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"There are many that I can be": The Poetics of Self-Performance in Isak Dinesen's "The Dreamers"

Barbara Straumann

This paper looks at issues of identity in relation to artistic performances of the feminine self. Isak Dinesen's story "The Dreamers" from her collection *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934) is remarkably in tune with contemporary theories of identity construction, notably with Judith Butler's concept of gender performance. Pellegrina Leoni, the protagonist of Dinesen's tale, is an acclaimed opera singer who loses her voice in a tragic accident. After having herself symbolically buried, she assumes an infinite series of masks and masquerades. My reading demonstrates how by abandoning her rigid star persona, Dinesen's heroine comes to perform a far more mobile selfhood. Her relentless role-play stands in stark contrast to a narrative desire which seeks to impose a stable identity upon her and by which she is eventually killed in a fatal scene of interpellation. By reading "The Dreamers" as a quasi-manifesto of Isak Dinesen's art, I argue that her poetic project feeds on a complex dialectics of self-masking and self-presentation. It is in and through her masquerade that this modernist writer develops a compelling form of feminine self-expression.

When Hannah Arendt reviewed a biography of Isak Dinesen for *The New Yorker*, she noted that, for Dinesen, "the chief trap in one's life is one's identity" (viii). But how is Arendt's statement to be understood? How does Dinesen's writing enact the vicissitudes of identity and, at the same time, create a poetics of resonant self-expression? In the following, I will examine these and related questions through a close reading of "The Dreamers" from *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934), the very first story collection by Karen Blixen, with which she established herself as the internationally renowned writer Isak Dinesen. As I shall argue, "The Dream-

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ers" suggests a paradoxical self-fashioning that hinges on a fragmentation and dispersal of the self. The protagonist of the story, the opera singer Pellegrina Leoni, abandons her role as a public performer and dissolves herself so as to reemerge and turn all the world into a stage for her protean performances. The poetics thus developed by Dinesen's writing foregrounds issues of identity that bear on the self-presentation of the woman artist in critical ways.

Dinesen's self-fashioning as a public persona already indicates how important masks and masquerades are to her artistic self-expression. In a photograph taken in 1954, Baroness Karen Blixen adopts a particularly remarkable pose: the writer can be seen to wear a black headdress topped by a black feather together with a pierrot costume she already possessed in her youth.[1] She fixes the viewer with her alert look and smiles enigmatically. Her heavy make-up and the spectacular way she is lit underline the theatricality and flamboyance of Blixen's self-dramatization, while at the same time her thin figure almost disappears under the ample folds of her white costume and the semi-transparent fabric framing her face. Her photographic portrait and her masculine pen-name Isak Dinesen, under which she published her English texts,[2] both suggest a complex dialectics of self-presentation and self-masking, and they also refer us to the multiple artistic self-transformations that characterized her biography. It was after she had to give up her African farm, described in her most famous text, *Out of Africa* (1937), and return to her native Denmark that Blixen reinvented herself and began to write professionally. As well as writing literary tales, she fashioned herself as a highly fictionalized persona by claiming, for instance, that she was three thousand years old and had already dined with Socrates (Thurman 331; Brantly 66). Indeed she repeatedly asserted that she had promised her soul to the devil so that she could turn her life into tales (Thurman 140, 258, 337; Brantly 66).[3]

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[1] This photograph is reproduced in the illustrated biography by Frans Lasson and Clara Svendsen (181).

[2] Blixen's *nom du plume* is, strictly speaking, a half-pseudonym. Dinesen was her maiden name, while the assumed Hebrew name Isak means "the one who laughs." Blixen had several nicknames such as Tanne and Tania and she acquired a number of further pseudonyms, including Osceola and Lord Byron. On Blixen's names and pseudonyms, see Judith Thurman (5).

[3] Blixen felt that she had been cut off from life after realizing that she had contracted a severe form of syphilis from her husband Bror von Blixen-Finecke and after having lost both her farm and her lover Denys Finch Hatton in Africa. It was against this backdrop that she turned to a second life in her writing and, as part of her artistic practice, fashioned herself as a living artefact. For a detailed account of Blixen's life, see Judith Thurman's standard biography *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller* (1995).

