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The Danish Spinster and the English Rake?
Isak Dinesen as the Inimitable Lord Byron—A Mythobiography

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Documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads.

—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (65)

AGNESE "GOT INTO HER HEAD the notion that she looked like Milord Byron, of whom so much is talked ... [for] she used to dress and ride as a man, and ... write poetry" (*Seven Gothic Tales* 174). As the dueling, cross-dressing heroine of Isak Dinesen's "The Roads Round Pisa," Agnese della Gherardesci is a character whose trespass into the masculine role of the Byronic poet represents an authorial fantasy dear to Isak Dinesen. As the trouser-clad Baroness, who managed her African farm from the back of a very tall horse and later as a pseudonymous "male" poet in her own right, Dinesen, like Agnese, entertained the notion that she too resembled Lord Byron. A self-professed storyteller resistant to the idea of becoming a bit of printed matter, Dinesen was both attracted and repulsed by the nineteenth-century construct of the author as cultural figure that reached its zenith in the cult of character that Byron inspired at a time when reading Byron, or reading *about* Byron, became its own literary industry.

What literary theorists call Byron's "self-fashioning"—his talent for conflating author and character, life and art—is reproduced in interesting ways by Karen Blixen's highly theatrical approach to her own

public persona, which she understood as a series of masks, beginning with her aristocratic, male pen name. "Not by the face shall the man be known, but by the mask," declares Kasparson, one of several masquerading characters in Dinesen's "The Deluge at Norderney" (*Seven Gothic Tales* 75). Such may also be the case for the post-Byronic author. By always leading with a mask, Dinesen was able to unmask, through her fiction, a kind of self-knowledge that complicates normative definitions of identity writ large or what the literary biographer takes to be his or her subject. My purpose, here, is not to sensationalize or expose either Byron's or Dinesen's efforts at self-mythologizing in the mean-spirited posture of a "tell-all" gossip or in the name of the biographer's sometimes over-assuming sympathy, but instead to honor the self-conscious and deliberate irony with which both George Gordon and Karen Blixen intentionally set out to make a problem out of literary biography through their respective strategies of dealing with fame and the discursive self.

In his dedication to Thomas Moore, Esquire, printed as the introduction to two of the four sets collected works of Byron in Dinesen's library at Rungstedlund, Byron resigns himself to serving the pleasure of a readership that *likes* to discover the author as the true villain of a text. "Be it so," he writes, "if I have deviated into the gloomy vanity of 'drawing from self the pictures [i.e. personages, or characters] are probably like, since they are unfavorable, those who know me are undeceived, and those who do not, I have little interest in undeceiving .... I must admit Childe Harold to be a very repulsive personage; and as to his identity, those who like it must give him whatever 'alias' they please" (4:49).

No doubt attracted to the transgressive possibilities of living as an alias, at a young age, Karen Blixen impersonated Milord Byron as part of a "private serial" co-authored with her best friend, Ellen Wanscher, who eagerly took the part of Lady Annabella, Byron's spurned wife (Thurman 44). Karen Blixen's early identification with Byron seemed to offer her a means of resistance against the bourgeois morality that dominated her female-headed household after the suicide of her father, who was himself a kind of self-destructive, Byronic hero. Indeed, of the seven types and prototypes Peter Thorslev ascribes to the Byronic hero, Wilhelm Dinesen embodied at least three: Rousseau's child of nature, when he lived among the American Sioux, Pawnee and Chippewa; romanticism's Satanic hero, when he ranted against the pietism

of his day in the ambulatory conversations he had with his nine year old daughter; and finally, the "hero of sensibility," or "the gloomy egoist," when he penned his own pastoral, self-exploration, *Boganis, or Letters from the Hunt,* which would influence both his daughter's expatriate wanderings and her own ambitions towards authorship (Thorslev 35; Thurman 16, 27).

Yet, if the reticence of Dinesen's memoir *Out of Africa* is any measure, Dinesen, as the author of fiction or non-fiction, was no "gloomy egoist" but quite the reverse. Rather than inherit romanticism's self-indulgence from Wilhelm or Byron before him, Dinesen selectively drew from these two iconic aristocrats a theory of selfhood that resisted the constraints of what her narrator in "Copenhagen Season" dubs "that dubious being, the individual" (*Last Tales* 253).[1] Rather, the aristocratic title the Baroness held in common with "Baron Byron" symbolized for her a model of identity in which the aristocrat was understood to be actually "walking, talking, riding, dancing, as the personification of his [or her] name," under no delusions (unlike the poor liberal individual) of his or her own celebrated uniqueness (*Last Tales* 252).

So earnest was Dinesen's interest in Byron, Oedipal and otherwise, (Ah, to be "for a few hours Lord Byron himself!") that the problems and pleasures of being Lord Byron add up to a pair of romantic book-ends that frame Dinesen's full body of work (*Carnival* 332). In her first publication in 1934, Byron, or Byron imitators, are present in three of Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales,* while more than forty years later, in the posthumously published collection, *Carnival,* Byron appears as the main character of "The Second Meeting," which is Dinesen's final, printed tale. It was last worked on in 1961, prior to Dinesen's death the following year. Editor Frans Lasson observes that "although it is to a certain extent a fragment, ['The Second Meeting'] will be for a great many readers the final, moving meeting with Karen Blixen, the

1. As Judith Thurman argues so eloquently in the first chapter of her biography *Isak Dinesen, Life of a Storyteller,* the either/or tension between the aesthetic and the ethical, laid out by Kierkegaard as the primary, polarizing issue of nineteenth-century European life, translates for Dinesen into a rubric of choices that splits her biography according to the "either/or" logic of competing class ideologies. Reflecting on the influence of Dinesen's dueling paternal and maternal lines, Thurman argues that "the poles Isak Dinesen knew as Dinesen/Westenholz, freedom/taboo, aristocrat/bourgeois organized her ways of feeling and her stock of images" (Thurman 8). As Thurman comments earlier, "when [Dinesen] shows herself, in her tales, to be such an excellent historian of the Romantic 'split,' it is because she had a kind of carnal knowledge of her material" (Thurman 7–8).

storyteller" (*Carnival* ix). In dramatic fashion, "The Second Meeting" is also Isak Dinesen's final, moving meeting with Byron, or put in more therapeutic terms, her final, moving meeting with a fictive projection of herself as Byron.

The literal second meeting staged in Dinesen's final tale is between Lord Byron and Pino the puppeteer, who resembles the otherwise inimitable Byron to the point of being his twin. In anticipation of various reencounters with destiny—the kind that doubles always find their way into—at their first meeting, on one of those "full-moon nights on Malta" (*Carnival* 328), Pino manages to save the life of Lord Byron. He accomplishes the rescue by secretly taking Byron's place in a rendezvous with a maiden whose rogue brothers are lying in ambush to kill the rake poet (*Carnival* 329). Despite the disguise of Byron's clothes, secured through the Lord's trusty valet, the brothers are not fooled by the resemblance. Humored by his effort at impersonation, they spare the courageous Pino on condition of a ransom, which a grateful Byron dutifully pays: one gold sovereign to his blackmailers and one to his brave double. This second, fortuitous sovereign launches Pino's famous puppet theater, which has made him a full-blown celebrity all over Italy. Now fourteen years later, Dinesen's tale opens with Pino explaining to Byron how a second meeting functions as an indispensable narrative principle, valuable to puppet plays and biographies alike, for a second meeting is necessary if the poet's life is to become "a story" ready for transmission and amenable to repetition and consumption.

