the Old Testament, and the parts expressing his hopes for his private life form one seamless fabric with his musings on his professional future. Rational argumentation is the organizing principle we find in both cases: intuition has no place in this philosophy of life. “*Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine...*” (Psalm 128:3), he writes, in optimistic expectation of a happy family life with Mette, but then this hope is overshadowed by the memory of another Old Testament passage: “*Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain...*” (Proverbs 31:30). Sørensen’s first-hand experience of the lovely Mette’s sweet temper and modesty makes no difference; his paraphrase of the proverb – “*Skønhed er bedragelig, og Dejlighed er en forgængelig Ting*”³ – is a categorical denial of his own personal experience of her. The “testimony” of the anonymous psalmist carries more weight than his own impressions. So pervasive is this mindset of Sørensen’s that even his stratagem for getting to know Mette better is analogous to the process of gathering evidence for presentation in a court of law: he gives more credence to the objective observations of an impartial outsider than to the subjective impressions of his own enamored senses: “*Min Avlskarl har tjent der I tre Aar, jeg skal dog saa listelig udforske ham, hvorledes hun er imod Folkene, samt hvad han ellers monne vide om hende. Af Tyendet faar man ofte den sikreste Underretning.*”⁴ In the same way as he will rely on witnesses in the case against Søren Qvist rather than on his gut feelings, so he dare not rely solely on his intuitions even in choosing a wife. Law-obsessed as Eric Sørensen is, ostensibly he is a man who to whom bribes are an abomination. When Morten Bruus offers him too good a deal, for instance, he categorically turns him down.⁵ His motto is: “*vi har jo Lov og Ret I Lande.*”⁶ These very same words,⁷ however, would be cynically echoed by the villain, Morten Bruus, in his allegations against the Rector Qvist; and when, in a last-ditch, frantic effort to save the rector, Judge

³ „Beauty is deceptive and charm is a dangerous thing.”

⁴ „My head farm hand served in the rectory three years. I will question him, - one often hears a straight and true statement from servants.”

⁵ Early on in the story, we learn that Morten Bruus wanted to present the judge with a calf. Not much later, Judge Sørensen wonders in his diary why Bruus wants to sell him a pair of horses at a ridiculously low price, and can only conclude that the transaction was meant to be a bribe.

⁶ “We have law and order in the land”.

⁷ „Vi har jo Lov og Ret i Landet, og en Morder kan ikke undgaa sin Straf, om han saa havde Stiftamtmanden til Svingerson.” – „We have law and order in the land, and the murderer shall not escape his punishment, even if he have the district judge for a son-in-law.”

Sørensen makes plans for bribing the jailer into letting Qvist escape, we cannot help feeling that, morally speaking, there is not much left to differentiate the judge from Morten Bruus. A key scene from the point of view of our understanding the relationship between the two men is the one in which Judge Sørensen reads out the verdict in the property dispute between Ole Andersen and Morten Bruus. Well we might ask why the latter, a man infamous for his overweening ways and aggressive nature, accepts the judgment against him with such complacency. One reason, obviously, is that the disputed property is of little value, and its ownership is of little consequence to a man of Morten Bruus's means. More importantly, however, it gives Bruus an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that no matter what, he is a decent, law-abiding man. People, as we know, tend to automatically conflate the notion of being law-abiding with the notion of rectitude: a man who obeys the law even when the verdict is against him cannot be a "bad" man, a man prone to crime. Bruus's deliberate and theatrical acquiescence in Sørensen's judgment makes something of a farce of the proceedings, but his calculated behavior is an integral part of his long-term strategy. His cynical grin (which Sørensen sees) on hearing the judge read the words is more than the malevolent smirk of a schemer sure of his ultimate victory; it is an adumbration of the gist of the story, namely, that the instruments of the law are not equal to the job of getting at the truth.