Dinesen's myriad self-stagings are remarkably in tune with contemporary notions of performance and performativity. It is no doubt as a result of Judith Butler's seminal work on gender performance that critical attention has increasingly shifted to the performative character of identity. At the same time, the work of Dinesen can also be seen to resonate with an earlier and, in fact, contemporaneous text by Joan Rivière. In her essay – entitled "Womanliness as Masquerade" and published in 1929, that is, one year after Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando*, another literary example that highlights performative aspects of identity – Rivière argues that gender and masquerade are "the same thing" (38). By drawing on Rivière's notion of gender masquerade, J. L. Austin's performative speech act theory but also on Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation and Michel Foucault's work on discursive power, Butler calls attention to a fundamental ambivalence of identity. On the one hand, we are interpellated as subjects and have to subject ourselves to cultural codes and social norms that curtail and injure us. On the other hand, if identity is performative, there is, according to Butler, scope for resignification, reiteration or renegotiation. Sedimented codes and norms are both affirmed *and* defied as subjects reiterate them with a difference.

My wager is not simply that Dinesen anticipates contemporary notions of identity as a series of performative acts. Rather, what I want to highlight is the feminine self-articulation enacted by Dinesen's poetics. "The Dreamers," with which she launched her literary career, is particularly pertinent to a discussion of artistic performances of the feminine self. The story revolves around a female performer, the spectacular opera singer Pellegrina Leoni whose voice serves us a powerful means of self-construction. However, when Pellegrina loses her professional singing voice, the emphasis of the text shifts from the stable persona of the prima donna to a self-performance that is more mobile, fluid and plural.

Who is the singer Pellegrina Leoni? How is her voice described? And how does she construct herself through her role as a singer? As observed by her impresario, the old Jew Marcus Cocoza, the operatic star performer Pellegrina Leoni "'had in her life two great, devouring passions, which meant everything to her proud heart.'"

> "The first was her passion for the great soprano, Pellegrina Leoni. [. . .] In her relation to this idol she had no forbearance and no rest. [. . .] She worked in the service of Pellegrina Leoni like a slave under the whip, weeping, dying at times, when it was demanded of her.
>
> "She was a devil to the other women of the opera, for she needs must have all the parts for Pellegrina. She was indignant because it was impossible for her to perform two rôles within the same opera. [. . .]

> "And the other great passion [. . .] of this great heart was her love for her audience. And that was not for the great people, the proud princes and magnates and the lovely ladies, all in jewels; not even for the famous composers, musicians, critics, and men of letters, but for her galleries. Those poor people of the back streets and market places, who would give up a meal or a pair of shoes, the wages of hard labour, to crowd high up in the hot house and hear Pellegrina sing, and who stamped the floor, shrieked and wept over her – she loved them beyond everything in the world. [. . .] And she was adored by the people." (Dinesen 402-405)

Remarkable in this characterization of Pellegrina Leoni is the mutual implication of the individual and the collective dimensions of the singer's voice. It is in dialogic exchange with her rapt audience and the operatic system as a whole that the protagonist constitutes herself as a star performer. She sings for the "poor people," who in turn confirm her in her social role as a celebrated public voice. But not only this. Driven by her boundless love for her audience and her unconditional commitment to her star persona, Pellegrina sacrifices herself in order to turn her own figure into an object of quasi-religious devotion, which is worshipped by her audience and herself alike.

On the one hand, the voice of Pellegrina Leoni is composite, multiple and plural because she performs various operatic roles. When necessary, that is, "'when it was demanded of her,'" Pellegrina will weep and die. She undergoes the numerous deaths demanded by the operatic scripts and scores only to constantly resurrect herself on stage. On the other hand, the passage implies that her voice becomes monologic in so far as she privileges one single role. As mentioned by Marcus, "'she needs must have all the parts for Pellegrina.'" Rather than actually transforming herself into the various operatic figures she enacts, she claims all parts so as to use them as her own vehicle and subsume them under her one superlative role, "'the great soprano, Pellegrina Leoni.'"

