

# Isak Dinesen, Spiritual Émigré

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In 1934 the Book-of-the-Month Club offered its readers a collection of short stories entitled *Seven Gothic Tales* by an unknown writer identified only as Isak Dinesen. The enthusiastic reception of these Gothic tales led to widespread speculation about the true identity of the author. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, the woman who had discovered this talent, said that the only thing one could be reasonably sure of was that Isak Dinesen was not a Sicilian.<sup>1</sup> Eventually it was learned that Isak Dinesen was the pen name of a Danish noblewoman, Baroness Karen Blixen; but this fact did nothing to satisfy the curiosity of those who wondered why a Danish noblewoman would write under a male pseudonym, in English, and in a genre long since out of fashion.

As the Dinesen audience has grown, so has speculation about the unique circumstances of her art. I should like to suggest that a dimension might be added to the appreciation of her art if we were to think of her as being, for all intents and purposes, an émigré writer; for while the Baroness Blixen may have lived out the last thirty years of her life on native soil, the artist Isak Dinesen spent those three decades of creative life in what might well be described as "spiritual exile."

Isak Dinesen was born Karen Dinesen at Rungstedlund, the ancestral home on the Sound halfway between Copenhagen and Elsinore. Her father had traveled widely, had even lived among the Chippewa Indians in Minnesota for a time, and his daughter acquired from him a longing for foreign places and exotic peoples—and a love of storytelling, an art at which he excelled. At an early age she exhibited a flair for writing and painting and languages, along with an irresistible urge to get out into the world, away from Denmark. Her brother Thomas has said that "her home life was not always easy to endure," that it turned out to be "an unendurable shackle, fettering her wings." In the end, he says, it became "almost a nightmare to her, filling her to the bursting point with the suppressed desire for rebellion. But what could one *do*?"<sup>2</sup>

An adolescent poem of hers expresses this desire for release. It is called "Wings," and each stanza ends with the couplet: "In its prison my heart sings/Only of wings, only of wings." Dinesen finally escaped in 1914 when, on the eve of World War I, she went out to Africa to marry Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke, a Swedish cousin, and to join him in running a coffee plantation in the hills above Nairobi, Kenya. Shortly before sailing for Africa, she told her brother how she had for years been intrigued by the French Revolution and its great characters. "How," she asked, "would it be possible for a young girl, in this inane new century, a girl who only attended a dull drawing school in Copenhagen, to gain admission

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction, *Seven Gothic Tales*, by Isak Dinesen (New York: Random House, 1934) vi.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Dinesen, "Karen Dinesen—Karen Blixen—Isak Dinesen," in *Isak Dinesen: A Memorial*, ed. Clara Svendsen (New York: Random House, 1965) 6-7.

to a hero world like this? How could one find a key to the door? Would one have to suffer very badly first? Starve, perhaps?"<sup>3</sup>

Dinesen suffered much in Africa, but to her joy she also found there more than she had ever hoped for. What she found was a lost paradise, but she had to lose it before she realized that it had truly existed, if only for a short time. "Her Africa," says Robert Langbaum, an astute Dinesen scholar, "is not everybody's Africa . . . [but rather] an Africa of certain romantic expectations come true—expectations as to the possibility of recovering in primitive places that unity of man with nature which yields psychological and social unity as well; expectations as to the possibility of recovering a kind of life that prevailed in Europe before the industrial revolution, that unique event, cut Europeans off from nature and the past, and consequently all other civilizations."<sup>4</sup> He implies that Dinesen could not have seen Africa as she did had she not discovered Europe in Africa.

Sir Edward Grigg, governor of Kenya in the 1920s, once remarked that all white men and women destined to spend their lives in Africa were assigned to an involuntary aristocracy. Dinesen accepted the assignment eagerly.<sup>5</sup> She thrived in this world, it became for her a true home. Her brother says that she "created around herself a sphere of aristocratic refinement, immediately striking to everybody who met her, and perhaps most conspicuous in her relations to her cherished natives, her servants and friends"<sup>6</sup> It was her devout wish to remain in Africa the rest of her life and to die and be buried there. Thus it was a crushing blow when, in 1931, after years of drought and the collapse of the world coffee market, she was forced to declare bankruptcy and return in defeat to Denmark. For it was Africa that had given wings to the imprisoned heart of her youthful poem. Listen to this passage from *Out of Africa*, that unique memoir that Robert Langbaum calls "perhaps the best prose pastoral of our time" (GV 119). "The chief feature of the landscape and of your life in it, was the air. Looking back on a sojourn in the African highlands, you are struck by your feeling of having lived for a time up in the air. . . . Up in this high air you breathed easily, drawing in a vital assurance and lightness of heart. In the highlands you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be."<sup>7</sup>