3. THE POWER OF SIMULACRA

The much-cited postmodern philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, chose the following quotation as the motto of the first chapter of his *Simulacres et simulation*: "*Le simulacre ne jamais ce qui cache la vérité – c'est la vérité qui cache qu'il n'y en a pas. Le simulacre est vrai.*" Baudrillard 1981:1–30) Baudrillard claims that *Ecclesiastes* is his source for this quote, which, of course, is bogus, since there is no such statement in the Old Testament. The bogus citation is itself an ironic hint at the problematic nature of accessing (divine) truth. As Baudrillard sees it, the reality of the tangible world around us comes into question at every turn. What we take to be the "real world" does not, in fact, exist. All we really have is signs, whose referents are beyond our grasp. Everything is only the mapping, the simulation of some entity which we believe to be real. It is these simulacra which model our world, presenting us with a network of signs which we cannot decode. With our consciousness incapable of distinguishing a simulation of reality from reality, we are left with the all-encompassing uncertainty of a virtual world of appearances.

The motto from Baudrillard's extraordinary work quoted above can be taken to speak to the nub of Morten Bruus's lethal machinations. The weapon he uses against the judge and the rector is one against which both men are

defenseless: verisimilitude. He manipulates appearances with a coherence and sophistication that overrides any suspicion of unreality. What makes Bruus's scheme so diabolical is that things *could* have happened exactly as he says they did. Søren Qvist did have a heated exchange of words with Niels Bruus and did hit him with a shovel, and Niels did fall to the ground. But then, a few minutes later, he came to, jumped Qvist's back fence, and ran off. All that Morten Bruus needs to do to make his vengeful version of events credible is to leave out some details of what actually happened. So he leaves out the "small" details of having stolen and himself donned the rector's green cloak, and of having dressed a dead stranger's body in his brother Niels's clothes. These "adjustments" apart, everything happened as he claims, and the sworn eyewitnesses confirm: Qvist's green cloak *was* seen digging and burying a body in his garden. Simulacra never hide the truth, writes Baudrillard, since every perceptible and causally related aspect of the object world serves to make empirically perceivable the phenomenon we call "reality": it serves, in short, to ostensibly corroborate the "visible", the "tangible" "truth". In our case, the truth is that the body (the very image of Niels Bruus) really is dug up in Søren Qvist's garden; it wears Niels's clothes, and bears the imprint of a blow with a shovel on its head. Moreover, several people saw a figure clad in a green cloak digging in the rector's garden in the dead of night. Who else could it have been, if not the Søren Qvist? So tenacious is the formative ability of simulacra that it can effect its reverse in our consciousness: it is the truth itself that hides the fact that there is no truth. What better testament to the uncanny power of simulacra than the accused rector's despair, and his reluctant admission: "*Skinnet er imod mig*".⁸ Blicher's story is built around an entire chain of simulacra: the anonymous dead servant is Niels Bruus's look alike; clad in the rector's cloak, Morten Bruus looks like Qvist to those who see him digging in Qvist's garden; and finally, the vengeful Bruus comes across as Judge S0rensen's alter ego throughout the judicial proceedings, and wears his intellectual mask.

4. FAITH IN TRUTH

Jacques Derrida, in his *Force de loi*, treats as axiomatic the idea that the legal systems regulating social relations have been based on the correlatives of justice and force from the beginning of time. (Derrida 1994) It was some originary act of violence that first established the fiction of justice. From that very moment of the institution of the system of laws, there has been no real way to challenge the original source of legal authority. From this it directly follows that the courts which pass judgment never really serve justice, but

⁸ "Appearances are against me".

simply enforce the law. Following Montaigne, Derrida argues that laws are legitimate not because they are just, but simply because they are the law. The immanent regulating principle of all legislation at any given time, therefore, is the unlimited power of the prevailing machinery of government. The legal system so generated has nothing to do with the principles of justice, let alone of Christian charity: its sole basis is brute force.⁹

