



## The Colonial Pygmalion: Unsettling Dinesen in *Out of Africa*

Shaun Irlam

Department of Comparative Literature, 638 Clemens Hall, State University of New York, Buffalo. Buffalo, NY 14260, USA  
e-mail: [irlam@buffalo.edu](mailto:irlam@buffalo.edu)

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores the atavistic and feudal historical fantasies that structure Isak Dinesen's 1937 memoir, *Out of Africa*. It analyses the imagery and symbolic logic of the memoir in conjunction with Dinesen's letters from Africa in order to examine how Dinesen derives an idiom to speak of Africa that synthesizes the social structures of European feudalism, the discourse of the noble savage and the aesthetics of the sublime. The paper seeks to unpack the conundrum that fashions a modern, emancipated female subjectivity from the anachronistic paradigm of feudalism and within the framework of imperial domination and colonial occupation. The paper explores how Dinesen's feudal idiom extends the genre of European pastoral to the colonial milieu and places it in the service of a larger search for a discourse of legitimacy. I argue that this is an abiding preoccupation of colonial literature. I analyze in detail the specular logic through which the narrator confronts Africa as a space that alternately panders to or challenges the psycho-political narcissism of the settler. Dinesen's memoir reveals the myriad operations of the narcissistic structure through which the narrator strives to fill the copula of the question, "What is Africa to you or you to Africa?"

**KEYWORDS:** Colonial authority; British East Africa; Danish literatura; legitimacy; Medievalism; Modernism; Primitivism; Feminism; race; inter-bellum.

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**RESUMEN:** *El Pígalión colonial: Dinesen trastocado en Out of Africa.* - Este trabajo explora las fantasías históricas de carácter atávico y feudal que vertebran las memorias de Isak Dinesen en *Out of Africa* (1937). Explora el imaginario y la lógica del simbolismo en las memorias junto con las cartas escritas por Dinesen desde África para analizar cómo Dinesen construyó todo un lenguaje para hablar de África que sintetiza las estructuras sociales del feudalismo europeo, el discurso del buen salvaje y la estética de lo sublime. El trabajo intenta explicar la manera rebuscada por medio de la cual se construye la subjetividad de la mujer moderna y emancipada desde el paradigma anacrónico del feudalismo y dentro del marco de la dominación imperial y la ocupación colonial. El trabajo explora cómo el lenguaje feudal en Dinesen extiende el género de lo pastoral europeo hacia el ámbito colonial para ponerlo en función de la búsqueda de un discurso de legitimidad. Sostengo que esta es una preocupación constante de la literatura colonial. Analizo en detalle la lógica reflexiva mediante la cual la narradora se enfrenta a África como un espacio que a una vez mima y rechaza el narcisismo psicopolítico del colono. Las memorias de Dinesen ponen en evidencia un sinnúmero de maquinaciones de carácter narcisista mediante las cuales la narradora intenta manejar el tándem enredado de la pregunta "¿Qué significa África para ti y tu qué eres para África?"

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Autoridad colonial; Africa Oriental Británica; literatura danesa; legitimidad; medievalismo; modernismo; primitivismo; feminismo; raza; entreguerras.

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“I speak of Africa and golden joys.”  
(Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part 2*)

“I have become what I was meant to be here”  
(Dinesen, *Letters*, 124)

“And what would Africa want with me?...  
A slightly daft, middle-aged woman with history on the  
brain”  
— Paule Marshall, *The Timeless Place, The  
Chosen People*

“*Out of Africa* is one of the most dangerous books ever  
written about Africa”  
— Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Moving the Center*

When we contemplate that mercurial phenomenon called modernity, attention is often drawn to the narrower band of cultural production roughly bracketed by two world wars: Modernism. Those inter-bellum years to which Isak Dinesen’s landmark memoir belongs are heralded as the exemplary epoch of Modernist expression. Modernism is commonly associated with the celebration and apotheosis of modernity by movements such as Futurism, avant-gardism, and Ezra Pound’s slogan, ‘Make It New’, and with the triumph of new technologies such as the gramophone, telephone, locomotive, automobile, airplane and steamship. It is an era that reaped the rich harvests of the Industrial Revolution and European imperialism, and magnified the gap between modern and ‘traditional’ societies. As Dinesen herself writes, “When the first steam engine was constructed, the roads of the races of the world parted, and we have never found one another since” (Dinesen, 1938: 208).<sup>1</sup> Yet these seismic forces that define the modern era and lionize novelty also inaugurated a renewed fascination with the ‘primitive’ past it was rapidly leaving behind.

The Modernist period arguably inaugurated anthropology as the discipline responding most directly to this fascination with the way other, non-European societies were organized. One index of this is the enormous cultural impact of Sir James Frazier’s *The Golden Bough*, which appeared between 1890 and 1922. Similarly, in the fine arts, painters such as Picasso, Gauguin and Matisse, embraced the art of Africa and the South Pacific in a restless search for new aesthetic idioms. At the same time, works such as Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1919) generated new interest in the ancient myths and legends of agrarian and pagan Europe while Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening* outraged audiences with their celebration of atavistic passions. Thus, as the triumphs of industrial modernity increasingly drowned out voices of the past, there were also those who turned back, hankering after strange and savage gods. This impulse elicited a romanticization and aestheticization of the primitive, precipitating social, cultural and aesthetic movements of exoticism and neo-Primitivism that paradoxically also shaped Modernism in profound ways (Torgovnick, 1990).

Isak Dinesen is among those disaffected, neo-primitive Modernists, embracing the traditional folkways of

Africa because she had found something rotten in the state of Denmark and discovered in Africa a vision of the feudal and aristocratic world that Europe had discarded. There is a delicious irony in the fact that her landmark memoir, celebrating the courtly *geste* of feudal nobility arises from a breach of *ancien regime* etiquette. Having noted that “a book of etiquette of the seventeenth century ... forbids you to tell your dreams to other people,” Dinesen describes how her receding life in Africa, becoming ever more like “my dreams at night ... might even be bad manners to talk about” (Dinesen, 1960: 437, 440-41). Yet talk of them she will!

Just over a century ago, Dinesen arrived in east Africa and spent 17 years there. She left after declaring bankruptcy in 1931, following the failure of her farm. *Out of Africa* was published in 1937, a year after Djuna Barnes’s fiercely primitivist *Nightwood*, and has since become a classic of colonial literature in Africa. This work has had a seminal role in securing enduring myths and fantasies about Africa, immortalized in the Redford/Streep film of the same name. In popular culture, as recently as the *Madagascar* series of animated films, the lush musical, *The Lion King* or even Coldplay’s music video, “Paradise,” escapist fantasies about the exotic African wilderness—a lingering legacy of *Out of Africa*—abound. Africa’s peoples are routinely replaced by anthropomorphic animals. Dinesen’s memoir, and the idealized myths of Africa it spawned, thus continue to exert a fascination on readers that remains hard to escape.

Africa seems unable to shake loose these vapid, historyless fables of the continent as one, vast safari park. As Simon Lewis comments, Dinesen’s memoir perennially renews and nurtures fantasies of an “exotic colonial chic to a Western audience still hungry for the safari image of Africa” (Lewis, 2000: 63). The safari image of Africa abounds in numerous forms and, as Ngũgĩ notes, perpetuates a “Kenya ... devoid of human beings ... a vast animal landscape ruled over by elephants, lions and leopards” (Ngũgĩ, 1993: 133). Even as Africa’s wildlife is poached into oblivion and the African continent becomes irreversibly damaged by the incursions of predatory capitalism, most recently from China, the romance of Africa’s pristine and abundantly fertile wilderness, as celebrated in Dinesen’s timeless idyll, continues to seduce modern readers.

