Olive (Emilie Albertina) Schreiner

Known As: Schreiner, Olive Emilie Albertina; Iron, Ralph; Schreiner, Olive
South African Writer (1855 - 1920)

Author(s): Anne McClintock
Source: ***British Writers.*** Ed. George Stade. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992.

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OLIVE SCHREINER'S LIFE was distinguished by paradox. Born in 1855 to missionary parents in an obscure corner of colonial South Africa, she consecrated herself to an impassioned refusal of empire and God. At the age of eight, she shook her fist at the heavens and reneged on the church. Although a daughter of empire, she devoted her life and writings to championing the dispossessed, abetting the Boers against the British during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), and then later the Africans against both. Schooled in discipline and decorum, and destined from childhood for domesticity, she flouted Victorian and parental decree by becoming a feminist, a best-selling writer and intellectual, and one of the most sought after celebrities of her time.

Schreiner's life spanned the heyday of South African mining colonialism, the rise and demise of the late Victorian industrial empire, and the outbreak of World War I. Migrating restlessly between colonial South Africa and fin-de-siècle Britain, she was unusually well positioned to testify, as she did in her novels, essays, political writings, and activism, to the major tumults of her time: the discovery of precious minerals in South Africa, the crises of late Victorian industrialism and the Great Depression, the socialist and feminist upheavals of the turn of the century, the Anglo-Boer War and the great European conflagration of World War I. Her diverse literary output – including three novels (*Undine, The Story of an African Farm, From Man to Man*), two exceptional prose books (*Thoughts on South Africa and Woman and Labour*), an allegorical novella (*Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*), political essays, and three volumes of short stories – was written, she said, "in blood" (*Letters*). Her work amounts to an impassioned and lifelong denunciation of social injustice in the colonies and Britain, and a fierce defense of the disempowered: Africans and Boers, prostitutes and Jews, working-class women and men. In this respect, Schreiner was an exception in her time.

A few years after the 1867 discovery of diamonds in South Africa, when she was fifteen, Schreiner joined the pell-mell rush to the Fields, where among the tents, the brothels, and tin shanties of New Rush she witnessed at firsthand the convulsions of colonial capitalism. Sailing to Britain in 1881, she saw in the fetid slums and rookeries of the East End the calamities of late Victorian industrialism. The 1883 publication in Britain of her novel, *The Story of an African Farm,* when she was twenty-eight, won her overnight fame, the admiration of some of the great luminaries of her time, and the distinction of being the first South African writer to be widely acclaimed in Britain.

In 1889 she returned as a celebrity to South Africa, yet immediately pitched her solitary voice against the swelling crescendo of British jingoism, publicly condemning the notorious Jameson Raid of 1895 and Rhodes's bloody mauling of Mashonaland. From newspaper and podium, she decried the British ravaging of the Afrikaners during the Anglo-Boer War and then the clandestine blood brotherhood of mining capitalism and Afrikaner nationalism that was spawned soon after. The British interned her during the war for her Boer sympathies, and the Afrikaners in turn vilified her for supporting the Africans.

Schreiner's life and writings were crisscrossed by contradiction. Solitary by temperament, she hobnobbed with celebrities. Hungering for recognition, she shrank from publicity when it came to her. Insisting on women's right to sexual pleasure, she suffered torments in confronting her own urgent sexuality. At odds with her imperial world, she was at times the most colonial of writers. Startlingly advanced in her antiracism and in her political analysis, she could fall on occasion into the most familiar racial stereotypes. Revering monogamy, she waited until she was in her forties to marry. When she found "the perfect man," she chose to spend most of her married life apart from her husband. Haunted by longing for a home, she wandered from country to coast, farm to city, continent to continent, unable to settle. She was a political radical, yet she aligned herself with no party. A belligerent pacifist, she supported the Boers in their armed struggle against the British, and was a supporter of the African National Congress when it emerged in 1912.

Yet it is precisely by exploring with the utmost passion and integrity what it meant to be both colonized and colonizer, in a Victorian and African world, that Schreiner pushed the contradictions of empire to their limits, and she allows us thereby to explore some of the abiding conflicts of race and gender, of power and resistance, that haunt our time.

EARLY LIFE

OLIVE SCHREINER was born on 24 March 1855 to an English Dissenting mother and a German Lutheran father in a mud-floored house on a mission called Wittebergen, which lay in a remote African reserve on the borders of Basutoland. The tiny cluster of buildings stood solitary in the veld, scourged by lightning, the red wind of the karoo, and a sun that struck like a damnation. The Schreiners' closest neighbors were the Fingo and Sotho, and some few surviving Khoisan. The nearest post office was a hundred miles away.