When a fire breaks out during a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at the opera house in Milan, the singer is hit by a falling beam. She makes a narrow escape from death, but loses her voice as a result of the shock. How is this near-fatal accident to be read? Dinesen's tale can be seen to rewrite nineteenth-century narratives in which female figures performing in public such as, for example, the improviser and genius Corinne in Germaine de Staël's novel *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807) tend to eventually lose their voice.[4] Seemingly in this tradition, "The Dreamers"

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[4] Further examples include the demonized diva Alcharisi in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) or the political speaker Verena Tarrant in Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886). For a reading which connects "The Dreamers" to *Corinne ou l'Italie* and other female *Künstlerromane* from the romantic period, see Kari E. Lokke (150-162).

reverberates with a tragic sense of loss. The singer leaves the stage never to be heard again. However, by using what would be a classic ending in a nineteenth-century text as her point of departure, Dinesen reshifts the narrative argument. The accident of Pellegrina Leoni can be seen to point to a deadlock in her persona as a singer. Investing everything in one single role, the incident suggests, is fatal.

Dinesen's protagonist loses her professional voice and her public acclaim as a singer, but she gains access to a different form of self-expression. After the star soprano Pellegrina Leoni has been buried at a public fake funeral, she explains to her former impresario: "'There are many that I can be. [. . .] I will not be one person again, Marcus, I will be always many persons from now. Never again will I have my heart and my whole life bound up with one woman, to suffer so much'" (Dinesen 417-418). What Pellegrina opts for is a protean performance of the self. Having recognized the lethal effects of a single self-construction, she fragments her former persona into a myriad of masks and masquerades: "'I will not be one person again,'" and "'there are many that I can be.'" Following her wish never again to be trapped and caught up in one single role, Pellegrina not only turns into a traveller but also adopts a new mask for each lover she encounters on her journey. To the Englishman Lincoln Forsner in Rome, she presents herself as the courtesan Olalla, to Friedrich Hohenemser in Lucerne as the milliner and revolutionary Madame Lola, and to Baron Guildenstern in Saumur as the saint Rosalba. Even while these roles suggest images of femininity that are flagrantly stereotypical, Pellegrina is, significantly enough, in control of their performance. Moreover, her radical role-play suggests at once a critical distance from and a vibrant expression of the self. It is by adopting multiple masks and personas that she can articulate herself.

The actual theatre may have burnt down, but for Pellegrina, the wanderer, all the world becomes a stage. The self-dramatizations on which she embarks after the symbolic burial of her singer persona follow a typically modernist project. By transposing her theatrical scenarios into everyday life, she recreates herself as her own work of art. As an arch-performer, she keeps transforming herself not unlike Virginia Woolf's cross-dressing and sex-changing Orlando, who becomes a purely aesthetic sign of writing and, in so doing, blurs any boundaries between text and self. Although, or rather because Pellegrina has lost her voice as a singer, she has a "voice" of her own, and this time her self-expression is indeed multiple. In keeping with the theatricalization of her masks and disguises, her self-performances do not give expression to any psychological interiority. Instead Pellegrina can be described as the sum of the effects which her vibrant vitality and her star-like luminosity have on her various lovers. Significantly enough, she lacks a shadow but has her-

self perpetually "shadowed" by Marcus. Whenever she starts to feel tied down to a particular role, Marcus helps her disappear without a trace and adopt a new mask. As a result, her self-performance is one of fleeting evanescence, of continual disappearance and reemergence.

Pellegrina serves as a figure who reflects Dinesen's aesthetics. She refers us to a voice which disappears and then resounds as pure text. Her voice can no longer be attached to a person but instead dissolves into writing. Moreover, it is important to note that her impersonal "voice" is mediated by the narration of other character voices. Her stellar career, the loss of her voice and her adoption of multiple roles are the chronological events of the story we can reconstruct once we reach the end of "The Dreamers." The actual structure of the text, however, consists of several narratives that frame Pellegrina, who is almost the only figure not to tell a story: a first-level narrative of the authorial narrator frames a second-level narrative, that is, the story that Lincoln Forsner tells to the "much renowned" but weary storyteller Mira Jama on a full-moon night, whilst their ship is sailing off the East African coast on the Indian Ocean (Dinesen 328). According to Lincoln, he was searching for the prostitute Olalla, who had made him a dreamer, when he met his two friends Hohenemser and Guildenstern, who, in turn, told him their stories about Madame Lola and Rosalba.