*Out of Africa* installs itself in an enduring tradition of pastoral literature, adapting the pastoral genre into the *farm novel*, which in turn became a prominent vehicle for colonial and settler self-justification. There are compelling cultural reasons for this: in the same ways that pastoral formerly mystified the political economy of agriculture, rural labor and property ownership in early modern European literature, so it is marshaled to perform similar ideological work in a nascent colonial world founded on occupation and expropriation. Lewis’s essay situates Dinesen’s text in the pastoral tradition analyzed by Raymond Williams in *The City and the Country*, drawing attention to a cognate erasure of agricultural labor by the sub-genre of the colonial farm novel. Robert Langbaum similarly remarks, “It is because Africa figures as a paradise lost ...

that *Out of Africa* is an authentic pastoral, perhaps the best prose pastoral of our time” (Langbaum, 1964: 119).

In an analysis of the Afrikaans farm novel in South Africa, J.M. Coetzee locates the peak of the genre in the inter-bellum period between 1920 and 1940, precisely the decades during which Dinesen is first farming and later recounting her experiences in Kenya (Coetzee, 1988: 63). The farm novel as a genre, typically documents the struggles of settler communities with their newly adopted land in order to set forth all the trials and tribulations of appropriation and cultivation—the struggles with the elements, with the alien flora and fauna, and above all, with the abiding challenge and often menace of those whose land they have seized and whom they are displacing.

Virgil’s *Georgics* and Hesiod’s *Works and Days* continue to inform the farm novel from a distance; however, later, European pastoral tends to occlude agricultural labor to sustain nostalgic fantasies of the landed gentry. Dinesen’s memoir falls well within this modern pastoral tradition and indeed explicitly appeals to the courtly, aristocratic and feudal codes of Renaissance Europe, seeking to graft those pre-modern and pre-industrial social structures onto pre-colonial ‘Old Africa.’ It is this nostalgic fantasy of a pre-industrial, aristocratic order in colonial Kenya—mediated by the pastoral form—that constitutes the unsettling heart of *Out of Africa*.

Scholars of Modernism are by now familiar with the powerful strains of primitivism that were drawn into the synthesis of a modernist aesthetic. Moreover, the turn within colonial modernity to atavistic and pre-modern forms of absolutist governance, even as modern democracies were taking shape in the West, is a familiar story. Dinesen’s turn to the genre of pastoral is legibly as much a critique and repudiation of European industrial modernity and the commodification of social relations under industrial capitalism as it is a celebration of Africa’s Edenic, pre-capitalist ethos. British East Africa in particular became a haven for aristocratic refugees of Britain’s Industrial Revolution who had only been “educated to the ideals and expectations of a gentlemanly status.” Dane Kennedy writes:

The ... meritocratic standards characteristic of a modern industrial state left fewer opportunities for those whose sole recommendations were the pride of a family pedigree ... The attraction of Kenya must be understood in the context of the revulsion ... against the allied forces of industrialism, urbanism, democracy, and egalitarianism that were transforming the whole of British life... Here was a rural, hierarchical society reminiscent of a past Britain more congenial to aristocratic sensibilities, sustained, so it must have seemed, by a semi-feudal relationship between European and African (Kennedy, 1987: 46).

Dinesen persistently seeks to present labor relations between herself and her African staff as founded on friendship, hospitality, loyalty, admiration, gratitude or obligation rather than exploitation. The underlying argument of the memoir appears to be therefore that there is a Rous-

seauvian ‘natural’ order of social relations, “the noble old code of the natural community” (Langbaum, 1964: 146)—in which a displaced European nobility can make common cause with the ‘noble savage’—that pre-dates economic relations and that still abides in Africa even as it is being eroded in Europe. Dinesen herself observed of her closest male companions, Finch-Hatton and Berkeley Cole, that “they did not belong to their century. ... they were examples of atavism and theirs was an earlier England” (Dinesen, 1938: 206). She imagines Finch-Hatton as an Elizabethan, keeping company with Sir Francis Drake (Dinesen, 1938: 208). She and her social circle regard themselves as refugees from industrial modernity and the crass, merchant classes controlling Europe. Indeed, on their last evening together, Dinesen and Finch-Hatton contemplate with dread “the sort of civilization we were going to get in Africa” (Dinesen, 1938: 331).

In J.M. Coetzee’s essay on the farm novel and the Afrikaans *plaasroman* in South Africa, he outlines a reading of Olive Schreiner’s *Story of an African Farm* (1880) with which *Out of Africa* has few affinities. In doing so, however, he sketches a novel that Schreiner never wrote, but which we can in fact recognize in Dinesen’s memoir:

There is an alternative story of the farm that we can conceive, a story Schreiner does not tell, a story to be identified with Old World farming rather than with farming in the colonies. In such a story, the farm is not simply a house or settlement in a fenced space, but a complex: at one and the same time a dwelling place, an economy, and all the creatures that participate in that economy, in particular the members of the family (in however extended a form), who both own the farm in law and are owned by the farm...

In this story, the farmer has both rights and obligations. However absolute his ownership, he has duties to the land, to his heirs ... and even to the ecology of the farm (Coetzee, 1988: 65).

Whereas Schreiner’s novel might be read as the *failure* of pastoral to take root in Africa, the climate of the East African highlands seems to have suited it much better. Dinesen of course left no legacy or heirs in the ordinary sense (though the Karen Blixen Museum and the eponymous neighborhood of Karen, outside Nairobi today are arguably a more enduring legacy than any left by other settlers in British East Africa). However, the strong ethos of stewardship that Coetzee describes is vividly present in her account of the farm in Kenya. Her farm is a richly complex organism and an economy in which all its creatures—human and animal, immigrant and indigenous—participate to create a “family” in an anomalous and attenuated form. Indeed, it is the sheer anomaly of the Dinesen farm, beginning with the female head of household and the maverick ‘family’ of émigrés, outcasts, misfits and refugees that she gathers around her, that constitutes the arresting *modernity* of this particular family farm, an odd assortment bound together by relations of affiliation rather than blood-lines (Said, 1983: 23). Furthermore, while Dinesen, does not consolidate the myths

of husbandry and inter-generational transmission that Coetzee finds in the classic Old World versions of the form, her memoir undoubtedly synthesizes a powerful new mythology of Africa that is steeped in wistful, Old World *seigneurial* fantasies of nobility and serfdom (JanMohamed, 1983). Perhaps because Dinesen was never obliged to face the problem of succession for her farm, it becomes a finitely circumscribed epoch in her life, and is thus more readily transmuted into an idyllic myth of paradise lost, one whose perfection grew as its memory became more remote.

Dinesen, being of *haute bourgeoisie* Danish descent, was an outsider in British East Africa; she spent less than two decades in the Ngong hills just outside Nairobi. In many respects, as JanMohamed documents, “Dinesen is a major exception” to the conventional colonial profile in Africa (JanMohamed, 1983: 57). Indeed, she derives distinct satisfaction from keeping aloof from the more crass and commercial aspects of colonial society. Although such sentiments seldom surface in her memoir, her letters are replete with disdain for the colonial society of the East African Protectorate. She places herself among the ‘better sort’ of settler predating World War I in her later recollections of the “noble” (Dinesen, 1960: 385) Farah in *Shadows on the Grass*, ostensibly the last of those in Africa to keep “direct contact with God” (Dinesen, 1960: 387). On several occasions in 1914, Dinesen writes, for example, “I find it quite impossible to take any interest at all in the English middle class” (Lasson, 1981: 15). She complains that “The English ladies are particularly dreadful” (Lasson, 1981: 10) and laments, “the incredible boastfulness of the English ... one cannot go along with the colossal self-satisfaction” (Lasson, 1981: 23). Elsewhere she comments, “I hate this kind of little community ... and am glad to be completely outside their little *shauris* [“troubles” “disputes”] and scandal mongering” (Lasson, 1981: 66).