Whether or not Dinesen's protagonist, the artist figured as puppeteer, intends this second meeting to generate the kind of serial reproduction or "branding" of the author as cultural hero, which Byron himself managed in his illustrious career is a matter of central interest in Dinesen's final tale. Whether or not Dinesen's protagonist, the artist figured as puppeteer, intends this second meeting to generate the kind of serial reproduction or "branding" of the author as cultural hero, which Byron himself managed in his illustrious career is a matter of central interest in Dinesen's final tale for it was written with Dinesen's mortality in full view, at a time when her artistic legacy was a matter of critical debate. Reproducing this self-reflective mood, "The Second Meeting" begins with Byron's death clearly inscribed on the narrative horizon. In contrast to Dinesen's consistently anti-realist aesthetic, the tale opens matter-of-factly, with an uncharacteristic amount of ironic weight placed on the authorized facts of Byron's highly publicized life. The

tale depicts Byron's final leave-taking from Italy and the circumstances surrounding his decision to board the *Hercules,* sail to Greece and join the revolutionaries in their cause—a heroic plot indeed, had he not died of rheumatic fever shortly after landing. Dinesen's narrator reconstructs Byron's contemplative mood before departing: "Twice, in the belief that he was shaking the dust of Italy off his feet for good, he had gone on board, and twice a fierce wind or a dead calm had made him turn to shore again. He had sent away his companions, he was alone in the empty Casa Saluzzo" (*Carnival* 327). According to Byron's loyal valet, the *Hercules* actually suffered three failed departures (Eisler 726); but for the sake of the symmetry of Dinesen's tale, twice he boards his destiny, and twice he disembarks.

Functioning in the guise of the curious reader, or critic, Pino invades Lord Byron's privacy in the name of securing "that sacred thing: a second meeting" (*Carnival* 328). The puppeteer confesses to an apprehensive Lord Byron:

> I have indeed come to make an inventory,... I am going to turn [your life] into a story. That is what a second meeting does. It is the story's touchstone, the last curve of the parenthesis, which joins up with the first curve and makes a unity of its contents. (*Carnival* 334–5)

Given what appears to be the infinitely reproducible life of Byron,[2] it seems Dinesen worried about who would make a unity out of her own life and work, or as Thurman puts it, her own "readable life," after she died (8).

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2. As with every decade since Byron's death in 1824, over the last ten years, critics of all stripes have paid Byron a visit in order to turn his life into a story. Recent works include: tome-length biographies, such as Fiona MacCarthy's *Byron: Life and Legend* (2002) and Benita Ensler's *Byron, Child of Passion, Fool of Fame* (1999); ambitious studies of Byron's posthumous reception, such as Giovanni Lamartino's two volume study of the evolution of Byronism in southern, central, and northern Europe: *Translation, Biography, Opera, Film and Literary Criticism: Byron and Italy after 1870;* as well as focused studies of romantic biography as its own Byronic sub-genre, found in Alan Rawes recent collection *Romantic Biography* (2002). In *Byron, Child of Passion, Fool of Fame,* Eilser argues that "the fame [Byron] enjoyed and exploited until it soured was obscurity itself compared to the mythologized Byron that virtually rose from his corpse at Missolonghi" (752).

3. Dinesen first made the more chaste selection of Aage Henrikson as her biographer. Although he had to decline the project, he would, no doubt, have been a more critical chronicler. See discussion of Henrikson and Dinesen's relationship and Thurman on Henriksen (*Isak Dinesen, Storyteller* 396).

Unfortunately, Dinesen's efforts before her death concentrated on closing the parentheses around her life at the expense of her work, or at least in defiance of the modernist aesthetic of impersonality reproduced so artfully in her fiction. Specifically, in 1956, she agreed to produce a biography with her French friend and admirer, Parmenia Migel, a decision her posthumous biographer, Judith Thurman, describes as "a major policy reversal" (Thurman 395).[3] Just ten years prior, Dinesen had hesitated when Danish critic, Hans Brix, began a study of her work because of his emphasis on literary biography. In interviews with another Danish critic Aage Kabell, Dinesen complained that Kabell's biographical line of questioning made her feel like hunted prey (Thurman 396). Apparently, Thurman argues, after spending "the better part of her seventieth year in a hospital bed," due to what critics would soon learn were symptoms of advanced stages of syphilis, Dinesen's "failing health and [this recent] brush with death had also made her concerned to assure that her reputation—her 'mythos' as she would call it—would outlive her" (395).

Condemned roundly as a sensational, mythologizing text riddled with misinformation, Migel's *Titania* was described by Hannah Arendt in an article first published in *The New York Review of Books* as a biography dominated by the "innocent impertinence, so typical of the professional adorers" (Arendt xii). It was clear to most critics that the narrative had been too much guided by Dinesen's own extravagant self-fashioning as a spiritual courtesan—as a witch, or a siren—caricatures which at the end of her career she reproduced in one theatrical interview after another (Arendt xxv).[4] Thurman describes the memorial anthology compiled in 1965, in Dinesen's honor, as a text that reveals, through its very uniformity, Dinesen's anxiety to control her reception—to control her story. "The remembrances," she observes, "are sometimes delicate and bright, sometimes trivial or sentimental, depending upon the writer, but they are strikingly uniform in their details—as uniform as the interviews Dinesen gave in the last decade of her life, when she had perfected her persona and almost never set it aside" (Thurman 408).

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4. In Arendt's 1968 review for *The New Yorker* of Migel's biography, she actually lists the text's errata and chronicles its inconsistencies (DAG, *xi-xii*). See the introduction to *Daguerreotypes* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1979) *vii-xxv*. The index of Judith Thurman's *Isak Dinesen, The Storyteller,* commits nine entries to inaccuracies attributed to Paramenia Migel's *Titania*.

To her credit, in tales such as "The Dreamers," Dinesen problematizes the virtues of uniformity, or living life as a unified, single self. A modernist at heart, Dinesen explores through her fictional characters the possibility of provisional unities, those supreme, necessary fictions spiritual courtesans construct in order to live. In particular, Dinesen's fiction reveals a consistent economy of desire in which virgins and spinsters are represented as women potently aware of their own appetites, who, by choosing not to participate in sexual intimacy, are rewarded with a charged proximity to erotic truth, which confirms their status as "earthy" idealists or erotic fatalists. The two spinster sisters in "Supper at Elsinore" are representative of Dinesen's interest in oxymoronic, doubled, or divided sexual identities, which range from the reoccurring tropes of the virgin whore, the virgin mother, and in the case of the sisters, the spinster as spiritual courtesan.