Dinesen's text works with two different modes, both of which are important to our discussion of identity and performance: Pellegrina's mobile enactment on the one hand and the narrative frames of the three men on the other. There is tension not just between the various male narrators, all of whom derive a narcissistic sense of identity from their beloved object. The fiercest conflict can be observed between their narrative desire and Pellegrina's protean performances. While Pellegrina keeps reinventing herself so as to avoid being read and appropriated, each of the three men seeks to reduce her to the particular figure she represents in his story.

This conflict comes to a climax on a stormy winter night. The three men have just finished telling each other their stories about Olalla, Madame Lola and Rosalba in a hotel in the Swiss Alps when, all of a sudden, they catch sight of a veiled woman. They all believe to recognize their respective object of desire and chase the woman as she is running towards the liminal scene of a mountain pass. Because Pellegrina eludes any single role, the question Lincoln asks her, when he finally catches up with her, is inevitable. Yet it also turns out to be fatal.

> ". . .Who are you?"
>
> She did not turn, or look at me. But the next moment she did what I had always feared that she might do: she spread out her wings and flew away [. . .] she threw herself from the earth clear into the abyss, and disappeared from our sight. [. . .]
>
> I thought then of how it had been my question to her which had driven her into this great white full-moon death, in the end. (Dinesen 395-397)

Pellegrina refuses to answer and attempts to escape from this scene of interpellation altogether. However, as suggested by the lethal injuries which she suffers in her failed flight, she is literally killed by the question which would pin her down to one single identity.

What then is the poetics of "The Dreamers"? The narrative mode of Dinesen's text, I suggest, presents a critique of the way in which the female figure is reified. It shows, and actually performs, the violence implicit in the narrative framing of the male characters. Significantly enough, it is only as the woman lies dying that Marcus tells the name and story of the great soprano. In a deft gesture, Dinesen has his belated commentary on the stable persona of the singer coincide with the actual death of the woman. Or put differently, the text implies that death is brought about by a narrative desire that seeks to reduce her to one single identity.[5]

Yet the feminine, or perhaps feminist, mode of Dinesen's text goes further than that: shortly before Pellegrina's death, her narrative containment is disrupted by a strange voice effect.

> Her whole body vibrated under her passion like the string of an instrument.
>
> "Oh," she cried, "look, look here! It is Pellegrina Leoni – it is she, it is she herself again – she is back. Pellegrina, the greatest singer, poor Pellegrina, she is on the stage again. To the honour of God, as before. Oh, she is here, it is she – Pellegrina, Pellegrina herself!"
>
> It was unbelievable that, half dead as she was, she could house this storm of woe and triumph. It was, of course, her swan song.
>
> "Come unto her, now, all, again," she said. "Come back, my children, my friends. It is I – I forever, now." She wept with a rapture of relief, as if she had in her a river of tears, held back long.
>
> The old Jew was in a terrible state of pain and strain. [. . .]
>
> Of a sudden he took up his little walking stick and struck three short strokes on the side of the stretcher.
>
> "Donna Pellegrina Leoni," he cried in a clear voice. "*En scène pour le deux* [sic]."

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[5] Also note Elisabeth Bronfen (1986), who shows that in Dinesen's tales narrative closure often means death.

> Like a soldier to the call, or a war horse to the blast of the trumpet, she collected herself at his words. Within the next minute she became quiet in a gallant and deadly calm. She gave him a glance from her enormous dark eyes. In one mighty movement, like that of a billow raising and sinking, she lifted the middle of her body. A strange sound, like the distant roar of a great animal, came from her breast. Slowly the flames in her face sank, and an ashen grey covered it instead. Her body fell back, stretched itself out and lay quite still, and she was dead. (Dinesen, 426-427)

Initially Pellegrina's famous singer persona seems to be reconstituted by the cue given by her impresario. She slips into her former symbolic role, ready to resume her part of Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at precisely the point at which she had been interrupted by the near-fatal accident. The accumulation of the words "she," "herself," "Pellegrina Leoni" and "I" in her speech suggests unreserved identification with the role of the singer: "'It is Pellegrina Leoni – it is she, it is she herself again [. . .]. Oh, she is here, it is she – Pellegrina, Pellegrina herself! [. . .] It is I – I forever, now.'" Yet ironically Leoni, a figure to whom she refers almost exclusively in the third person, is just as much a mask as any of her other roles. Rather than coming back to the stage, Pellegrina has actually never left the theatrical boards. And, indeed, while the three men seek to demask her, this last performance shows not just the fatality but also the inherent impossibility of their attempt to lay bare and thus expose her identity.

