

# Without Fear: Isak Dinesen's *Winter Tales* and Occupied Denmark

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By the time of the German Occupation of Denmark in April, 1940, Isak Dinesen's international reputation was finally beginning to impress her own countrymen who have traditionally waited upon the acclaim of the outside world to allay their suspicion of local talent. For a number of reasons their suspicion of her ran even deeper than usual. For one thing, she was writing in English, and this struck them as self-serving and snobbish, particularly from a woman who had married a title (they knew her as the Baroness von Blixen-Finecke) and, it seemed, assumed airs. For another thing, her first volume of tales, *Seven Gothic Tales* (*Syv fantastiske Fortaellinger*) was too exotic—even too erotic—for their taste, and the settings and situations seemed too remote for their liking. Even the very moving memoir, *Out of Africa* (*Den afrikanske Farm*), seemed light years away from the mundane social concerns which occupied the minds and energies of her compatriots during that depressed prewar decade. Critics and readers alike felt that she was escaping from, rather than wrestling with, the important issues of the day.

Her fame abroad, then, caused the Danes to reassess their first impressions, and gradually, as the Danish critic Tom Kristensen put it, they "began to understand her human loving nature behind the arabesques."<sup>1</sup> The war clouds were already gathering over Europe by this time, and suddenly, almost without warning—except to those who dared to look—one country after another was plunged into the darkness of the long German winter of occupation. Overnight the Danes found themselves in the clutches of their old enemy, the Germans, who had so bitterly defeated them in the Schleswig-Holstein War of 1864. Isak Dinesen was even more familiar with the German threat than many, for she bore memories of the struggle in Africa in which she and her husband had been involved during the First World War. And just days before the occupation of Denmark in 1940 she had returned from Berlin to write her "Letters from a Country at War" ("Breve fra et Land i Krig"), first-hand impressions of the German madness.

According to these letters, which could not be published until after the war, the thing that appalled her about Nazi society was that it glorified will power, that its achievement was not a growth but a mechanical *tour de force* that suppressed the human and natural desire out of which, for her, all good things come. The glorification of will power is the antithesis of her own philosophy of destiny which to her means the fulfilling of the will of God with courage and with gladness. Thus, it was the spiritual as much as the physical bondage that made the occupation particularly oppressive to her. At the same time, it was a situation peculiarly suited to challenge her talents as a writer, and it came at a moment when she wanted to let the Danes know that she was once and forever one of them.

As a loyal citizen, Isak Dinesen did all anyone in an occupied country could do to prove that loyalty; she refused to hoard, she supported the resistance, and she allowed her home (Rungstedlund) to be used as a waystation on the "underground railroad" by which Jews made their way to Elsinore and then across the sound to Sweden and freedom. And she did something more.

Denied a sword, she took up the only weapon she had—her pen—and wrote *Winter's Tales*. Huddled behind blackout curtains in that draughty old house on the sound, cut off from the world, aware that she was watched (German soldiers camped in her backyard), she began writing tales again, the first in nearly a decade. These new tales were remarkably different from the Gothic tales of the earlier collection, less bizarre, less complex, less fanciful.

*Winter's Tales* was written in English but translated immediately into Danish and published by Gyldendal under the title, *Vinter Eventyr*. The year was 1942, the second year of the occupation. The original English version was spirited to Stockholm from where it found its way to London and New York, was published, and gained an enthusiastic following of which its author knew nothing until Denmark was liberated in 1945. Meanwhile, the Danes were discovering in Karen Blixen a native voice which did, after all, have something to say to them.

The style of the stories in *Winter's Tales* is simpler, more direct. Most of the tales are set in Denmark, and their subject matter is closer to the land, their plots earthier. Although the same nimble imagination pervades them, the same aristocratic outlook, the same philosophy, these ingredients are present in brighter, yet starker colors. There is none of the frivolity, the capriciousness, the archness of the Gothic tales; such embroidery would have seemed tasteless in the dark world of war. These tales resound with courage and pride, and while they are universal in meaning, they speak most poignantly to people imprisoned in a dark nordic night of occupation.

These tales are, then, in the most profound sense, "winter's tales." They are tales to be read on a long winter's night when all about is blackness and cold, when spring is unthinkable far away, when bleakness and deprivation abound, and hostility is loose in the land—tales of promise, of consolation, but never of false hope or pinched-faced stoicism. These are not tales about the occupation; they are tales in which persons, faced with situations beyond their control, find reason not only to face them bravely, but even to welcome the distress they bring for the measure of wisdom it imparts—for the grand story it makes and for the more glorious story of which it is a part.