Throughout her letters, Dinesen is thus differentiating herself sharply from the putative vulgarity of the settler society. Her scornful laughter is later heard in *Shadows on the Grass* (Dinesen, 1960: 382), “we laughed at the ambitions of the new arrivals, the Missions, the business people, and the Government itself” (Dinesen, 1960: 386). However, what distinguishes her from almost all European settlements on the continent are her attitudes on race. While the English settlers regard the ‘natives’ as antagonists and treat them with contempt, Dinesen integrates the Africans into her world through an alternative vision of community. Dinesen’s demeanor towards the indigenous Kikuyu and Maasai peoples is certainly paternalistic, deeply condescending and finally, of course, feudal; however, what fundamentally sets her apart from the colonial culture of the period is an absence of the venomous racism that characterized settler societies across Africa. Dinesen’s ‘feudal’ ethic of *noblesse oblige* binds her in a custodial responsibility towards her African ‘vassals’ that is best reflected in the extensive provisions she makes to resettle her “squatters” after she loses her farm and realizes they are to be evicted.

One peculiar feature about *Out of Africa* and the companion volume, *Shadows on the Grass*, published years later, is that, while they synthesize several enduring features of settler literature—chief among them, the search for *legitimacy*—Dinesen was, as we have noted, an outsider and a transient; she did not ultimately ‘settle’ in Africa. One might argue that, paradoxically, her very *alienation* from the colonial milieu actually informs the urgency of her quest for settlement. Her marginal positioning in the colony facilitates her synthesis of an alternative community among the colony’s other outsiders, and strengthens her assertion of a special, privileged relationship with Africa. In other words, lacking the common bonds of blood, culture and nation that unite the British settlers and keep them from embracing Africa as a new home, she must instead spin her own threads of affiliation (Said, 1983). After some four years in Africa, Dinesen writes to her brother in 1918:

I have a feeling that this country belongs to us. It has a kind of charm that not everyone can understand ... The fact that most white people here hate it and have nothing good to say of it brings it in a way still closer to the hearts of those who feel that they can understand its voice *and that it has spoken to them*” (Lasson, 1981: 60, my emphasis).

It is evident that “us” is a very select group that actually excludes “most white people here.” Africa is conjured as a place that does not yield its secrets easily; it confronts the settler with a hermeneutic riddle, a “charm that not everyone can understand,” and it chooses those elect few to whom it speaks. Moreover, on those who “understand its voice,” it confers the privilege of possession, “this country belongs to us.” Legitimacy thus arises from the fiction of a shared confidence, initiated by the land that has been seized.

*Out of Africa* will build on this foundation, constantly asserting Dinesen’s special relationship to the country. In fact, her social positioning in the colonial society is nuanced in complex and contradictory ways by her race, class, gender and national identity. While she keeps an aloof and disdainful distance from middling British society, and while her national identity as a Dane places her under suspicion as a German sympathizer during the Great War, her aristocratic connections and title also grant her privileged access to the inner circle of the British colonial elite and even win her the opportunity to welcome Edward, Prince of Wales at her home for dinner during a royal visit in 1928. Moreover, in a society where the racial privilege of white women already confers power over African men, the departure of her husband, Bror Blixen in 1921 also gave her an uncommon autonomy and independence *vis-à-vis* other white women. As the owner and manager of her own farm, a position universally reserved for men, she wielded an unusual power in colonial society. She thus occupies both the center and the margins of British colonial society, a position that affords her a singular mobility and latitude across all strata of that society.



During centuries of colonial mischief and misadventure, Africa has suffered through countless scenes of grandiose male self-fashioning across the imperial canvas. Some of these have been relatively benign, such as the adventures of Dinesen's husband, Bror Blixen and her lover, Denys Finch-Hatton; many have spawned horrors of the first order from Cecil John Rhodes to Henry Morton Stanley, King Leopold II of Belgium, General von Trotha in South-West Africa, or Voulet and Chanoine in Chad. Conrad's Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness* is the apotheosis of them all. One should therefore scarcely be surprised that European women similarly catapulted into heady positions of colonial power and freed from the constricting gender norms that prevailed back home seized analogous opportunities for self-fashioning, if not on the same megalomaniac scale as their male counterparts. Indeed, in a 1938 lecture to students after she left Africa, Dinesen reminisced, "Here at long last one was in a position not to give a damn for all conventions, here was a new kind of freedom" (quoted in Hannah, 1971: 29).

Susan Horton recognizes in Dinesen's complicated and politically compromised African life, "a very 'masculine' manipulation of people and landscape to the end of her own self-production" (Horton, 1995: 7). Dinesen's community of footloose vagabonds and adventurers playing out *seigneurial* and aristocratic fantasies in Africa ironically becomes the theater for staging her self-fashioning and emancipation as a modern woman. While Dinesen's adaptation of pastoral to the African colonial landscape undergoes a dramatic cross-dressing, installing her at the center of the paternalistic fantasies that the genre traditionally spawns, the hierarchies and aristocratic power structures undergirding pastoral remain intact. We must contend with the conundrum that Dinesen's proto-feminist liberation as an energetic hunter and farmer in Africa unfolds against the backdrop of racial and class privilege (Lasson, 1981: 146) that constitute the hidden political economy of her emancipation. It is my aim in the remainder of this essay to examine the ways in which Dinesen places herself at the center of the colonial world, usurping the customary place of the colonial patriarch and fashioning herself through various narcissistic devices as the *omphalos* —or 'om-phallus'— of a quasi-feudal empire. Dinesen's status as a modern woman is achieved by embracing a venerable and very male form of power; it is a vision of an aristocracy exempt from labor and at the heart of a world of tribute, "He is a privileged person, the one who has got nothing to do, but for whose enrichment and pleasure all things are brought together" (Dinesen, 1938: 83).

### "DOES AFRICA KNOW A SONG OF ME?"

Dinesen poses possibly the central question of the settler in Africa, "What is Africa to you or you to Africa?" (Dinesen, 1960: 441). The question establishes the specular logic —you, Africa— that guides Dinesen's inquiry. Answering that question, or rather, fashioning the copula between these incommensurables, is perhaps the

principal objective of her memoir. For Dinesen, the yearning for legitimacy, that hallmark of arrival and settlement in the adopted land, takes the form of a desire for recognition by the Other, already intimated in Dinesen's assertion of a privileged relationship to Africa. The desire for legitimacy scours the surroundings, seeking any token or earnest of recognition, affiliation and umbilical belonging to the adopted land. Through a host of different approaches and strategies, Dinesen seeks, construes, crafts, claims or forges (in both senses) this bond with Africa and its peoples. What Dinesen desires is the blessing of Africa and the reciprocation of her own love. This is reflected throughout the text in many ways, both performative and profound; thus, Dinesen will comment casually, "Generally I and Nairobi were in very good understanding" (Dinesen, 1938: 11). Elsewhere she will similarly declare, "I was very much at home in the Somali village" where she is fêted as a "guest of honor" (Dinesen, 1938: 12).