While on the face of it, a chaste spinster might seem to inhabit an identity inverse to that of a rake, such as Byron, in Dinesen's hands they share common ground, for the spinster can choose to appropriate or impersonate the seductive verbal prowess of the rake poet. In a teasing tone, Dinesen's narrator describes the supper held in none other than Queen Gertrude's Elsinore, an atmosphere already charged with the problem of an older woman's desire:

> The party was characteristic of the two old maids by being mostly composed of gentlemen. They existed in their pretty house in Gammeltorv, like a pair of prominent spiritual courtesans of Copenhagen, leading their admirers into excesses and seducing them into scattering their spiritual wealth and health upon their charms. (*Seven Gothic Tales* 236)

Thorkild Bjørnvig, one of Dinesen's chief admirers and protégés—a poet with "spiritual wealth" of his own to scatter—once suggested in an interview with Isak Dinesen that she resembled another one of her characters: Pellegrina. As Dinesen's readers will remember, Pellegrina is the opera diva from "The Dreamers," who, after losing her voice in a tragic fire, goes on to pursue a nomadic life under a series of aliases. Bjørnvig claims that Dinesen replied to the suggestion by agreeing: "Ja, det er mig [Pellegrina].... Dét at hun mister sin Stemme, svarer til at jeg mistede Farmen og Afrika" (*Pagten* 35) ["Yes, I am (Pellegrina).... The loss of her voice corresponds to my loss of the farm and Africa" (46–7)]. Yet Dinesen's specific loss meant she, in fact, gained a voice, and a career, rather than losing one. The similarity between Dinesen and Pellegrina is more subtle than a simple one to one correspondence. Ultimately, it

comes down to a shared respect between author and character for the mutability of "the self"—one Byron himself would have appreciated. In "The Dreamers," Pellegrina tells Marcus Couza, her confidant and protector: "I shall give you this good advice. Be many people. Give up this game of being one" (*Seven Gothic Tales* 345).

In full agreement, it seems, with Dinesen's defeated diva, Byron entertained what Kay Jamison describes as "a veritable city of selves" (195). Byron's physician claimed that he was "capable of assuming so many shapes," in any given day; he was, in the truest sense of the word, protean (195). Byron himself describes such a plurality of selves when he writes in *Don Juan* "I almost think that the same skin/For one without—has two or three within" (*Complete Poetical Works* 5:660).

In the tale "Carnival," the title story of Dinesen's posthumous, final collection, a character dressed as Pierrot announces to her fellow revelers at a masquerade dinner: "It is a little silly to be a caricature of something of which you know very little, and which means very little to you, but to be your own caricature—that is the true carnival!" (*Carnival* 100). Thurman reminds us that in the same year Dinesen agreed to the interviews that led Migel to shape her in the image of Shakespeare's fairy queen, *Titania,* she had a large portion of her stomach surgically removed, after which she would never again "eat normally" and weigh more than eighty-five pounds (Thurman in Smith 11). "But in exhibiting that heroism she called *chic*," Thurman argues, Dinesen "made the best of it, turning [her alarming physical presence] into a joke, [by] swathing herself in bearskins and her head in turbans, accentuating her ghostly pallor with white powder and her enormous limpid eyes with kohl" (Thurman in Smith 11). When Dinesen boasted that her devotees had declared that hers was a mythic voice, "three thousand years old," the claim was at once personal and deeply philosophical, because by reproducing this ancient persona of "a witch who dined with Socrates," she was simultaneously drawing attention to her own dramatic premature aging and to one of her most prized aesthetic principles: transmissibility. In Dinesen's hands, the quality of transmissibility translates into the "immortal story's" power to outlive "the facts" of any single life,[5] just as Plato's character, Socrates, enjoys real immortality (along, it seems, with everyone with whom he dines), in contrast to the now

5. See the plot of the tale by the same name, "The Immortal Story," published as one of Dinesen's *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958).

silenced, historical Socrates. Dinesen's artistic dream was to create a literature worthy of transhistorical transmission, with tales that could live on, just like Scheherazade's *1,001 Arabian Nights,* long after their turbaned, twentieth-century author had been forgotten. By declaring herself "a witch who dined with Socrates," Isak, or "the laughing one," engaged in a type of public theater that allowed her to perform what we understand as the postmodern death of the author by imitating in the storyteller's voice the disappearing act of a humble ventriloquist or puppeteer, even as she contradicted this ethic by participating in the clownish construction of her own celebrity.

In *Pagten: Mit venskab med Karen Blixen* [*The Pact, My Friendship with Isak Dinesen*], Bjørnvig, the most intimate and arguably the most loyal of Dinesen's protégés, explains how Dinesen made him promise to warn her if he found in her "Tegn paa Højgedsvanvid" (13) ["signs of megalomania" (28)] of the kind exhibited by Nietzsche. It seems that for Dinesen sharing Nietzsche's disease was one thing, but sharing his existential egoism was another. Bjørnvig describes a mask Dinesen would don in the company of guests, late in her career—precisely the time when her "mythos" was being collectively authored, both at home and abroad.[6] Echoing Dinesen's own theme of self-caricature, Bjørnvig insists that Dinesen's style of self-presentation became

> *en formelig opvisning, et cirkusridt i prøvede åndrigheder og paradokser, anekdoter og gamle historier. Alle kan med alderen komme til at gentage sig, men dog i reglen nødigt og uforvarende—her virkede det bevidst og som om hun var komplet ligeglad med dét.* (52–3)

> a veritable show, a circus ride through tried witticisms and paradoxes, anecdotes and old tales. With age anyone may chance to repeat himself—usually unwilling and unawares—but here it seemed deliberate, as if she were completely indifferent to the matter. (64)

Yet if "The Second Meeting" is any guide, it is possible to argue that Dinesen was at least partially indifferent to her reception as *auteur;* her philosophy of art suggests that this is the case. The critical legacy of Dinesen's storytelling prose is vested in three related principles: her suspicion of original authorship, her refusal of interiority as a necessary principle of characterization, and, as mentioned earlier, her overall

6. Excerpts from her BBC interview, and others, can be seen in Christian Braad Thomsen's documentary film "Isak Dinesen, Storyteller."

disdain for that hallowed bourgeois figure, "that dubious being, the individual" (*Last Tales* 253). Again and again, the critic faces in Dinesen the central paradox of an eccentric, highly individuated personality whose philosophy of art advocates the self-forgetful, self-masking practice of the storyteller—one which specifically resists the cult of character associated with print authorship, in a post-Byronic literary market.