Seen in this light, even the commandments imprinted on Moses's stone tablets are nothing more than vengeance invested with the force of law. From the very beginning, Blicher's novella makes clear that Erik Sørensen's judgments are brought in the same spirit. Mosaic law, for instance, allows anyone to legally take the life of a person guilty – according to the testimony of at least two witnesses – of having committed a mortal sin.¹⁰ The same practice is followed in Judge Sørensen's court. When Mette Qvist asks him what law obliges him to judge her father so harshly, he makes no apologies for his answer: "*siden I spørger mig ad: den mildenste Dom, som baade Gud og Kongen har afsagt, er dog Liv for Liv.*"¹¹ This is the merciless dictum of the Mosaic law: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Well might even the most religious wonder whether every man's judgment does indeed come from the Lord. To complicate matters further, Erik Sørensen himself turns his back on the law when, a few minutes after his harsh pronouncement, he advises Mette to bribe the jailer into letting her father escape. Morten Bruus, as we have seen, exploits the law to satisfy his personal desire for vengeance; when it comes to exploiting the law to satisfy one's personal desires, however, Erik Sørensen is no better, for his advice to Mette to circumvent the law is motivated by his emotional involvement in the case and personal need to oblige her.

In another philosophical essay, *Donner la mort*, Derrida offers an analysis of Kierkegaard's *Frygt og Bæven*. (Derrida 1994) On this reading, Kierkegaard sees acting "out of duty" in the universalizable sense of the law as a dereliction of one's absolute duty. Dereliction of one's absolute duty, however – as Derrida argues in *Force de loi* – is tantamount to abandoning the pursuit of justice. In Blicher's novella, Eric Sørensen definitely takes this easy way out when, despite his intuitions to the contrary, he goes with the "evidence" and simply orders the rector's execution. Derrida makes a strong point of noting that we cannot speak of justice being served until the judicial

⁹ For more on how Derrida might be seen to shed light on Blicher's novella, see Henrik Skov Nielsen, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ 1 Kings 21:9-10: „And she wrote in the letters, saying, Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people: And set two men, sons of Belial, before him, to bear witness against him, saying, Thou didst blaspheme God and the king. And then carry him out, and stone him, that he may die.”

¹¹ “But I dare not conceal from you that the mildest sentence that God, our king, and our laws demand is, a life for a life.”

system manages to resolve the contradictions between the correlatives of justice and the law. Detailing these contradictions, he calls attention to three aporia in particular. First aporia: the general principles enshrined in the law cannot be applied mechanically to singular cases. As long as we insist on following the letter of the law, we are likely to bring mistaken verdicts. The second aporia, closely related to the first, is the problem of undecidability. In searching for the truth, we will never discover the secret crux of the matter by rigidly following the rules. Every judicial decision will necessarily leave us with an unsettling sense of the case's undecidability. The third aporia is the challenge posed by the decision's urgency: the urgency, as Derrida puts it, that obstructs the horizon of knowledge. A judicial decision, obviously, should be just, and swiftly brought; but in most cases, it is simply impossible to meet both requirements. The fact is that one can never be sure that some new and decisive evidence might not emerge at some later date, evidence that would completely change the direction of the hearings. A judge, however, must finish hearing the evidence within a certain time frame, and must pass judgment on the basis of the testimony presented to that time. This being so, it is, for the most part, purely a matter of chance if his judgment happens to coincide with justice.

Judge Erik Sørensen, for one, cannot find his way out of the conundrum encapsulated in Derrida's aporia. He is incapable of considering the rector's case in all its singularity, and though in his heart of hearts he is not at all convinced of Qvist's guilt, he feigns decisiveness to mask his troubling foreboding of the case's undecidability. The driving force behind the evidence that is presented is Morten Bruus, and not the judge, who has clearly lost his hold on the proceedings. Judge Sørensen soon becomes a weightless figure, whose weak gestures are overshadowed by the cynical machinations of Morten Bruus. When the judge speaks, it is the institutionalized voice of a thoroughly impersonal Law that we hear, law that is no longer grounded in reality. In addition, he fails the test of Derrida's third aporia: he has no time to wait out the return of Niels Bruus, *i.e.*, the piece of evidence that would have given Qvist's case a decisive turn. What is more, he ends up a victim to the implacable logic of his own Mosaic interpretation of the law: a life for a life – his own life for the life of the innocent Rector Qvist.