These tales are not "resistance" literature. They would be better described as "reconciliation" literature—and as such they are Isak Dinesen's own testing of the philosophy of submission to the will of God which her own life had taught her and which her earlier works had argued. What more exacting test case of destiny can one imagine than to have one's country overrun by Nazi troops and occupied for what, at the outset, could easily have looked like forever? How, then, is one to argue God's will and not sound like a coward, a collaborator, or simply a fool? As an artist, Isak Dinesen did not, could not argue. Her art must be her argument, and the situation called for a test of her art as well as of her self. Thus, these are stories of persons who explore their destinies, feel them out, search them for wisdom, and only when that wisdom comes, do they know how to act and whether to act. They are stories of the assessment of values, of the coming to terms with events beyond one's control, stories, ultimately, of being blessed even by misfortune—of forcing the acorn to yield the oak.

The unifying theme of *Winter's Tales* is the interdependence of opposites. Whatever the opposites may be—life and death, man and woman, rich and poor—they are, in Isak Dinesen's words, "locked caskets, of which each contains the key to the other."<sup>2</sup> Charlie Despard, a writer who appears in both the

opening and closing tales, and who has been thought to speak for Isak Dinesen, puts it this way: "We are, each of us, awaiting the consent, or the cooperation of the other to be brought into existence at all."<sup>3</sup> Isak Dinesen contrasts many opposites within the pages of these tales: God and man, savior and saved, husband and wife, parents and children, mistress and servant, oppressed and oppressor. They leave an overwhelming impression that, by analogy, occupied and occupier cannot exist without each other and that, however painful the experience of occupation, it is less a reason for bitterness and despair than for a fuller appreciation of the grand mystery of destiny.

She never apologizes for this condition, nor does she argue for docile consent. Her interest lies in the necessity of such relationships and in the vitality that is released from the friction between opposites. Opposites define one another. Alone they have no meaning, no existence. In "The Dreamers," one of the *Seven Gothic Tales*, Mira Jama, a legendary storyteller, says, "You must take in whatever you can, and leave the rest outside. It is not a bad thing in a tale that you understand only half of it."<sup>4</sup>

"The Heroine" is the story of a group of refugees detained at the French-German border during the Franco-Prussian War. These refugees are offered their freedom in exchange for their approval of a German officer's request that one of them, a beautiful French actress named Heloise, appear before him as Venus—unclothed. Their choice is between collaboration with shame or resistance with pride. They refuse to agree to the officer's demands. As it turns out, they are released anyway; thus, the story implies, among other things, that the moral choice in such a situation need not always result in suffering. Of course, the larger implication—and the real point of the story—is that freedom gained at the price of betrayal is no freedom at all but rather enslavement in the bonds of guilt and remorse. The only truly liberating choice is a moral choice. Ultimatums require moral choices. Collaboration diminishes all concerned.

The tale, "The Pearls," takes place at the outbreak of the Schleswig-Holstein War of 1864 and is concerned with the question of courage in the face of impossible odds. It is the story of a newly married couple, Alexander, "a human being entirely devoid, and incapable, of fear" (p. 109), and Jensine, a rather craven young woman who tries unsuccessfully to teach her husband the meaning of fear. To her, the struggle with Germany seems utterly hopeless, but Alexander is "as convinced of Denmark's invincibility as of his own immortality" (p. 119). According to the story, it is a phrase in the Copenhagen newspaper, *Bertingske Tidende*, that awakens Jensine to an understanding of her husband's noble pride: "The moment is grave to the nation. But we have trust in our just cause, and we are without fear" (p. 119). Isak Dinesen then adds: "It was, perhaps, the words 'without fear' which now made her collect her courage" (p. 119). The implication is that fear under such conditions is a useless commodity, that it dissolves into cowardice and compromise and loss of integrity. Alexander's fearlessness in a lost cause turns the conflict of opposites into something more meaningful and enduring than the humiliation of either neutrality or annexation.