Indeed, in her final tale, Dinesen's way of "punctuating" the biographical fallacy is telling. While "the last curve of the parenthesis" Pino intends to inscribe on the life of Lord Byron in order to "make a unity of its contents" seems to represent an all-powerful graphic mark, seductive in its symmetry and compelling in its linearity, the fact that this typographical mark converts the life of the author literally into a parenthetical (a grammatically expendable aside) represents an irony Isak Dinesen, the storyteller, would certainly have relished (*Carnival* 335). Yet, in "The Second Meeting," Pino makes the ironic prediction that the work that will be most often "rewritten and reread" will not be Byron's volumes of poetry—"they will collect dust on the shelves"— but rather, it will be *The Life of Byron,* which "each year [will] have a new edition set upon the shelf" (*Carnival* 338). If nothing else, the grammatical rules governing parentheses that Dinesen invokes complicate an easy first reading of "The Second Meeting," reminding us that Dinesen, rather than Pino, should have the final word, about the uses and abuses of literary biography.

In "The Cardinal's First Tale," Cardinal Salviati, a character often identified by critics as Dinsen's fictional stand-in, delivers what could be described as a Brechtean critique of empathic identification that specifically calls into question the merits of reading and re-reading the individual life lived. In a sermon applicable to readers of biographies as much as to readers of novels, the Cardinal makes a case for resisting the charms of "individuality" upon which the whole urge to read and write biographies is predicated. More specifically, the Cardinal warns his penitent, the "Lady in Black," who acts in this frame tale as the inscribed reader that,

> the individuals of the new books and novels—one by one—are so close to the reader that he will feel a bodily warmth flowing from them, [to the point] that he will take them to his bosom and make them, in all situations of his life, his companions, friends and advisers. And while this interchange of sympathy goes on, the story itself loses ground and weight and in the end evaporates, like the bouquet of a noble wine, the bottle of which has been left uncorked. (*Last Tales* 23–4)

When it came to "making a unity" out of her life, Dinesen in fact did not court "an interchange of sympathy" like the one experienced in the bosom of the Lady in Black for the unlucky, passionate Ellenore, whom the latter describes as a "sister of mine—frail and faithful as myself" (*Last Tales* 23–4). It is telling that in defense of the "new" novels, the Lady in Black offers up Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* (1816), with its memorable Ellenore, as her favorite because this romantic classic draws its very life from Constant's own autobiography, specifically from his experiences as the young lover and political ally of the exiled Madame de Staël. Rather than court the "bodily warmth" of sentimental literature, weighted as it is in the personal, Dinesen willed that her life be understood in the more broadly symbolic terms of "the story."

Based on an implied theory of authorship, distilled from her most meta-fictional tales, that rewards the "everybody and nobody" persona of the storyteller, it is clear that the value of an author's mythology, over and above her personal biography, was a genuine generic preference for Dinesen. In "The Second Meeting," she constructs just such a mythos for Pino, the puppeteer, by tracing his artistic lineage from Arabia to Nottinghamshire. In the passage below, Pino describes an identity born out of a kind of literary miscegenation, with kinship claims ranging from Scheherazade to Byron. The pattern passed down through the centuries as Pino's artistic birthright reveals the Byronic tradition of the artist as seducer, a tradition that dates back still further to the most famous sustained seduction in literature: Scheherazade's 1,001 Arabian Nights. Pino explains to Lord Byron:

> [I] have got many different kinds of blood in my veins. My grandmother held that hers was Arab and of the noblest quality, since she was descended from the Sultana Scheherazade, who sweetened the Sultan's nights by her eyes and lips and by her tales. But in the course of the years a maiden of my blood let herself be seduced by a Norman chevalier, whose name may well have been Byron, so that it be to this love affair that I owe this honor and good luck of mine to be like Your Excellency in looks. (*Carnival* 329)

Readers of Dinesen will recognize that Pipistrello's brief sketch of his family tree functions also as a comic shorthand for Dinesen's own biography. Expressed in this passage is Dinesen's desire to be a modern day Scheherazade, descended from the noble Arab "Sultana" whose tales were not only a favorite from childhood, but an active part of the oral culture of east Africa, which she experienced first hand out on safari.

Dinesen also experienced, of course, her own seduction by a "Norman Chevalir," Denys Finch von Hatten, the Englishman who, Arendt argues, may have inspired her life long commitment to writing in English (vii). Not to be out-raced on the topic of mythic-biographies, Lord Byron, of course, liked to remind his readers that he too could trace his lineage back to the "liegemen of William the Conquerer" (Eisler 7).

Demonstrating how the construction of a mythos is indeed a kind of praxis, Karen Blixen and Clara Svendsen, Dinesen's personal secretary of nearly twenty years (1944–1962), created a kind of daily mythology and an habituated humor that ritualized their shared love of Byron. Early in their relationship, Ms. Svendsen remembers that she shared with Karen Blixen "en særlig hemmelighed: at Byron, der var død for hundrede år siden, fascinerede mig mere end noget levende menneske (Svendsen 19) [a queer secret, that Byron, dead a hundred years, fascinated me more than any living person]."[7] For Dinesen and her personal secretary, Byron became a household brand, a familiar ghost and interlocutor around the house, be it at Rungstedlund or at Clara's "lejlighed, som [Dinesen] navngav "Newstead Abbey" efter Byron's gods i Nottinghamshire" (74) [at Clara's apartment which Dinesen nicknamed "Newstead Abbey" after Byron's home in Nottinghamshire]. Their coded exchanges, recorded in Svendsen's *Notater*, suggest how all impressionable readers should aspire to live in the company of a dead poet like Byron. Clara recollects that Lord Byron visited Dinesen both in her dreams and in the margins of her manuscripts. At the time Clara's father passed away, she recalls a dream that the Baroness recounted to her. Karen Blixen

> *drømte...at hun gik over i "Newstead Abbey" for at se om jeg var hjemme, og dér sad Byron og syslede med end slags spil, "hvor han skulle flytte nogle pindle." Hun sagde til ham: "Men sidder De her? Vil De ikke komme over i dagligstuen?" Men han ville blive deroppe, "jeg synes, her skal være nogen, hvis Clara kommer hjem og har dårligt nyt." "Hvor længe tænker De Dem at blive?" "Nogle få dage."* (Svendsen 102)

> (dreamed that she walked over to "Newstead Abbey" to see if [Clara was] home, and there sat Byron, fiddling with a chess piece, moving pawns about the board. She said to him "won't you come into the living room? But he wanted to stay upstairs, because, he explained "I think

7. All subsequent passages cited from Clara Svendsen's *Notater om Karen Blixen* were translated with assistance from Professor Emeritus Naomi Lebowitz, Washington University, St. Louis.

someone should be here, if Clara returns with bad news." "How long do you plan on staying?" Dinesen asked. "A few days," replied Byron).