Settlement and legitimacy in *Out of Africa* are performative tropes that manufacture and consolidate the very bonds of connection and inclusion that they impute to the colonial Other. This appears to be the pre-eminent objective of Dinesen's memoir: to forge Africa's embrace of *her* as the strongest expression of her own embrace of Africa. The text thus becomes a call, calling forth the land *as call*; it thus solicits, or calls forth a calling that calls to it for response. In other words, through this textual sleight of hand, the call calls to itself, calling forth its own calling, reversing the sequence of voice and echo. Put somewhat differently, the *constative* predication of *Out of Africa*, purportedly *representing* the bonds of reciprocal affection between Dinesen and Africa, serves to mask the text's *performative* function as a vehicle for actually creating and synthesizing the blessings it claims merely to represent.

This tangled structure of the colonial call is superbly represented in the 1918 poem by Afrikaans poet, C.J. Langenhoven that served as the national anthem of the settler community in South Africa until 1994. The structure of the call in the poem deserves closer scrutiny, given its status as a national anthem. With its themes of love and autochthonous calling, the poem shares several affinities with Dinesen's memoir of the same era. The first verse runs as follows:

<i>Uit die blou van onse hemel,</i>	From the blue of our heaven
<i>Uit die diepte van ons see,</i>	From the depths of our sea,
<i>Oor ons ewige gebergtes</i>	Over our eternal mountain ranges
<i>Waar die kranse antwoord gee.</i>	Where the cliffs give answer
<i>Deur ons vêr verlate vlaktes</i>	Through our far-deserted plains
<i>Met die kreun van ossewa.</i>	With the groan of ox-wagon
<i>Ruis die stem van ons geliefde,</i>	Rises the voice of our beloved,
<i>Van ons land Suid-Afrika.</i>	Of our country South Africa
<i>Ons sal antwoord op jou roepstem,</i>	We will answer to your calling,
<i>Ons sal offer wat jy vra:</i>	We will offer what you ask
<i>Ons sal lewe, ons sal sterwe,</i>	We will live, we will die
<i>Ons vir jou, Suid-Afrika</i>	We for Thee, South Africa
	(literal translation)

This project in self-fashioning in *Out of Africa* is furthermore compounded by an expansive and, one might suggest, expansionist and imperial subjectivity that is nourished by an aesthetics of the sublime and an imperial stylistics; as the idiom of the sublime has taught from Longinus to Kant, an appreciation for the sublime attests to a concomitant nobility and delicacy of soul in the subject. The sublime is a private club to which not all are admitted. It became the preferred vehicle in colonial literature for an ‘innocent’ appropriation of the imperial landscape, as Mary Louise Pratt has argued in her account of the ‘seeing-man’ (Pratt, 1992: 7). The prototype for Dinesen’s ‘innocent’ imperialism arguably appears in the reflections of one of the eighteenth-century’s earliest theorists of the sublime, Joseph Addison, who carefully differentiates *aesthetic* appropriation from property and possession in *The Spectator* in 1711, “A man of Polite Imagination is let into a great many Pleasures that the Vulgar are not capable of receiving. He can converse with a Picture, and finds an agreeable Companion in a Statue. He meets with a secret Refreshment in a Description, and often feels a greater Satisfaction in the Prospect of Fields and Meadows, than another does in the Possession. It gives him, indeed, a kind of Property in every thing he sees, and makes the most rude, uncultivated Parts of Nature minister to his Pleasures: So that he looks upon the World, as it were, in another Light, and discovers in it a Multitude of Charms, that conceal themselves from the Generality of Mankind.” The idiom of the expansive sublime, what Pratt calls the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ rhetoric (Pratt, 1992: 201) frequently becomes the scaffolding of Dinesen’s African sensibility. Thus, in her first evocations of the African continent for her readers, she writes, “the views were immensely wide. Everything that you saw made for greatness and freedom, and unequalled nobility” (Dinesen, 1938: 4), and describes the landscape as “tremendously big, picturesque and mysterious” (Dinesen, 1938: 6). The pairing of this expansive sublime with “nobility” and “mystery” will prove to be seminal for her narrative. The notably modern twist that Dinesen brings to this rhetoric is her gender; she appropriates what had been a singularly masculine idiom to set forth her own vision of Africa.

Consistent with the exculpatory agenda of “anti-conquest” literature, Dinesen also draws on many elements of sentimental travel writing (Pratt, 1992: 39). Sentiment, Pratt argues, is an integral component of the ‘innocent’ colonial conquest. In this idiom, the conqueror succumbs to the charms of the exotic land and the vectors of conquest are reversed; rape becomes rapture. In addition to the warm embrace Africa ostensibly offers Dinesen, her capacity to feel and appreciate Africa’s sublime charms becomes a further index of her rightful place there, “Here I am, where I ought to be” (Dinesen, 1938: 4). Dinesen’s embrace of Africa as a sublime landscape later reaches its apogee (excuse the pun!) in her enthusiasm for the aerial view (Dinesen, 1938: 229) (dramatized in exemplary fashion in the 1985 film, with its lush images of Lake Natron and the vast East African plains).

The aerial perspective, as Gillian Beer has argued, is a prominent index of inter-bellum modernity from Apollinaire to Woolf which she evocatively calls, “the new pastoral of the aeroplane” (Beer, 1990: 279). In a similar vein, David Lehmann writing of Apollinaire’s “Zone” comments, “The poem doesn’t so much praise its objects of futurist desire —the Eiffel Tower, airplanes, a railway terminal— as treat them like pastoral motifs”<sup>2</sup> Not coincidentally, this is also the customary landscape of her dreams, “I move in mighty landscapes ... with unlimited views to all sides” (Dinesen 1960, 438); one immediately recognizes the convergence of this oneiric landscape with the aerial view of Africa. The aeroplane, along with the gun, the gramophone, the automobile and the book, become the tools of modernity and empire through which Dinesen projects her mastery and symbolic power over the African wilderness and its peoples. These machines of modernity paradoxically provide the material means that enable Dinesen to consolidate the atavistic, feudal fantasies that shape her imaginative world. Dinesen’s nostalgic, retrospective pastoral converges perfectly with the “new pastoral” to produce the strange, quaint modernity that is struck from the improbable match between aeroplane and *ancien régime*, or a *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* that unites Finch-Hatton and Cole —those “examples of atavism,” exiles from “an earlier England”— around a gramophone in the *veld* at the foot of Mount Kenya (Dinesen, 1938: 206).

Above all, Dinesen desires to see herself reflected in the Other; she craves the recognition, admiration and gratitude of the Other as confirmation of her legitimacy. All of these libidinal demands for unity and confraternity with the Other might be summed up by the figure of love which her letters evoke just months after her arrival in Africa in 1914; quite simply, what she desires is the love of her African subjects, of the colonial Other. In her letters she writes, “I really love them” and “the really great passion in my life has come to be my love for my black brother” (Lasson, 1981:11, 270). The love she repeatedly expresses for the ‘natives’ is one that pleads for reciprocation. Years later, Dinesen reiterates these sentiments in her memoir, “from my first weeks in Africa I had felt a great affection for the natives” (Dinesen, 1938: 17). This love in turn becomes the twine of belonging; in a 1926 letter to her brother, she writes, “I belong here and should be here ... my heart is in this country” (Lasson, 1981: 241). Her “affection for the natives” also stems in large measure from the narcissistic dividend it yields, framed once more in the idiom of the sublime, “The discovery of the dark races was to me a magnificent *enlargement of all my world*” (Dinesen, 1938: 17; my emphasis). Through bonds of love and fealty, she would be assured that her community is founded on principles other than conquest, subjugation and economic exploitation; ‘love’ becomes the privileged affect for camouflaging the colonial yoke and projecting the soft and sentimental power of the “anti-conquest.”