Because Africa was where she "ought to be," to have no choice but to leave it and return to Denmark was nothing short of exile. But it was this involuntary, this ironic exile to her own native land that galvanized her creative energies. Hudson Strode, an ardent admirer of her work, once said that "fate had ripened her for the art of writing. It had plunged her into a stirring primitive activity, which tore at the heart and brain and nerves and muscles with both ecstasy and despair, and then it lifted her back into the seclusion of a sheltered life in a sophisticated culture. She had first spun her Gothic tales," he says, "to beguile an alien

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Dinesen 8.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Langbaum, *The Gayety of Vision* (New York: Random House, 1965) 119. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation GV.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Hannah, *Isak Dinesen and Karen Blixen: The Mask and the Reality* (London: Putnam, 1971) 33. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation MR.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Dinesen 108.

<sup>7</sup> Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa* (New York, Random House, 1934) 4.

loneliness. Back now in Denmark she spun tales for a winter's night to beguile her nostalgia for the African farm."<sup>8</sup>

Langbaum explains the chemistry that resulted in her art this way: "By combining what she heard from old people with her own observations of Danish peasants and aristocrats, Isak Dinesen acquired an almost personal memory of the European past, the range of which she extended in Africa" (GV 128). "Her Africa is seen retrospectively, as something already lost even to her. It is seen in a way she herself could not have seen it while she was in the midst of the experience and did not know it was to end" (GV 119). "When," he goes on to say, "the modern world breaks in and she loses her farm through bankruptcy, we see re-enacted in miniature the crisis of modern Europe, the breakup of a social organization based on love and mutual obligation. In the end she goes back to Denmark to become the author of stories about the difference between the old order and the new . . . thus recovering in the imagination what has been lost in the external world" (GV 125).

While she might easily have resumed her place in Danish and international aristocracy, she became more or less a recluse. Settled back in the very house she had been born in, she not only retreated from the immediate world around her, but she seemed, according to Strode, "something of an exile from another century . . . related to a gallant past period when great art flourished and values were properly defined. But," he adds, "she bore with grace and good humor her own exilic existence in this current age of gadgets and contagious mediocrity."<sup>9</sup> Dinesen expressed her alienation this way to him: "You will see here in Denmark the plus and minus of true democracy. When I returned from Kenya it struck me how things come out so right on paper, but seldom in life. With democracy, we seem to give up all ideals that are higher than those that can be reached. It's a mediocre happiness, I think, that is purchased at the price of no great art, no great music. With complete democracy the quality is bound to come down."<sup>10</sup>

Back in Denmark, Dinesen was truly a stranger in a strange land, stranded, desperate, isolated. Donald Hannah, in his perceptive contrast of the woman Karen Blixen with the persona Isak Dinesen, argues that "it is the conditions in Denmark to which we must finally return; these must be stressed, since they also have their part to play in her work. And one can understand the reasons for this sense of isolation," he says. "Having grown up in pre-war Denmark, and having passed the happiest and most eventful years of her life in Africa amidst an aristocratic form of society, she returned to the Denmark of the 1930s—an aristocrat in exile from a world that no longer even existed" (MR 66). No longer at home anywhere, Karen Blixen became Isak Dinesen and began writing, in English, her own *Arabian Nights*.

Dinesen once gave a talk about the unsettling experience of traveling to a land so different that "not only will your surroundings change and be strange and unknown wherever you turn, but . . . you yourselves will change in your own eyes so that you will eventually ask the question, 'Who am I? What do I look like?'" As

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<sup>8</sup> Hudson Strode, "Isak Dinesen at Home," in *Isak Dinesen: A Memorial* 108.

<sup>9</sup> Strode 113.