What is, however, even more disruptive is the culmination of Pellegrina's swan song in a monstrous utterance towards the end of the passage – "a strange sound, like the roar of a great animal." The sheer sound of her non-verbal voice disrupts not just the narrative desire and fantasy of the three men. It also undercuts all symbolic and imaginary codes, and hence all social identities. The sublime song Pellegrina used to produce as a singer allowed her and her audience to mirror themselves in each other. Her swan song refers her listeners to the very reverse: an articulation of radical alterity.

As a quasi-manifesto of Dinesen's art, "The Dreamers" demonstrates, and indeed performs, a radical dispersal of identity into a multiplicity of masks. Or as Kari E. Lokke puts it in her reading, Dinesen's text "explodes, in explicit and spectacular fashion, all received notions of a coherent, individual self in favor of an imaginatively constructed collective selfhood that comes into being through performance" (151). As I have been arguing, the disappearance of Dinesen's protagonist from the opera stage effects a resonant self-creation, at least as long as Pellegrina can continually renew herself in and through her perpetual

performance. It is because she abandons her monolithic star persona that she can articulate herself through her myriad masks.

On the one hand, Dinesen's text accentuates the subversive elusiveness of its protagonist who cannot be pinned down to a single role. On the other hand, the story of Pellegrina does carry a tragic note – not just because she cannot sustain her protean performance and dies in her failed attempt to escape from her symbolic interpellation. What is also sad is the fact that she is able to fashion herself as a star singer but has to exit the public arena, which is a fate she shares with many earlier female performer figures featured in nineteenth-century texts.[6] In contrast to Woolf's Orlando, who gains a voice in English literature as a woman writer by eventually publishing the poem she has been rewriting for centuries, Dinesen's Pellegrina has to fall silent in order to express herself and eventually dies in her effort to escape from fixed identity constructions. However, as pointed out by Kari E. Lokke (158), the tale does not end quite as tragically. In the closing narrative frame, Lincoln and Mira Jama both affirm that Pellegrina may not be dead after all. They claim that she survives as a "'pretty little jackal'" and reasserts the potential of multiplicity and metamorphosis by barking "'I am not one little jackal, not one; I am many little jackals.' And pat! in a second she really is another, barking just behind you: 'I am not one little jackal. Now I am another'" (Dinesen 429). The fatal interpellation of the singer may thus ultimately be counteracted by her transformation through yet another series of masquerades.

Dinesen had long turned herself into an iconic figure and cultivated her legendary status when she visited the United States towards the end of her life. During her trip her many activities included a lunch given in her honour. One of the pictures taken on this occasion shows her together with two American authors, namely Carson McCullers and Arthur Miller on the one hand and the tragic star Marilyn Monroe on the other.[7] Like Monroe, who is looking at her, Dinesen is immediately recognizable. Marked by age and illness, she looks frail and fragile. However, if Monroe stands for the lethal logic of the single star image she came to enact over her body, Dinesen refers us to a resilient modulation and expression of the self. Seen in profile, her made-up face looks like an elegant mask, which puts the existence of a real Karen Blixen into question and simultaneously proclaims the presence of a fictionalized Isak Dinesen.

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[6] See again the tragic silencing of the female performers in novels such as Germaine de Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie*, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Henry James's *The Bostonians*.

[7] A reproduction of the image can again be found in the illustrated biography by Lasson and Svendsen (198).

As Susan Hardy Aiken points out, Dinesen's fusion with her writing "was never more poignantly enacted" (255) than in the last years of her life, when she seemed to literally die into her art as her already emaciated body withered to merely skeletal dimensions. However, as my reading has shown, it is already in "The Dreamers," the first tale written at the very beginning of her literary career, that she develops a complex dialectics of disappearance and reemergence. Similar to her literary alter ego Pellegrina Leoni, Dinesen modulates her voice as a storyteller by always speaking through her consciously staged masks. In contrast to her fictional character, she succeeds in sustaining both her artistic voice and self-performance.

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