Throughout the memoir, the farm serves as an extension of Dinesen’s own ego and ambition, and becomes a



FIGURE 1: The millstone table. (Shaun Irlam).

central instrument in her search for settlement. The farm is conceived as a centripetal force, exerting lines of influence and attraction that gather in the surrounding communities, coming to pay tribute towards its mistress. Dinesen and her farm literally and figuratively host the dance of Africa around them. With great satisfaction, Dinesen records, “the farm was highly thought of by the young people of the country, and the invitations to my balls were much valued” (Dinesen, 1938: 154); the evocation of African dances as “balls” again signals Dinesen’s desire to dress Africa in the weeds of feudalism.

Dinesen, moreover, singles out the omphalos of power on the farm—a mill-stone that has been consecrated with spilt blood, “tragic history” (Dinesen, 1938: 140), and memories of her homeland—where all the momentous deliberations of power are transacted, “The mill-stone table ... constituted the centre of the farm, for I used to sit behind it in all my dealings with the Natives” (Dinesen, 1938: 140; See Figure 1). The space of the farm thus becomes a narcissistic extension of the narrator: *L’état, c’est moi!* she might have said.<sup>3</sup> The strongest expressions of this motif arise, instructively transferred into descriptions of Finch-Hatton, a figure through whom Dinesen can mediate and temper her own self-aggrandizing fantasies. Finch-Hatton, with whom Dinesen was memorably infatuated and with whom she is so deeply identified that he becomes her *alter-ego*, presides over the farm as a sort of *genius loci*. Thus, in a displaced echo of her own narcissistic ambitions, Dinesen writes, “When he came back to the farm, it gave out what was in it; it spoke ... When I was expecting Denys back ... I heard, at the same time, the things of the farm all telling what they really were ... it knew in him a quality of which the world

was unaware” (Dinesen, 1938: 217). In such passages, narcissism acquires a ‘hexameral’ cast, according to which the surroundings become merely emanations of the central character. Finch-Hatton’s subsequent, premature death will once again summon this arresting and singular idiom of personification and transferred agency in the memoir.

Dinesen’s relationship with Kamante, the “queer” young waif and *idiot savant* whom she adopts, serves as a powerful fable for her relationship to Africa. In the symbolic imaginary and rhetoric of her narrative, her relationship with Kamante becomes a microcosm for Dinesen’s conception of Africa. Kamante personifies Africa as an ailing child in need of charity and care, yet also harboring an ancient nobility to be rescued and revealed by the colonial benefactor, while nevertheless retaining an elusive depth as well.<sup>4</sup> What is striking throughout this opening section, is Dinesen’s assertion that a true *knowledge* of Africa involves a recognition of its mystery and inscrutability. The narrative engages in a *fort-da* pattern of both claiming knowledge of Africa and coyly eschewing that claim. Grotesque maxims of colonial and racial knowledge peppering the memoir and prefaced by the syntax, “the Native is always...” “the Native mind is...” or “All Natives have...” (this appalling discourse of the “Native mind” is later used by others to excuse the murder by his master of Kitosch, an African servant [Dinesen, 1938: 270-71]) are thus counterpointed by a more deferent, mystical discourse of crypto-Africa, redolent of Conrad, “it is wrapped up in darkness” (Dinesen, 1938: 76). Moreover, the hidden face that Africa had revealed to Dinesen becomes veiled once more after her departure; thus she later muses of Kamante:





FIGURE 2: Flanking the rear of the house there are in fact *two* millstone tables that memory appears to have fused into a single origin of power and authority (Shaun Irlam).

Kamante writes that he has been out of work for a long time. I was not surprised to hear of it, for he was really caviare to the general. I had educated a Royal Cook and left him in a new Colony. It was with him a case of “Open Sesame.” Now the word has been lost, and the stone has closed for good around the mystic treasures that it had in it. ... nobody sees anything but a bandy-legged Kikuyu ... But Kamante had in him a greatness of soul of which the people who knew him will still hear the note in the cracked disordered music (Dinesen, 1938: 76-77).

Just as Kamante had once answered to Dinesen’s “word” now lost, in order to spill forth his “mystic treasures,” so, too, only those who really knew him can “still hear the note” of “greatness” in his “cracked disordered music.” The talismanic word that had once breathed life into the dormant Kamante—casting him as Galatea to her Pygmalion, Dinesen elsewhere looks upon Kamante with “a creator’s eyes” (Dinesen, 1938: 30)—still elicits a cryptic echo, but “the lines are crooked and there is no order in the phrases of the letter” (Dinesen, 1938: 77). Only she who has ears to hear “through a triple layer of idiom” (Dinesen, 1960: 462) can sense the meaning behind these “disordered” but “vital” communications now “wrapped up in darkness” (Dinesen, 1938: 76).

The privileged relationship to Africa that is mediated through the figure of Kamante is even more boldly asserted through another character with whom he shares the pastoral stage: Lulu, the little bushbuck whom Dinesen adopts. Lulu becomes the prototype of all those anthropomorphic African creatures bemoaned by Ngūgĩ. It is no surprise that Africa’s truest blessing upon Dinesen’s set-

tlement should emanate from a creature still more guileless than the feral child, a wild animal. The shrewd pairing of the quasi-feral Kamante and the quasi-domesticated Lulu in Part One serves to establish the natural and therefore extra-political credentials for both sources of Dinesen’s recognition and legitimacy, and deliberately blurs the boundaries between nature and culture, and between animal and human. Dinesen’s syntax explicitly asserts the parallel blessings of Kamante and Lulu, “Lulu came to my house from the woods as Kamante had come to it from the plains” (Dinesen, 1938: 61). The acceptance, recognition and blessing bestowed by “Visitors to the Farm” will later occupy the entire third section of the memoir, where Dinesen imagines one group of visitors as “a company of angels” (Dinesen, 1938: 167).

Dinesen rescues Lulu after she spots the fawn trussed up alongside the road and offered for sale by a gang of boys. She notes that “Lulu soon adapted herself to the house and its inhabitants and behaved as if she were at home” (Dinesen, 1938: 65). The charmingly imperious Lulu, compared to the famous Chinese Empress, Cixi (Dinesen, 1938: 73), quickly assumes a “commanding position in the house” (Dinesen, 1938: 65), indeed, one emulating “*Lioness Blixen’s*” (Dinesen, 1938: 67) own prominent, or omphallic, position in the household. However, her true importance emerges once she has abandoned the farm and returned to the forest to raise a family. Lulu reappears one morning and Dinesen writes, “Lulu of the woods was a superior, independent being, a change of heart had come upon her, she was in possession ... She was standing quietly on her divine rights ... She was now the complete Lulu” (Dinesen, 1938: 71). Pursuing the



conceit of sovereignty still further, she compares the domestic Lulu to a “young princess” who has since risen to her “full queenly estate.” The importance of asserting Lulu’s sovereignty and royal pedigree in this passage fully emerges once this new co-habitation becomes customary; Dinesen writes:

The free union between my house and the antelope was a rare, honourable thing. Lulu came in from the wild world to show us that we were on good terms with it, and she made my house one with the African landscape, so that nobody could tell where the one stopped and the other began (Dinesen, 1938: 73).