<sup>10</sup> Strode 102.

long as you remain at home, she said, the question never arises, but when the day comes that you confront people who see you with different eyes, it will slowly dawn on you that, after all, your social and intellectual attitudes may not reflect your true being, and that "something remains behind when they disappear." The truest answer to the question 'Who am I?' then, since I am no longer the same person I have previously been taken for, must be 'a human being.' 'This experience,' she added, "was for me a kind of revelation, not only of the world, but also of myself. And I can say that it was a great and unexpected happiness, a liberation. . . . One more step in this direction, I thought, and then I will be face to face with God" (MR 50).

The conditions which had convinced Dinesen that she might find her true self among the Africans and perhaps even "stand face to face with God" had disappeared, says Hannah. Back home—but not really 'at home'—"compelled to make 'some kind of existence' for herself, faced with the impossibility of again putting on the social and intellectual attitudes of which she had divested herself so thoroughly, she chose another course. 'Who am I? What do I look like?' And for answer this time," he says, "she donned the mask of Isak Dinesen" (MR 50-51).

It is Hannah's opinion that Dinesen assumed a mask "in order to fill the emptiness she found in her environment in Denmark," and in order to create "an artistic conception of herself to replace the identity of which circumstances had robbed her" (MR 52). "Made to see herself through the eyes of the Africans, she too began to look at herself as if she were another person" (MR 61). Hannah is convinced that "the writer begins where the woman ends" that Karen Blixen had a "richness, variety, and warmth of personality" that contradicts the distant and unapproachable public persona of Isak Dinesen (MR 59). Just to set the record straight, it should be noted that Dinesen chose the name Isak (Isaac) less to conceal her sex than to declare her view of life. Isaac, in Hebrew, means "one who laughs," and her view of life, in spite of her own suffering (or, more likely, because of it), was the opposite of tragic.

If Africa gave Dinesen a new identity, it also, in the opinion of Eric Johannesson, "made [her] into an English writer since English was the language she used almost daily for twenty years."<sup>11</sup> Her first biographer, Parmenia Migel, insists that another equally valid reason for writing in English was her need to escape. "She took refuge," says Migel, "in a language which was not her own."<sup>12</sup> Certainly the choice involved risks. Hannah uses Shelley's remark that "nothing is more difficult and unwelcome than to write without confidence of finding readers," to underscore his observation that "living in Denmark, writing in English, Isak Dinesen could have no confidence at all (MR 48).

It could be argued that she was simply making a bid for a much greater audience than she could ever find at home, or that she knew well the fate of prophets in small lands. But neither these nor other practical reasons can explain satisfactorily the unprecedented metamorphosis of a Karen Blixen into an Isak Dinesen.

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Johannesson, *The World of Isak Dinesen* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961) 5. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation WID.

<sup>12</sup> Parmenia Migel, *Titania* (New York: Random House 1967) 93.

This change demanded, above all, the adoption of a foreign language, and it took courage for Dinesen to beard the English lion in his own den. The only satisfactory explanation for her choice of English is an artistic one, and her friend and admirer Sybille Bedford has no doubt whatsoever that this is the case. Dinesen, she maintains, "belongs to that small band of independent writers who dared write as they please and as they must, little, early, late: the grand and lonely ones who had the courage and the genius to keep—at their cost—to their vision and eccentric disciplines . . . without regard to fashion, the mainstream and the time, not because they were dilettantes, but because they were artists." She "chose the language she saw fit for herself to write in," says Bedford, "and she wrote it superbly."<sup>13</sup>

English was the language of her "spiritual homeland" and, thus, of her very soul. It was the language by which she measured her most profound experiences. It was the language of her wings, her freedom. In the end it became a fugitive language by which she could extract, without violating, the essence of the Africa that had inspired her. And the way she put this language to work was in the revival of the art of the tale, that venerable genre not in vogue since the days of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe.