5. THE TRUTH OF FAITH

This parallel notwithstanding, a key element of the story is the rector's emergence as a foil for the judge's thinking and character. The execution of the innocent Qvist stands in lethal contrast to Sørensen's maxim that "every man's judgment cometh from the Lord". Indeed, the judge does everything in his power to legitimate the divine order of which he considers himself to be

the deputy here on earth, while Qvist, for his part, sacrifices his life to validate his faith in the integrity of the visible world. Throughout the story, Judge Erik Sørensen tries to act “out of duty” in Kierkegaard’s sense of the term, mechanically differentiating guilt from innocence, and good from evil. As Derrida points out, however, acting simply out of duty is really a dereliction of one’s absolute duty. With no objective criteria to guide us, it is a dilemma that has no real solution on a purely ethical plane. The only way out is to recognize that in relation to God, we are always in the wrong.¹² This is precisely what Søren Qvist does when, abandoning his own ethical scruples, he simply admits his guilt, and, as befits a man of the cloth, puts his fate in God’s hands: “*Jeg er en stor Synder!*’ tog han til Orde, *’hvor stor – det ved Gud, jeg ved det ikke selv. Han vil strafe mig her, at jeg hisset kan faa Naade og Salighed, ham være derfor Pris og Ære!*”¹³

The motive force behind the rector’s confession of his guilt is the simulacrum effect. When he finds his green cloak not in its usual place but lying on the floor, memories of past episodes of somnambulism flash across his mind, and he recalls learning that he had done things that he himself did not remember doing. Posing another such somnambulist episode seems to Qvist to account for what presumably happened to Niels Bruus. Reconstructing the events in his head, the rector recalls that Niels got up after he knocked him down with his shovel, and managed to escape through the back fence. Continuing the story as if in a dream, Qvist sees Niels fall over dead in the neighboring woods. He then sees himself going to get the body, bringing it home, and burying it in his garden. When the rector tells his story to Eric Sørensen, the judge finds it a coherent account of the events; just one small detail is still unclear, namely, the rector’s state of consciousness at the time of his last three “acts”. What the judge does not even consider is the possibility that the facts of the matter are obscured by the appearances, in other words, that it was not Qvist who wore the green cloak that fateful night. The appearances, at any rate, confirm the rector’s guilt even at the unconscious level: the pictures conjured up by his neurological disorder ostensibly present the transpired events in the same logical order as they are presented to the judge in real life in the course of the criminal proceedings. The fictive account construed and presented by Morten Bruus, and the fantasy generated by Søren Qvist’s overwrought brain are both perfect examples of the suggestive power of simulacra: both prove capable of overriding reality. Particularly if the refe-

¹² In his *The Gift of Death*, Derrida ponders the meaning of Abraham’s sacrifice in terms of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. The quote, however, refers to another work of Kierkegaard’s, the sermon that ends Part II of *Either/Or* (Kierkegaard 1996), entitled: “*Det opbyggelige, der ligger i den Tanke, at mod Gud have vi altid Uret.*”

¹³ „I am a great sinner’, he sighed, ’God only knows how great. His punishment crushes me here that I may enter into His mercy hereafter.”

rents of the deconstructed traces of objective reality continually suggest the primacy of simulacra, and prepare the way for their triumph.