In graphic form, Byron was also present in the editorial exchanges Karen and Clara generated in the margins of Dinesen's manuscripts. In the section of *Notater* dedicated to "The Second Meeting," Clara translates the marks left on Dinesen's final revised draft of the tale which encode one of Byron's most protected and exploited secrets: his incestuous love of his sister, Augusta. Referring to Dinesen with the nickname she had had since childhood, "Tanne," Ms. Svendsen writes:

> *Jeg genlæser udkastene nu—forskellige dele af historien er nået til forskellige stadier af bearbejdelse, på at enkelt har jeg set mit snit til at sætte dato: 7/11 61—Tanne brød sig ellers ikke om at sætte dato på de mange mellemstadier, men skrev ofte et stort S, det betød "Seneste" og skulle jo så streges ud igen når næste stadium forelå. På mange afsnit af de ufærdige ting står også* AM. *Det var en forkortelse for "Augustas menage." Agusta var Byron's søster, og en af de manage gange i årenas løb, hvor vi sad og snakkede om Byron, havde vi slået fast, at "Augustas menage gik på bedste beskub."* AM *betyder derfor et meget foreløbigt udkast.* (Svendsen 189)
>
> (I re-read the drafts of ["The Second Meeting"] now—several parts of the story reached different levels of revision and editing, on one I have entered a simple date of 7/11 61—Tanne didn't really care about dating all the middle stages of editing, but often wrote a large L, which meant Latest, subsequently to be stricken when the next stage was at hand. On many pages of the rough draft it said AM—Augusta's part. Augusta was Byron's sister and once when we were talking about Byron, we had decided that Augusta's parts seemed random. AM therefore meant only a very provisional draft.)

Itself a sort of incestuous wink at Byron's ability to live through scandal by calling upon provisional selves analogous perhaps to provisional drafts, Dinesen and Svendsen's "AM" ultimately domesticates a secret, by conscripting the irony of two initials into the service of the poetic. My instincts tell me that the teasing manner in which Byron's life became a shorthand for Karen Blixen and Clara Svendsen represents an abbreviated, compressed, and ritualized way of insisting that Byron's genius could not, in fact, be reduced to his random, haphazard, or accidental life.

"My life?... What a thing to save!" exclaims Dinesen's Byron to Pino, in the voice of a true fatalist (*Carnival* 329). Reading Dinesen backward, through the lens of this final tale, she too practiced the bravado of Byron's self-deprecating question. When she expressed to Hans Brix, and other

critics, her acute distrust of the aims of biography, she was essentially asking: "My life? What a thing to save!" (See Thurman 396).

The active silencing of biography, or autobiography, evident in Dinesen's fiction from the thirties, forties, and fifties, was, of course, front and center also the pet issue of New Criticism. In 1964, when Langbaum published *The Gayety of Vision,* the first full length study of Dinesen's oeuvre, he stops to grabble with how to take measure of her literary life and in the process sums up the current debate over the methodological merits of biographical study.

> The old simple idea was that the work is an expression of the life, and the current reaction is to say that there is little connection between them. The fact is that the connection is more important in some writers than in others. But where it is important, the work has as much effect upon the life as the life upon the work.... One thinks of Byron who made his life into the legend required by characters like Childe Harold and Don Juan. Yeats moved into a ruined medieval tower in order to give himself the setting required by the speaker in his poems, in order, as he says in "Meditations in Time of Civil War," to grow his symbolic roses in his own garden." (Langbaum 131)

On the face of it, Pino's prediction initially proved true for *The Life of Isak Dinesen,* namely that the work that will be most often "rewritten and reread" will not be Byron's volumes of poetry, or in Dinesen's case, her collections of tales—"they will collect dust on the shelves"—but instead "*The Life of Byron,*" or by extension, *The Life of Dinesen,* will "each year in a new edition be set upon the shelf" (*Carnival* 338). Approximately every five years since her death, "a new edition [has been] set upon the shelf," in the form of a new Dinesen biography, or a book length study of her work, heavily inflected by the details of Dinesen's page-turner of a life.[8] While never on the scale of Byron's career, during which, partly by his own designs, he became a "walking, talking" commodity, by the end of her life Dinesen also had genuine fame to contend with and answer to. William Jay Smith, in the introduction to the English translation of Thorkild Bjørnvig's *The Pact,* describes how on her legendary tour to New York in 1959,

8. An overview of Dinesen scholarship reveals a healthy body of criticism in English which boasts four in-depth biographies, five book-length studies, two volumes of collected criticism, and a rich variety of critical essays primarily in English and Danish but also in French, German, and Dutch.

> [Dinesen's] listeners came from every corner of Manhattan and from every walk of life—young writers who had just discovered her work, older members of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, which had elected her an honorary member and applauded her address at a dinner meeting, theatrical celebrities, and society women who had probably never before attended a reading of any sort. Taxis and limousines converged nonstop on Ninety-second Street: the evening had all the earmarks of the most glamorous Broadway opening. The reception was such that she was called back a second and then a third time to repeat the exact same program. A cartoon in the *New York Times Book Review* showed a beatnik in a Village haunt asking another, "Did you catch Isak Dinesen at the Y?" The *Times* also ran an advertisement of the kind that no speaker, not even Dylan Thomas, had received: ON MARCH 31st. THIRD APPEARANCE BY DEMAND—ISAK DINESEN. (9)

In *The Gayety of Vision,* Langbaum argues that when Isak Dinesen recounted her tales to her Danish radio audience or to her American audiences on her New York tour, "she [was] able to do what few writers nowadays can do—speak directly and intimately to an audience whom she [could] rely on to know her legend as set forth in *Out of Africa* [1937]" (Langbaum 131). In other words, *The Life of Isak Dinesen* was already very much a received text, one that would shape the reception of her fiction for twenty plus years, until her death in 1962.

Given our contemporary appetite for memoir, it is still the case that readers typically begin and end their relationship with Isak Dinesen by reading *Out of Africa,* thus, by default, privileging the life over the work or, at the very least, the "truth-value" of non-fiction over fiction. Yet *Out of Africa* is one of the most sophisticated and varied examples of modern memoir written in English because, in fact, it defies our expectations for autobiography by resisting generic prescriptions for the right way to tell a life or put differently, the right way for an author to tell on herself. As Judith Lee and other critics have noted, absences abound in the memoir. The love story between Karen Blixen and Denys Finch Hatton is almost nowhere to be found—it is mentioned only under the euphemistic cover of friendship—neither is the reader privy to the scandal of her syphilis contracted from an unfaithful husband, nor the story of subsequent divorce. Instead, what might have been a page-turning romance plot is subverted in a text in which representation and self-representation are artfully conflated in the style of the impartial storyteller. As Judith Lee argues in "The Mask of Form in *Out of Africa,*" "the form Dinesen has given to the information about her experience

constitutes a 'mask,' and our understanding of the life she represents depends not upon 'unmasking' the speaker but in closely examining the lines and contours of that mask" (267).