The royal blessing conferred by Lulu upon the house of Dinesen, one that blurs the line between forest and farm, secures the recognition and legitimacy Dinesen craves. She concludes:

The years in which Lulu and her people came round to my house were the happiest of my life in Africa ... I came to look upon my acquaintance with the forest antelopes as upon a great boon and a token of friendship from Africa. All the country was in it, good omens, old covenants, a song (Dinesen, 1938: 74).

Confirming Ngũgĩ’s lament, one notices immediately that Lulu’s metaphorical “people” have displaced Kenya’s actual people in furnishing that deeply desired, “token of friendship” that secures the settler’s place in Africa. It is no accident that Dinesen punctuates this passage with the verse from the Song of Songs, “Make haste, my

Beloved...” These memories and reflections draw us towards the final, elegiac question that originally brought us to Kamante’s “disordered music.” Dinesen is always yearning for some echo to her narcissism, returning her deep affection and feeling for Africa. The sound of Lulu’s bell tolling through her dreams jars her awake to wonder “if ... she ever dreamed of the bell. Would there pass in her mind ... pictures of people and dogs” (Dinesen, 1938: 75). This desire to find her own memories of Africa reciprocated by their memory of her finds its most poignant expression in her wistful and narcissistically anxious question: *does Africa know a song of me?*

“If I know a song of Africa ... of the Giraffe and the African new moon lying on her back, of the ploughs in the fields and the sweaty faces of the coffee-pickers, does Africa know a song of me? Would ... the children invent a game in which my name was ... or would the eagles of Ngong look out for me?” (Dinesen, 1938: 75).

Dinesen lived long enough to learn that those who were children in her time did indeed invent a suburb of Nairobi that is still today “the residential district of Karen, named after me” (Dinesen, 1960: 458). This affluent suburb on the outskirts of Nairobi surrounds the homestead where she lived and where today the Karen Blixen Museum is housed (Figure 3).<sup>5</sup>

The thread of Dinesen’s narcissistic demand for recognition from Africa, accessed in these episodes that seem to provide it, can be as keenly traced in its disappointments as well, when that recognition is withheld.



FIGURE 3: Bogani, Blixen’s homestead after 1917 and currently home to the Karen Blixen Museum outside Nairobi (Shaun Irlam).

Dinesen bitterly complains, “the Natives know nothing of gratitude” (Dinesen, 1938: 122; cf. 33). She laments at some length:

To white people there is something vexatious and mortifying in this state of mind in the Natives. ... you can do but little and what you do disappears, and will never be heard of again; they do not thank you.... It is an alarming quality; it seems to annul your existence as an individual human being, and to inflict upon you a rôle not of your own choosing, as if you were a phenomenon in Nature (Dinesen, 1938: 122).

The anguish legible in these confessions reveals that Dinesen’s love for Africa, unlike her earlier, disappointed love for Hans Blixen, and her rejection by Finch-Hatton for her rival, Beryl Markham, cannot go unrequited; her affection for Africa is not given freely and unconditionally, but urgently beseeches reciprocation; it is as if the entire memoir makes the plea, “I will not let thee go, except thou bless me” (Dinesen, 1938: 263, 264, 350). It offers us a candid glimpse of the colonizer’s psychic vulnerability despite all the external trappings of imperial power, “it seems to annul your existence ... and to inflict upon you a rôle not of your own choosing.” It also reveals the limits of that desired union with Nature that she had celebrated in Lulu’s gesture; one does not wish to be so completely a “phenomenon in Nature” as to pass unnoticed among the local inhabitants and vanish as “an individual human being.” Dissolving one’s sovereignty in an oceanic blending with Nature is evidently a discretion that should remain firmly under the control of the colonizer.

What takes place as an effect of the narrator’s claim to legitimacy and the assertion that Africa reflects back to her an image of herself, is a splitting of the phenomenality of Africa, between an imaginary and oneiric ‘Africa’ embraced by Dinesen, and another Africa, sporadically acknowledged, that is quite indifferent to her fate, and where “what you do disappears.” The ‘narcissistic’ geography, one that seems to be a plastic extension of the self, compounds itself throughout the memoir. The African landscape becomes a self-aggrandizing mirror, reflecting back and consolidating the image of the narrator, while increasingly existing at the narrator’s behest. Africa emerges, operating in the modality of Lacan’s ‘mirror phase.’ According to this paradigm, the narrator finds the fullest expression and representation of herself in an exteriorized image that can also always be alienated from her, as the final section of the memoir painfully reveals (Lacan, 1966).<sup>6</sup> I have no intention of pursuing a ‘Lacanian’ reading of *Out of Africa* here, however, Lacan’s essay provides a useful guide to some of the tangled specular exchanges at work in the memoir.

Paul de Man’s reflections on the *fort-da* oscillations of the narcissistic image (it’s me/it’s like me/it’s not me) compound the entangled character of this specular encounter that can whimsically be conjured as identity, resemblance or difference; the concept of resemblance always retains the discretion of widening into difference

the gap between similarities. It is precisely this vacillating, fluid structure of the narcissist’s circle that allows his/her others, Africa among them, to be summoned either as intimates or avatars. This is perhaps why ‘love’ is privileged as the passion uniting Dinesen to Africa (De Man, 1979: 168, 169). One can trace this symbiotic relationship between spectator and spectacle, between face and place most acutely during its negation and dissolution in the traumatic final act of Dinesen’s pastoral in Book 5, when the farm, once nestled cozily “at the foot of the Ngong hills” (Dinesen, 1938: 3), is instead discovered to be exposed to misfortune, perhaps like Icarus, flying “too high up” (Dinesen, 1938: 307). It is no mistake that Finch-Hatton, Kinanjui and Africa become different but inseparable inflections of a common, underlying structure in the closing sections of the memoir; the loss of Finch-Hatton, Kinanjui and Africa all belong to one and the same process of bereavement and narcissistic wounding that is experienced by Dinesen as “a sort of derangement” (Dinesen, 1938: 335), or a passage “through death” (Dinesen, 1938: 370). The inexorable remission or ‘ebbing’ away of Africa (Dinesen, 1938: 312, 317, 335, 353, 365-66; cf. 171-8) narrated in this section corroborates the extent to which Africa had formerly been a narcissistic extension of the narrator. The illusion of their intertwined fates fades; Africa seems to revoke its fealty to the settler, and slowly returns to its primordial indifference:

it seems to me that the lifeless things were aware of my departure a long time before I was so myself. ... all knew that we were to part. ... the attitude of the landscape towards me changed. Till then I had been a part of it.... Now the country disengaged itself from me, and stood back a little (Dinesen, 1938: 317).