"It was evidently the long droughts of Africa," says Johannesson, "that made Dinesen into a storyteller. Because she felt the need of collecting her energy, she began, she says, 'in the evening to write stories, fairy-tales and romances, that would take my mind a long way off, to other countries and times'" (WID 8). Her reasons for choosing this art form and her theories pertaining to it constitute a fascinating study in themselves. In my opinion, her decision to fly in the face of fashion was neither casual nor arch. She had a deep and abiding faith in the mythic truth of the classic tale, and she saw its revival as a means of reconciling the conflict between the will of man and the will of God, the conflict that had become the divisive legacy of Romantic disillusionment. For her, the subject matter of the tale was destiny, the exalted merger of wills; and thus only the tale could have the power to heal what Arnold Toynbee has called the schism in the modern soul. Dinesen imagined herself as a modern Scheherazade, and her tales, says Johannesson, "are so imbued with the spirit of storytelling that one might venture to assert that the basic theme running through them all is, in fact, the storyteller's defense of the art of the story" (WID 8).

It was all an outrageous gamble—new identity, different language, unpopular art form, comic vision—and it paid off. But there were problems, and they were compounded, I am convinced, by her peculiar status as a "spiritual émigré."

Once Dorothy Canfield Fisher had "discovered" her, Random House had published her, and *Seven Gothic Tales* had been selected as a book of the month, Isak Dinesen's reputation in English-speaking countries was launched. In Denmark, however, the initial critical reception of *Seven Gothic Tales*, after being translated into Danish and published the following year, was not exactly favorable. In the 1930s, Danish literature was predominantly sociological and psychological, and the tales of Isak Dinesen seemed rather strange and forbidding to the critics. One

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<sup>13</sup> Svendsen 21-22.

critic, Sven Moller Kristensen, spoke of the collection as "something isolated and foreign, like an element from another world" (WID 7).

Dinesen herself said, "When I wrote this book for my own pleasure in English, I did not think that it would be of any interest to Danish readers. [Even] the parts about Denmark have to be considered more as the fantasies of a Danish emigrant than as an attempt to describe reality" (MR 68). However, because of her enormous popularity outside Denmark, her position in Danish letters changed radically. From having been thought of as an anachronism in the 1930s, she developed into the leading figure of Danish literary life in the 1950s. Nevertheless, she is still considered by most Danes to be rather bizarre. Literary historians and critics in Scandinavia continue to make much of her "uniqueness" without ever quite coming to terms with the significance of this uniqueness. They like to remind us that "her art and vision of life are of such striking originality" (WID 6) that she cannot really be compared to anyone, an observation not intended to be flattering. To many of them she seems to be some exotic ornament for which there is no real place on the shelf, a porcelain figurine so admired by foreigners that there just might be something there after all. According to Johannesson, "the literary historians have, for this reason, encountered some difficulty in finding a niche for Isak Dinesen in the history of contemporary Scandinavian literature" (WID 6).

It took serious and objective American critics like Eric Johannesson and Robert Langbaum to see that her oppositions to the sociological-psychological novel was not mere evasion and diversion and that these tales were not frothy concoctions meant to occupy an idle hour and keep reality at bay. Instead, says Johannesson, these tales, "like the stories in the *Arabian Nights*, proclaim the belief in the all but magic power of the story to provide man with a new vision and a renewed faith in life" (WID 10). Dinesen's tales, in Langbaum's view, "show us how psychology may be dealt with in terms that are purely literary. They make us realize that the old literary forms—tragedy, comedy, romance, pastoral—are names for clusters of concepts that we would nowadays call psychological insights. For the old forms carry assertions of value, "he says, "while psychological analysis has, in the modern novel, separated our internal from our external life in order to discredit the external life. Psychological analysis has thus tended to dissolve the outlines of character and dissipate the magic or glory of the life dealt with" (GV 2-3). Dinesen's method, says Langbaum in an inspired summing up, "is a way of reconciling the knowledge of life with the praise of it" (GV 3).

Johannesson attributes the phenomenal popularity of Dinesen's works to the fact that she appealed to "a generation feeling a need for myth" (WID 7). If anything gets close to the heart of Dinesen's genius, it is this recognition of her understanding of man's need for myth and her unsurpassed attention to this need. But this recognition will not be wholly forthcoming until this "spiritual émigré" has found a proper home. I'm not sure I know where that home is, but I seriously doubt that it is exclusively among her fellow Danes, whose language she did not write in and whose ideology she did not share. There is much about her that is Danish, but there is much more that is universal. It would be an irony worthy of one of her own tales if this spiritual émigré were to be confined to the very home she once fled. It may be misleading to call her an English writer, but it would be absolutely accurate to call her one of the world's finest writers in English.