While, in effect, Dinesen crafted her own version of *The Life of Isak Dinesen* by authoring *Out of Africa,* in many respects the text is better read as a kind of coded artistic manifesto—as an exploration of prose genres ranging from fable to ethnography—than as the autobiography of its displaced narrator. As a text that begins so dramatically in the first person—"I had a farm in Africa..." in practice, Dinesen's first person narrative actually prefers the third person. The distanced artifice of Dinesen's African memoir is in keeping with the most pronounced narrative value alive in her fiction, namely, the suppression of character in the interest of plot. Just as Kamante, her Kikuyu cook, subjugates the value of the noun—person, place, or thing—to the value of the verb or predicate, by naming his culinary creations "the sauce of the lightning that struck the tree" or "the sauce of the gray horse that died," so too the author of both *Out of Africa* and "The Second Meeting," prefers the exterior plots of fate—lightning and all—to the interiority we associate with memoir, or with autobiographical fiction and poetry more generally.

Yet when it comes to *The Life of Isak Dinesen,* there remain many competing editions on the shelf worthy of being re-read. If we include Dinesen's public and private performances as texts demanding reception and interpretation, we are left struggling to make a unity out of Dinesen's philosophy of art, centered as it is on the value of oral storytelling or live performance as a key component of authorship. While the narrator of *Out of Africa* shows great restraint, the voice that comes through in her posthumously published *Letters from Africa* reveals a prospective author already worried at age forty-one about how *her* story would be told, or how, metaphorically speaking, she should take stock of her remaining biographical inventory, in the face of economic bankruptcy. Writing to "Tommy," her favorite brother, on September 5, 1926, she confesses:

> *Jeg har været, om jeg maa sige, Offer for en ganske meningsløs Op- og Nedgang i mit Syn paa Tilværelsen overhovedet, og for et Menneske, som har bevaret i det mindste noget af sin Fornuft, er dar virkelig noget uhggeligt i selve denne Foreteelse. Jeg tror nu ikke at den var fremkaldt af de særlige ydre Forhold alene, men snarere af det Tidspunkt i Livet, hvorpaa jeg befandt mig: nemlig det, hvor man ikke længere lever paa en hel Del forskellige Muligheder, men maa tage, hvad man har faaet i Livet, for good og saa at sige gøre sin Status*

> *op, —og dette er, tror jeg, altid vanskeligt, og man er tilbøjelig til at se, i det ene Øjeblik urimelig lyst, i det næste urimelig mørkt paa sin Stilling; og det ligger vel i Sagens Natur, thi det er virkelig en vanskelig Bedømmelse, og en Lykke eller Fordel, imellem mange, ved Ungdommen er, at man dér, saa længe man som sagt lever med alle Muligheder for Øje, sletikke behøver at foretage nogen saadan.* (Breve 2: 62–3)

> I have been, if I may say so, the victim of a completely meaningless see-sawing in my view of life itself, and for someone who has retained at least a modicum of sense there is really something depressing in such an experience. I do not think it was produced by the particular external circumstances only, but rather by that stage in life in which I happened to be: when one no longer looks forward to a whole range of various possibilities but must accept what life has given one *for good* and take stock of oneself, as it were,—and I think this is always difficult and one is inclined to take a very bright view of one's position at one moment and an unreasonably dark one the next; and this is no doubt natural, for it *is* a difficult thing to judge, and one of the advantages of youth, for many people, is that then, as long as one has these possibilities before one, one has no need to take stock. (*Letters from Africa* 276)

The same metaphor appears in "The Second Meeting," where "taking stock" is not just a matter for private memory, but also an issue of literary memory and judgment. When the puppet master asks Byron, "When I saved your life, what did I save?" at first he receives the reductive, literal answer, "fourteen years," so he presses the romantic poet further:

> "I may see fourteen bottles of wine on a shelf," said Giuseppino, "and still ask the owner of the cellar what he has got there."

> "You will know something about my fourteen years already," said Lord Byron. "For your humble servant has been a good deal more talked about than he deserved, or than was to his liking. There has been some really fine wine in some of my bottles, poison in some and wormword in a few, tears in one. Have you come to make an inventory of the cellar of my experience?..."

> "I have indeed come to make an inventory," said Giuseppino, "to round off your stock and collect it into a unity." (*Carnival* 334)

In order to close the parentheses around the poet's life, Pino recommends that Byron stage "one great and deadly defeat, brought on by no fault of [his] own" (*Carnival* 338). Rather than being purely prophetic, Pino's advice may contain Dinesen's own mischievous desire to rewrite Byron's death more in the image of one of his love-crossed heroes. For

unlike the famous Leander, who drowned swimming the Hellespont in the name of ill-fated love, Byron survived the swim but drowned in a virus.[9] Yet Langbaum seems to think that Byron's literal death *did* produce the required effect: that ultimate second meeting. He argues, in *The Gayety of Vision,* that "the point [of "The Second Meeting"] is that Byron's final defeat was necessary to give his life the artistic shape that makes it, rather than his poems, his greatest work" (Langbaum 205). While it is persuasive that Dinesen was drawn to Byron's "readable" life because of its "artistic shape" and the famous "chic" with which "Milord" faced his numerable defeats, I resist the notion that in the final tale she worked on prior to her death Isak Dinesen would demote "the immortal story" in favor of celebrating a single, mortal life—even one as memorable as Byron's. What Langbaum reads as Dinesen's tribute to Byron the man, I read as situational irony that implicates the ego of the author, embodied, in this case, in the vulnerable Byron, who, in the course of this unfinished tale, may or may not, have decided to accept Pino's evaluative premise. In my reading, Pino's prediction, echoed by Langbaum, that Byron's life will prove to have been "his greatest work" does not articulate one of Dinesen's greatest death-bed desires, but rather one of Dinesen's greatest death-bed fears, namely that an author's life *could* render a corpus of work (that other corpse!) truly dead. It seems clear to me that Byron's problematic reception offered Dinesen the perfect material for a cautionary tale, riddled with her own signature brand of irony, the kind she liked to direct right back at herself.

As Clara Svendsen observes in *Notater,* for both Pino the character and Isak Dinesen the author, converting one's life into stories constituted at once the greatest blessing and the most tragic curse. Perhaps because it is a fragment, "The Second Meeting" never resolves the central paradox of how an author's biography can serve as both a blessing and a curse to "the story itself." Coming down on one side or the other, however, becomes the job of the reader or critic, whose second reading of the tale functions as a kind of "sacred" second meeting with the "symbolic roses" Dinesen grew in "her own garden," at the end of her life.

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9. In *Out of Africa,* Dinesen admires the eccentric heroism of yet another swimmer, one "Mr. Charles Bulpett of Nairobi," who "swam the Thames in evening clothes and a high hat—but later on, more romantically, [he] swam the Hellespont like Leander and Lord Byron" (41).