#### “GATHER ME/ INTO THE ARTIFICE OF ETERNITY”

— W.B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium”

The appeal to pastoral is fully of a piece with the search for legitimacy and for sanctioned, classical social forms to chart and contain the incommensurable space (Dinesen, 1938: 17-18) between colonizer and colonized, sketched in that haunting question, “What is Africa to you, or you to Africa?” No satisfactory precedents or norms existed for how to be a colonizer. Indeed, Dinesen comments “My relations with the Natives ... were altogether of a queer nature” (Dinesen, 1938: 95). Through the feudal form, Dinesen believed that she had found a social structure that could accommodate and meaningfully interpret her relationship to her African subjects. The projection of feudal forms into the African landscape serves to domesticate it and to create an illusion of legitimacy there. This ideological work of pastoral is overlaid by a secondary aesthetic formation which consolidates that pastoral foundation: the resolution of Africa into artistic forms; as she observes during one of her flights over the African plains, “how keenly the human mind yearns

for geometric figures” (Dinesen, 1938: 7). In these privileged moments, the *sense* or meaning of Africa emerges in its fullest expression; a “mysterious and sacred moment” (Dinesen, 1938: 157) when “the strong and refined essence of a continent” (Dinesen, 1938: 3) appears. As we might expect, the expansive, panoptic view from the aeroplane, affords the best site from which to capture this meaning of the landscape; in Dinesen’s words, “Every time that I have gone up in an aeroplane . . . I have had the consciousness of a great new discovery. ‘I see’: I have thought. ‘This was the idea. And now I understand everything’” (Dinesen, 1938: 230). Thus, just as tribute converged centripetally on the farm, so understanding radiates centrifugally away from the spectator, imbuing Africa with meaning.

Dinesen’s work, as much Modernist-era literature does, strives to transform life into legend, to see the flesh made word. It aspires to an immutable, mythic substance, or, in her own vocabulary, to become a ‘brass-serpent,’ an aptitude for the creation of which she imputes to the people of Africa. She expresses a particular satisfaction in becoming a ‘brass-serpent’ among her African subjects (Dinesen, 1938: 101-102, 358). Africa can pay her no greater tribute than to integrate her into its structures of belief, myth, legend, music and art. Becoming legendary is a distinct desideratum and if there is one myth that provides a framework and scansion for interpreting Dinesen’s entire relationship to Africa, it is the myth of Narcissus. Dinesen desires most to find a reflection or echo (the gap kept open between sound and image in Ovid’s fable seems to disappear in Dinesen’s appropriation) of herself in the African landscape and so, as we have seen, she will poignantly ask, “Does Africa know a song of me?” (Dinesen, 1938: 75).

Dinesen frequently intimates that Africa harbors a crypto-identity only disclosed to those possessed of ‘noble’ sensibility, those, that is, who are capable of retrieving Kamante’s “greatness of soul” from his “disordered music”; in other words, one’s aesthetic aristocracy is unveiled through the deciphering of this crypto-Africa and, for the chosen few, this crypto-Africa conforms to a universal social order—once visible in feudal Europe—that is not really historical at all, but, implicitly, the great chain of being, the natural order of things, the *truth* of Africa. This vision of Africa is epitomized by those rare and extraordinary moments when experience crystallizes into art, where the formless rush of ordinary life is arrested by the emergence of form.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, from this capacity to grasp Africa’s truth derives the mandate to govern.

The becoming-image or becoming-mark of Africa is an abiding *desideratum*, perhaps best illustrated by the poignant episode with Jogona Kanyagga, an elderly peasant whose son, Wamai, is killed in a shooting accident on the farm. Dinesen volunteers to prepare a legal statement for him, but through this process, something else emerges for the first time: his life is transformed into writing. It is a Promethean act in which Dinesen borrows the divine fire of creation. When she has read her account back to

Jogona, he gives her “a great fierce flaming glance.” She continues,

Such a glance did Adam give the Lord when He formed him out of dust, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. . . . I had created him and shown him himself: Jogona Kanyagga of life everlasting . . . He could not afford to lose it, for his soul was in it, and it was proof of his existence (Dinesen, 1938: 115).

The passage perfectly illustrates the insights of Lacan’s ‘mirror-phase’; Jogona paradoxically ‘possesses’ himself fully in his textual double (“his soul was in it”), yet is by the same stroke also alienated from himself in that image, “He could not afford to lose it.” She concludes, purloining her words from the Bible, “Here was something which Jogona Kanyagga had performed, and which would preserve his name for ever: the flesh was made word and dwelt among us full of grace and truth” (Dinesen, 1938: 115). This is the most developed of several pivotal ‘hexameral’ scenes in the memoir, where the narrator arrogates the role of Creator to herself. Origin, existence and meaning now radiate from her. Through her reference to the creation of Adam, and her mischievous inversion of scripture (John, I.14), Dinesen underscores the magnitude and portentousness of her intervention into this world of ancient oral culture and wryly casts herself in the narcissistically flattering role of Creator (Dinesen, 1938: 115).

The transfiguration of reality into art, and action into image, a frequent conceit throughout the memoir, can be usefully approached through the metaphor of tapestry—or a “giant. . . very old . . . Persian carpet” (Dinesen, 1938: 14)—an artefact explicitly invoking medieval Europe (one thinks of the Bayeux tapestry, or more appropriately, ‘La noble Amazone’ astride her hunting steed and ‘La dame à la licorne,’ flanked by her vassals, both animal and human; this association is further strengthened by Dinesen’s assimilation of her “unfailingly loyal” servant, Farah to a “cheetah or falcon” [Dinesen, 1960: 387]). Dinesen comments, “An African Native Forest is a mysterious region. You ride into the depths of an old tapestry” (Dinesen, 1938: 61). Among several recurrences of this image in *Out of Africa*, none evokes the medieval character of the east African highlands better than when she writes,

In Africa I never had dogs of any other breed than the Scotch deerhound. There is no more noble and gracious kind of dog. They must have lived for centuries with men . . . You will find them in old paintings and tapestries, and they have in themselves a tendency to change . . . their surroundings into tapestry; they bring with them a feudal atmosphere (Dinesen, 1938: 65).

Wherever Dinesen turns in Africa, she seeks an African world poised to resolve itself into images and figures of art, distinguished by their eternal qualities, “the millennium character” (Dinesen, 1938: 168), and their primordial pedigree (Dinesen, 1938: 156-57, 168); Africa also



offers tantalizing traces of the Paradise lost, “they —the Natives— had preserved a knowledge that was lost to us by our first parents” (Dinesen, 1938: 19). Later, when Dinesen briefly embarks upon a charcoal-burning venture, the transformation of the living forest into the “little mummy of the wood” (Dinesen, 1938: 182) also becomes an occasion to render Africa into art, “The mise-en-scène of the art of charcoal burning” yields “a theatrical atmosphere which . . . was of infinite charm” and gives the entire process the air of “a romantic Opera” (Dinesen, 1938: 182). The narrative is replete with such examples through which Africa is conjured into tapestry, tableau, theatrical stage, writing, “all . . . different expressions of one idea” (Dinesen, 1938: 20), all with a view to deciphering and asserting the timelessness and *textuality* of the African landscape, the flesh made word. To ‘discover’ these timeless images where life becomes art is to unveil the meaning or truth of Africa and once more to claim one’s privileged relationship with a continent that only reveals its hidden face to a select, noble few. If Africa is a continent without writing, it is paradoxically because it is already all writing.