In "The Invincible Slave-Owners," a tale set in Germany, the young Danish nobleman, Axel Leth, observes two sisters who alternate the roles of mistress and servant and learns from the experience "that the slave-owner's dependency upon the slave is strong as death and cruel as the grave. The slave holds his master's life in his hand, as he holds his umbrella" (p. 147). In contemplating the sisters, Axel thinks to himself, "No slave could more

desperately sigh and pine for his enfranchisement than they did sigh and pine for their slave, nor could freedom, to the slaves, ever be more essentially a condition of existence, the very breath of life than their slaves were to them" (p. 151). Again, in this story, the interdependence of opposites, the necessity of one to define the other, is reinforced. There can be no occupier without an occupied, and the occupied have their own peculiar hold over their occupiers. Which is, after all, truly freer than the other?

The themes of betrayal and collaboration are ever uppermost in the minds of occupied people, and these are the themes that Isak Dinesen develops fully in "Peter and Rosa," undoubtedly one of her most inspired stories. Peter plans to follow his destiny and run away to sea, but Rosa betrays him to her father, who happens also to be the boy's uncle and guardian. "She had sold a life, she thought, and had done what Judas Iscariot did once do" (p. 275). To Isak Dinesen, betrayal is moral suicide and indicates a death wish. Rosa dreams of death, and when she accompanies Peter to the frozen sound, she is inescapably participating fully both in his destiny and her own. Together they live out their lives in a few hours. He finds the freedom he craves in their few moments adrift on an ice floe; and his drowning is the fulfillment, not of a death wish but of a wish that death, when it comes, will come at sea. She fulfills her role as the inspirer/betrayer whose testing binds her irrevocably to him. They require each other, they define each other, and they suffer a common fate when the ice floe on which they are symbolically sailing breaks apart beneath them and sends them to the bottom of the sound. "They might have saved themselves, then," writes Isak Dinesen, "if they had separated and struggled on to the two sides of the crack, but the idea did not occur to either of them" (p. 285). Opposites fulfill their destinies through the agency of one another. Separately they have no roles to play. Together their roles become ultimately indistinguishable. "Just as dream and reality seemed, on the floe, to have become one, so did the distinction between life and death seem to have been done away with" (p. 283).

Rosa's father had taught her "that a prison is a good, a safe place for human beings to be in; he himself still often felt that he might sleep better in a prison than in any other place" (p. 276). In betraying Peter, Rosa, who had once valued freedom, realized that she had sided "with the prison, with the grave, and had closed the doors of them on her" (p. 276). And, adds Dinesen, "But what she had not guessed, then, was that if Peter was a prisoner, she herself would no more be free" (p. 276). The interdependence of opposites is nowhere so forcefully displayed than in the image of Peter and Rosa, embracing each other across the widening crack in the ice floe.

In editions that follow Isak Dinesen's preferred arrangement, "Sorrow-acre" comes just after "Peter and Rosa" and thus, according to Robert Langbaum, "fills in the vision of man's tragic position in the social order, where men are set over each other and are under the cruel necessity of acting as destinies of each other."<sup>5</sup> "Sorrow-acre," probably Isak Dinesen's best-known tale, is the story of an old woman named Anne-Marie who dies after having mowed an entire acre of rye between sunup and sundown of a single day. She agrees to perform this incredible task in order to free her son from imprisonment on charges of which he is most likely guilty. The old lord who sets her this task insists that his role as a ridiculous oppressor has less honor to it than Anne-Marie's role as proud victim. To interfere would be to deny her the dignity of her tragic lot. Popular as it is, the story has puzzled many readers in the way that it justifies what seems to be, on the surface at least, a morally indefensible position.

Although this moral reservation can be refuted outside the context of the occupation, it is precisely within such a context that this tale in particular—as well as all the others in the collection in general—makes its point. And the point is simply this, that you beat your oppressors at their own game. Humanitarian impulses such as those that motivated the evacuation of the Jews, take on a special edge and call forth unexpected heroism if only because to obey such impulses is to get the better of those who deny them.

It is difficult to conceive of a literary work more appropriate for a nation that found itself in Denmark's unique situation during the Second World War. Conquered, yet courted by its victors, it was too vulnerable to fight and too proud to collaborate. Read in the light of this dilemma, Isak Dinesen's *Winter's Tales* takes on a dimension that, it seems fair to say, answers those critics who have said that this volume is not quite up to her other works.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Rev. of *Vinter-Eventyr* (Copenhagen, October 10, 1942), *Politiken*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>"A Consolatory Tale," *Winter's Tales* (Vintage, Random House, 1961), pp. 302, 308, 311.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>4</sup>"The Dreamers," *Seven Gothic Tales* (Vintage, Random House, 1972), p. 279.

<sup>5</sup>*Isak Dinesen's Art: The Gayety of Vision* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 192.