When giving his testimony, the Rector Qvist speaks at length of some memories of his childhood and early youth. He recalls that once, when his dog stole and ate his buttered bread, he got so angry that he kicked the dog, which then expired. The incident was a warning for him to control his temper, but he did not really learn from it. While at school in Leipzig, he challenged a fellow student to a duel and injured him so gravely that the young man almost died of his wound. In retrospect, these actions seem to Qvist to adumbrate the fulfillment of the Biblical admonition: “*But I say unto you that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment...*” (Matthew 5:22). Having succumbed to the temptations of his violent temper all his life, the rector sees his punishment as just and inevitable. Still, the New Testament as a whole suggests a break with the Old Testament notions of sin and punishment. The mercy of Christ, the hope of forgiveness offers a real way out of an equivocal ethical world based on the dichotomies of true and false, good and evil. The only solution, as Søren Qvist sees it, is to trust in God, accept the stigma of being a common murderer in the eyes of the world, and embrace the gift of death. The rector ends his testimony before the judge with the following words: “*jeg længes efter Døden, thi jeg haaber for Jesu Skyld, den skal vordre mig en Indgang til et bedre Liv end dette nærværende, der nu ikke har andet at yde mig end Kval og Forførdelse.*”¹⁴ Seen in this light, it is irrelevant whether the chain of evidence really proves that the rector – who truly was responsible for several violent acts in the past – did, in fact, commit the murder he stands accused of, or whether the ever-manipulable judicial process simply allowed some incriminating “facts” into the diabolically deceptive world of appearances. This is why Derrida maintains that justice is always a future thing; no one, speaking in the present, can claim that he is dispensing justice.

In the last third of the novella, the comments jotted down by the rector of Aalsø form a deliberate counterpoint to Erik Sørensen’s conviction that a judge’s right to pass judgment comes from God. “*Hvad er dog et Menneske, at det tør opkaste sig til Bloddomer over sin Lige?*”¹⁵ - he exclaims, then goes on to make clear that only God has that right. His statement is open to at least two interpretations. Theologically speaking, it obviously calls attention to the necessary shortcomings of any worldly justice - “*kun Gud hører Hævn til*”¹⁶ - declares the rector of Aalsø, thereby undermining the basis of Eric Sørensen’s philosophy of law. Under no circumstances can a man, a mortal judge, be the

¹⁴ “I long for death. Go now, my kind, sympathetic judge. Send for me to-morrow to speak my sentence, and send to-day for my brother in God, the pastor in Aalsø.”

¹⁵ “Oh, what is man that he shall dare to sit in judgement over his fellows!”

¹⁶ “God alone is the Judge”.

instrument of divine retribution. God does not expect something for something,¹⁷ what He offers every man is the unconditional mercy of salvation. As St. Paul reminds us, "...A man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ..." (Galatians 2:16). No wonder that it makes little difference to Søren Qvist whether he is guilty or innocent according to the law of man. He confesses himself to be guilty primarily on very different grounds: "...The scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe" (Galatians 3:22). As an heir to Abraham, he can win eternal life only by first losing his life on earth.¹⁸ That is why he refuses to avail himself of the opportunity for flight offered by Judge Sørensen.

Considered from a more general point of view, *Præsten i Vejlbj* is an overt critique of the death penalty. Two years prior to writing his novella, Blicher wrote an article on the subject (*Om Dødstraffe*), excoriating this cruel judicial practice with arguments based mostly on Montesquieu and Cesare Beccaria. (Blicher 1983:264–268) In this essay, Blicher calls capital punishment a case of sheer revenge, and argues for its replacement by efforts on the part of the authorities to reeducate the criminal. Given the questionable legitimacy of capital punishment and the dangers of its being no more than judicial murder – a chance that must be unacceptable to every humanist thinker – Blicher's suggestion, like his novella, deserves serious consideration to this day.

The true contemporary appeal of the story, however, lies primarily in Blicher's thoroughly modern appreciation of the ambivalence informing our world in the 21st century. In the guise of a simple detective story, the core issue of the narrative adumbrates that extraordinarily ambiguous postmodern "feeling" which is incapable of clearly distinguishing truth from falsehood, and a copy from the original. At the same time, we see the triumph of faith over reason: see the faith of the dead rector emerge as a vital force that transcends the absurd, and the living death of the judge's cold, stiff rationality. *Præsten i Vejlbj*, thus, is relevant in our times for its broad conceptual interface with the questions – and possible answers – addressed by today's theologians and philosophers of law.

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¹⁷ It is this that is meant by Jesus's question in Matthew 16:26: "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

¹⁸ "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." Matthew 16:25.

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László Gergye

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literatures
Rákóczi út 5.
1088 Budapest
Hungary

gergye.laszlo@btk.elte.hu