As Dinesen's narrative double, Pino has experienced how, as Langbaum puts it, "the work has as much effect upon the life as the life upon the work," for ever since his first meeting with Lord Byron, he has ceased being an individual, and has become a character in a story (Langbaum 131). He admits to Byron:

> In accepting my life then, and [your] sovereign, I forfeited my claim to a real human life. The harmony of it from then on was the harmony of the story. Certainly it is a great happiness to be able to turn the things which happen to you into stories. It is perhaps the one perfect happiness that a human being will find in life. But it is at the same time, inexplicably to the uninitiated, a loss, a curse even. (*Carnival* 333–4)

It seems that, along with Pino, Dinesen considered herself among the initiated. Whereas the uninitiated see being subsumed by "the story" as a loss, Dinesen witnessed that "the things which happen to you" can be turned "into stories" as "perhaps the one perfect happiness that a human being will find in life" (*Carnival* 333–4).

Pino's proposed plot twist that Byron ought to invent his own grand but "deadly defeat" can be read as a thinly veiled reference not only to Dinesen's loss of the farm but also, perhaps, to her syphilis, which was her *other* great "deadly defeat, brought on by no fault of [her] own," contracted as it was from an unfaithful spouse (*Carnival* 338). To find this morbid humor in her final tale, suggesting that a disease can operate as "one great and deadly defeat," is consistent with the stoicism Dinesen exhibited towards her disease all of her life. In more narrative terms, the loss she practiced every day was losing herself within the voice of the storyteller, and like Byron before her, this gift appears to have turned her life's tragedies into a blessing. Yet the narrative she planted with those she entrusted with her story insisted that the pact she made with the devil to become an author was incontrovertibly a curse.

In among the pages of one of the manuscript drafts of "The Second Meeting," Clara Svendsen discovered "helt for sig selv på et stort blankt stykke, disse centrale ord skrevet med Karen Blixens hånd" [all by itself on a blank sheet, in Karen Blixen's own hand] a sentence that read: "forfeited my claim to a real human life" (191). Inserting the implied or silenced subject, this mysterious sentence fragment, later repeated by her character Pino, could also read: "*syphilis* forfeited my claims to a real human life." In Christian Braad Thomsen's documentary film "Isak Dinesen—Storyteller," friend and fellow writer Aage Henrikson relates how, prior to her confession to Parmenia Migel near the end

of her life, Karen Blixen treated the story of her syphilis as forbidden knowledge. For instance, in 1915, when Dinesen came home to Denmark for her first round of treatments, she arrived from Kenya through Paris and guarded the nature of her illness with great care until she could be hospitalized in Copenhagen in a ward that would not reveal the nature of her condition (Thurman 138–9). Once she had returned to Denmark for good in 1931 and begun the intensely private yet overtly public life of an author, she reportedly made each of her male converts swear an oath of secrecy before confessing to him the story of her disease in a highly ritualized fashion that began to take on the stark theological outlines of a parable or a prophecy. Fact or fiction, it seems apparent that the story of her disease began to serve Dinesen as a kind of origin myth for her talent.

Aage Henrikson felt that for years "this situation forced her to lead a double life," by producing "a painful splitting of her personality" (qtd. in Thomsen). At the end of her life, perhaps because of this schism, Dinesen dramatized her taboo secret by reproducing a mythic plot line, a mytho-biography if you will, which both Henrikson and Bjørnvig recount in similar detail. It seems that just as Pino entered into a pact with Byron, Dinesen to her thinking had entered into a pact with Byron's friend and cohort, the devil himself, in order to purchase her chance to write. According to the legend she crafted and repeated, in exchange for living with syphilis, an evil produced in her case by second hand pleasure, or a "second meeting;" Dinesen, like Pino and Byron before him, was granted the power to "be able to turn the things which [happened] to [her] into stories" (*Carnival* 333–4).

Besides reproducing an origin myth for her own "initiated" talent, Dinesen's "The Second Meeting" explores how her experiences of authorship are inflected by the career of Byron, the romantic poet, who by most measures also "forfeited [his] claim to a real human life" (*Carnival* 333). Henrikson remembers Dinesen enhancing what I am calling her "mytho-biography," with the fantastic recollection that one day "she [had] felt the presence of someone in her sick room who didn't feel her situation was an embarrassment. It was fun. It was this person she later called 'her best friend, and the Devil'" (qtd. in Thomsen). Readers of "The Second Meeting" will recall that Dinesen's Byron predicts that he will meet the devil in hell when he teases Pino about the moral repercussions of the story the puppeteer has sponsored or inadvertently set in motion: "If I had died at Malta in the comparative innocence of

my youth" Byron speculates, " I should have gone to Paradise, while now, owing to my behavior in these fourteen years, I shall go to the other place (*Carnival* 333).

Dinesen's use of Byron's biography forces a second look, a second meeting if you will, with what Arendt describes as the problem of living life "as though it were a work of art" (Arendt xxiv–xxv). In her essay on Dinesen, which she later included in the volume *Men in Dark Times,* Arendt isolates this issue as the central lesson of Dinesen's own gothic biography. Inspired by perhaps the most recurrent plot in Dinesen's fiction, "that no man in the world" can make a story come true (*Anecdotes of Destiny* 192), Arendt argues that

> you cannot make life poetic, live it as though it were a work of art (as Goethe had done) or use it for the realization of an "idea." Life may contain the "essence" (what else could?); recollection, the repetition in imagination, may decipher the essence and deliver to you the "elixir"; and eventually you may even be privileged to "make" something out of it, "to compound the story." But life itself is neither essence nor elixir, and if you treat it as such it will only play its tricks on you. (xxv)

What "compounded" Karen Blixen's story was syphilis, but what she "made out of it" was a life committed to the imagination. In many ways, Dinesen's syphilis represents more than a clinical phenomenon for were the topic of disease to be surgically removed from her biography, Dinesen's life would cease to be legible in the way in which she ultimately intended it to be read. In contrast to Parmenia Migel, who was first trusted with the task of making the secret of Dinesen's syphilis public and did so with the kind of quiet, euphemistic touch that breeds a sense of scandal, another critical approach inflected by Dinesen's own brand of irony advocates instead that her disease be allowed to follow its own pathology as a symbol understood in the context of her own mytho-biography.

While living together in British Kenya, Dinesen and her brother Thomas came to the consensus that syphilis was a "likely," "logical," even "probable" explanation for their father's suicide based on their mother's censored admission to Thomas, then only twelve years old, that "a man like Father, a soldier and an outdoors man, could not live with the thought that he would have to continue to exist, throughout many years, as a wreck, a helpless relic of what he once was" (Thomas Dinesen qtd. in Thurman 29). For our purposes, however, it is more interesting to examine what Dinesen was "privileged to make" out of

this inter-generational legacy, this symbolic inheritance from her father's mythologized life. For example, why did she choose to share the disease with her character, Lady Flora Gordon, the female protagonist of "The Cardinal's Third Tale," whose name marks her as a fictional descendent of Lord Byron's (related by maternal lineage to a proud line of Gordons, the sons and daughters of Scottish kings) (Langbaum 214)?