The death of Finch-Hatton might now be revisited as the apotheosis of this transformation of flesh into word. We have already read an implicit sacrificial logic in the Jogona episode, whereby the blood of the son prompts and consecrates his father’s written story and “life everlasting.” Through his son’s death, an obscure African

peasant has stumbled into the pages of Dinesen’s memoir and into the annals of “History” (Dinesen, 1938: 119). Finch-Hatton’s untimely death in the plane crash similarly serves to consecrate the landscape and draw it in around his grave as an embellishment of his life. We read earlier how, formerly, Finch-Hatton was portrayed as breathing life, meaning and truth into the farm like a *genius loci*; through him, the things of the farm had told “what they really were” (Dinesen, 1938: 217). Later, Dinesen remembered Finch-Hatton as “an unconditional truthfulness” (Dinesen, 1938: 337). With the dissolution of the farm —and the loss of its omphalos, the blood-stained mill-stone and the sovereign who governed from it (Dinesen, 1938: 140)— Finch-Hatton’s grave in the hills now becomes a substitute for the mill-stone, and takes over that function as omphalos. The spilling of the settler’s blood on the land becomes the ultimate vehicle for hallowing it and giving the settler legitimacy. As if to underscore the omphallic status the grave inherits, an obelisk was erected on Finch-Hatton’s grave by his family in 1945 (See Figure 4: The Finch-Hatton grave site in 2015). The chapter documenting Finch-Hatton’s death and burial is replete with omens and portents and even the preparation of his grave site is imbued with latent, numinal meaning. Dinesen takes up many of the themes and motifs that are central to the vision of Africa developed throughout the memoir and to her mythopoeic imagination.



FIGURE 4: The obelisk marking Finch-Hatton’s grave in the Ngong Hills, Kenya (Shaun Irlam).

Dinesen and Finch-Hatton had discussed the site selected for the grave many years before; it enshrines the aesthetics of the sublime and Pratt's "monarch"-motif, "there was an infinitely great view from there" (Dinesen, 1938: 338). The morning she sets out to locate the site of the grave up in the hills, her surroundings acquire a portentous agency, as if one is venturing into a hallowed sanctuary, "The great country of the hills opened up reluctantly round me and closed again" (Dinesen, 1938: 339). Moreover, the wilderness seems to call to the settler, "there was a whisper on all sides," "there was an echo in the hills, it answered to the strokes of the spades" (Dinesen, 1938: 339, 341). However, it is the body itself, as it is laid to rest, that hallows the place, secures its meaning and animates the surrounding landscape; the sudden transfer of agency in this passage is striking:

As it was placed in the grave, the country changed and became the setting for it, as still as itself, the hills stood up gravely, they knew and understood what we were doing in them; after a little while they themselves took charge of the ceremony, it was an action between them and him (Dinesen, 1938: 341).

Significance emanates centrifugally from the grave and the country now becomes a magnetic field oriented around it, "the setting for it"; Dinesen here reiterates the themes of mutual recognition and reciprocity that she had celebrated in her account of the bushbuck Lulu, "He had taken in the country, and in his eyes and his mind it had been changed, marked by his own individuality, and made part of him. Now Africa received him, and would change him, and make him one with herself" (Dinesen, 1938: 342; cf. 441). As the text shuttles between figurative and literal 'taking in,' Dinesen records a transfer of power from the once-living Finch-Hatton to the now-animated land. Just as the farm had formerly derived its vitality and truth from Finch-Hatton, so here, too, he becomes the animating spirit of the place, through his death conferring life upon it. Finally, just as Lulu had once blessed the farm, Africa's lions bless Finch-Hatton's grave with another portent, "a strange thing ... had happened by Denys's grave ... A lion and a lioness have come there, and ... lain on the grave for a long time. ... It was fit and decorous that the lions should come to Denys's grave and make him an African monument" (Dinesen, 1938: 346). Denys's death traces once more the path from mortality to monumentality.

This episode must be aligned with the other 'hexameral' scenes in the memoir (the 'creation' of Jogona, or the aerial view where one flies "low enough to see the animals and feel toward them as God did when he had just created them" [Dinesen, 1938: 229]), where the Other derives its origins from the creative, animating force of the settler. In these hexameral rêveries, which punctuate Dinesen's narrative, we glimpse the dream of Pygmalion, breathing life into his creation. In such passages, the desire for legitimacy has come full circle; rather than taking his origin and legitimacy from the land, the settler instead becomes a point of origin and confers being upon it. In



FIGURE 5: Memorial plaque on the Obelisk marking Finch-Hatton's grave (Shaun Irlam).

this fantasy of usurpation, we can also decipher the logical conclusion of the narcissistic fantasy: the entire landscape has its origins in the narcissistic consciousness.

We have noted several occasions in which Dinesen's world seems to be nothing more than the exoskeleton of her own narcissism, called into being by her creative powers. This conceit finds powerful expression once more in the closing epoch of the novel as Dinesen faces leaving Africa and seeks to resettle her squatters, "I felt that they were not only asking me for a place to live on, but that they were demanding their existence of me" (Dinesen, 1938: 359). Where formerly she had delighted in her role as demiurge to Kamante and Jogona, she now expresses an audible weariness. Finally, as she tries to imagine Africa after her departure, she confesses, "It may have been to them difficult, and daring, to imagine the world without me in it, as if Providence had been known to be abdicating" (Dinesen, 1938: 369; my emphasis). Everything we have read thus far should now equip us to decipher the self-aggrandizing equation that the text makes between the narrator and Providence. As Dinesen here grandiosely imagines Africa struggling to imagine a world without her, in this glimpse of a *negation* of the narcissistic geography she has sown, the latent hexameral logic of the narcissistic trope emerges: the settler is the origin of the colonial world, her withdrawal will be tantamount to the desertion of Providence. Thomas Pynchon, evoking the hexameral rêverie through an image by Remedios Varo in *The Crying of Lot 49*, returns us to tapestry and offers us an arresting image for Dinesen, "embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world." (Pynchon, 1966: 21).

*Out of Africa* thus offers readers the *pre-post*-erous spectacle of a colonial modernity forged from a return to a pre-industrial and pre-capitalist, aristocratic social order, remaking the modern, imperial possession in the image of feudal Europe. By borrowing the antique weeds of aristoc-



racy, Dinesen strives to fashion a neo-feudal legitimacy for herself on the plains of Africa. As we have seen, her vision of colonial authority and legitimacy is modeled on that of the *ancien regime*, where power —on the model of the *roi soleil* or Providence— radiates centrifugally from the monarch and creates a world which, in its most extreme expression, is nothing more than the emanation of himself. Colonial modernity shows itself haunted by the specter of medieval feudalism and the absolute monarch. It is also the boldest and most artful mystification of imperialism, where the violence of conquest and dispossession is concealed through pastoral as a phantasmagoria of provision, and ultimately the provision of nothing less than life.

## NOTES

- 1 In all references to Dinesen's memoir, I use the 1989 Vintage Press edition which includes both *Out of Africa* (1938) and *Shadows on the Grass* (1960); references to *Out of Africa* are dated 1938. Citations from *Shadows on the Grass* in the same volume are dated 1960.
- 2 <http://www.vqronline.org/translations/apollinaires-zone>
- 3 I use the term 'narcissism' not as an epithet of facile disapproval but to analyze a pervasive affective structure of specularity that oscillates between identity (me) and proximity (like me) and derives gratification and self-esteem from finding its libidinal investments reciprocated.
- 4 Blixen writes to her mother in 1922, "this place is a kind of child to me – the only one I have in this life" (Lasson, 1981: 131).
- 5 <http://www.museums.or.ke/content/blogcategory/13/19/> Accessed 01/01/2015.
- 6 By a remarkable historical coincidence, Lacan first formulates the theory of the mirror-phase at almost the same time that Dinesen is composing her memoir; he first outlined the idea of the mirror-phase at the International Congress of Psycho-Analysts in Marienbad in 1936.
- 7 In his discussion of similar episodes in the Afrikaans farm novel of the same period, Coetzee describes this process of emerging form or *Gestalt* as "a *vergestaltiging* (a taking on of form, an emergence of truth)" (Coetzee, 1988: 98).

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