Curiously enough, unlike Dinesen, Lady Flora's literary loyalties do not seem to include Byron. A giantess, not quite on the scale of the Jonathan Swift's Brobdinagnags, Lady Flora Gordon is a self-declared disciple of Swift. As such, her scale for determining her own moral superiority next to the foibles and appetites of others is measured solely from the satirist's lonely perspective of assumed infallibility, which proves to be the exact inverse of the perspective which informs how a storyteller, like Dinesen, or a romantic poet, like Byron, approaches the problem of human desire as a blessing and a curse.

Exploring the depth of Dinesen's allusion to Byron's biography in "The Cardinal's Third Tale," Langbaum observes, "[Byron's] father was a rake who mistreated [his mother]; just as Lady Flora's rakish father [betrayed] and [mistreated] her mother" (Langbaum 214). Yet "The Cardinal's Third Tale" does not go on to exact some kind of poetic revenge for wronged mothers, instead it attempts to subvert a tradition of feminine prudery with a Byronic vision of the humanizing powers of the masculine erotic. Comparing Byron and Lady Flora's reactions to the same parental drama, Langbaum asserts that what

> Isak Dinesen seems to be saying in comparing Lady Flora to Swift and Byron is that frigidity and promiscuity are two sides of the Puritan coin. Lady Flora solves her problem by moving from frigidity to at least symbolic promiscuity.... In Missolonghi, the Greek town where Byron died, she discovers the syphilitic sore on her lip that is the sign of her salvation. (Langbaum 214–5)

In the spirit of a riddle, Lady Flora is cured not only by a disease but by a sly cosmic joke. She is cured by kissing the foot of a super-sized statue of St. Peter, a "giant" just like herself, who denied three times yet still was saved. In narrative terms, this minimal human contact, the fated kiss which infects her, makes Flora part of a story larger than herself.

Based on Dinesen's diagnosis of Lady Flora, who is paradoxically cured by her affliction, it appears that the disease Dinesen may have shared with her father is capable of asexually reproducing contradictions of the most animating and productive kind; that is, if allowed its own symbolic play.

Like other performative contradictions, no doubt, Dinesen's syphilis must have produced polarizing patterns of intimacy and alienation. It is possible that she may have experienced an exaggerated intimacy with "self," a kind of literal self-absorption, because it is a burden always to *be* one's body without the luxury of Descartes's mind/body dualism the healthy individual can invoke. It is also equally possible that she might have experienced an alienation from her core "self" because the body humbled by disease is already somewhat "other." In Dinesen's case this "othering" of the body seemed to encourage the ego to play the sibylline role of the self-forgetful storyteller, busy telling tales of spiritual courtesans capable of, in Langbaum's words, "symbolic promiscuity" (215).

In cultural terms, Dinesen seemed to read her own disease in two diverging ways. On the one hand, Dinesen's disease isolated her from a community of sinners, lovers, and artists, in a kind of self-quarantine, for she seemed to censor her own physical contact. In *The Pact,* Bjørnvig describes a particularly peculiar exchange he had with Isak Dinesen the day after she had embraced his young son and kissed him. He recalls that she had told him of the disease and explained:

> *hvordan den havde skilt hende fra livet, ikke blot det erotiske, men også havde lagt tabu på enhver legemlig berøring: "Men nu smitter den ikke mere, nu er den uskadelig—for andre end mig."* (Bjørnvig 15)

> how it had cut her off from life, not only from the erotic part of life, but also how it had placed a taboo on any bodily contact. "But it is no longer contagious; it is now harmless—to everyone except myself." (Bjørnvig 27)

On the other hand, Dinesen's syphilis marked her as a lover. To be sure, her syphilis represented a bitter memento from her marriage, but one that was, nonetheless, proof of an erotic self. Ultimately, her disease, like Lady Flora's, offered a kind of connection to the libertine life of Lord Byron. In Dinesen's case, this "blessed curse" connected her with a model of authorship invested in the notion of the author as seducer, which she would explore in one of her last published tales, "Ehrengaard" (1958), which boasts its very own Don Juan. In Dinesen's fiction, the artist as seducer, like the spiritual courtesan before him, takes it upon himself to manage the large libidinous economy of the reading public through the idealism of a suitably daemonic literature, one that, like the poetry of Shelley and Byron, is not tied to normative constructions of bourgeois morality, or to the chaste rationality of the Enlightenment.

For both Byron as the consummate English Rake and Dinesen as the eccentric Danish spinster or "spiritual courtesan" the teleology of sexual choices and their consequences seemed to produce an ironic distance from the self that was at once alienating and liberating—but always artistically useful. Apparently, however, one of the secondary symptoms of the pairing of disease and authorship, or in the case of Byron, addiction and authorship, is that readers become inclined to ask the fiction to serve the "flesh and blood" biography, rather than the reverse, as if all fictions are inflected by the author as surrogate character, villain or victim, in a plot made neatly linear and sensationally compelling by the commingling of sex and death, life and disease.

Dinesen understood all too well the risk her biography posed to the longevity of her work. Therefore in "Second Meeting" she chooses Byron as her possible double, an author whose antics in life, spiced with misfortune and misadventure, threatened to collapse the divide between author and text in the mind of his public. In the last tale she started but never finished, Isak Dinesen offers a cryptic warning to her modern readers: "Speak not so disparagingly ... of that sacred thing: a second meeting" (*Carnival* 328). In metafictional terms, "a second meeting" represents a "sacred thing" because a second meeting amplifies the deceptively simple, providential power of plots: *la façon de la raconter* integral to the art of "the story." A storyteller knows by trade that even for characters as plain as Ali Baba the woodcutter or as innocent as the Blessed Virgin, "between the distant first meeting ... and the present meeting lies the story" (*Carnival* 337). In Dinesen's "The Second Meeting," a first meeting is understood as a mere coincidence, a trivial event reduced to the level of accident, while it takes the all-powerful second meeting to produce a narrative. Representative of Dinesen's loyalty to oral narratives that have managed to survive in print, the two examples the narrator of "The Second Meeting" invokes with a kind of nod and a wink are, indeed, Ali Baba's two encounters with the forty thieves, and the Virgin Mary's reunion with the Holy Ghost at Pentecost (335–7). With a genuine comic seriousness indebted to Kierkegaard, Pino, acting as Dinesen's narrative double, completes the Virgin's story in a way scripture never dared: he stages Mary's second meeting with the Holy Spirit as if it were a reunion with a long lost first love—the divine, but illegitimate (dare one say rakish?) father of her first born son. Jaws slack with wonder, Pino's puppet show audiences are able to witness this crucial second meeting between the Virgin and the Holy

Ghost that gave the world Pentecost, or the gift of tongues. With just a hint of lust in her voice, Pino's Blessed Mary puppet whispers to the Holy Ghost, who appears in the form of a dove: "Is it you sir? After these thirty-four years, is it you?" (*Carnival* 337). Just as poignantly and just as reverently could the chaste Danish spinster be whispering to the Bad Boy of English Poetry, alongside his smitten readers and eager biographers: "Is it you, Milord? After so many years, is it you?"

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