In 1837, the same year that Queen Victoria ascended the throne, Rebecca Lyndall had married Gottlob Schreiner. Born into the plush sobriety of a Dissenting Yorkshire parsonage, Rebecca, Olive Schreiner's mother, was carefully groomed for her destiny as adornment to a middle-class man's career. As befitted a daughter of the cloth, she was bequeathed the demure accomplishments proper to her class: French and Italian, singing, drawing, and a generous exposure to books. Cultivated and brilliant, she wanted to be a doctor, but, as a girl, her education was intended to be decorative and not practical; the portals of university and hospital were closed to her. Olive Schreiner later described in a letter her mother's own account of her parent's house, as a sad place of cold meats and catechism, sinners and psalms. Destined for the listless slumber of bourgois marriage and maternity, she glimpsed in empire the radiant

promise of escape. At one of her father's services, she met a young German missionary, Gottlob Schreiner, and agreed almost at once to marry him. Within three weeks of marrying, they had sailed for South Africa.

At once the Schreiners took their place in an imperial narrative already two centuries in the making. Their mission work was inseparable from the politics of empire, and since Schreiner's own background cannot be understood outside this context, something must be said about the colonial situation into which she was born.

Europe first saw the southern African coastline in the fourteenth century, when the Portuguese rounded the Cape and sailed triumphantly into the Indian Ocean on their way to the spoils of the East. In the fifteenth century, the Dutch East India Company founded a tiny refreshment station at the Cape to provide fresh provender for ships plying their unseemly trades up and down the two great coasts of Africa. The Dutch saw little reason for establishing a colony at this unpromising spot, and in 1642, when Jan Van Riebeeck's ships scraped their keels on the bright beaches, the Dutch sailors built a hedge of sour almonds to segregate themselves from the continent of Africa. Nevertheless, over the centuries, small bands of Europeans arrived in sporadic waves and, lured into the interior by the promise of barter and hunting, became the unglamorous vanguard of white expansion.

Contrary to the colonial "myth of the empty lands," the vast grasslands into which these white intruders pushed had been widely populated for centuries. A diversity of sophisticated chiefdoms, some strong, some weak, with different settlement patterns, skills, and military systems, had migrated south in long, slow sweeps through the grasslands, the Nguni along the eastern seaboard, the Tswana and Sotho on the high savannas. Along the southern coast, the gentle Khoikhoi and Khoisan greeted the white visitors with curiosity and a frank enthusiasm for barter. But the sailors and settlers, piqued by the Khoi reluctance to part entirely with their herds, were not fussy about preserving good relations. Grisly colonial records tell of sportive killing raids of hair-raising cruelty, when white men rode out at dawn to massacre at random the sleeping Khoi. Those who did not succumb to smallpox or massacre were dragooned into slavery on the white farms.

Inequities certainly existed between African royals and commoners, seniors and juniors, men and women. Nevertheless, military conflicts were ritualistic and not very bloody affairs, and sophisticated social systems of communal and familial responsibility made southern Africa in some respects a more democratic place than much of medieval and Renaissance Europe (Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa,* 1990). There seemed to be plenty of room for everyone. Only as the white nomads pushed steadfastly east and north, borne rapidly on their extraordinarily wasteful system of farming, did land become scarce, tensions flare over cattle and water, and chafing wars break out along the tattered frontiers. When the British took over the Cape in 1806, most of the settlers were Dutch, so in the 1820's the British Government sponsored the arrival of thousands more settlers to stimulate farming and swell the British presence on the frontiers. It was along these same frontiers that missionaries were settled to serve as a buffer between the colonials and the Africans, and it was among a settlement of Khoikhoi in the eastern Cape that Olive Schreiner's parents had their first mission station.

Rebecca's life there refuted in almost every detail the prototype of the faded, crushed petal of idle Victorian womanhood: the same bourgeois prototype her daughter later passionately denounced in her writings. At the same time, her life bore witness to the subtle betrayals of empire. During the wedding, the minister brusquely tore the garland from Rebecca's bonnet. The frivolity of flowers was improper for a missionary wife, and the clergyman's rebuke foretold a life plucked bare of frippery and frills. On the Schreiners' arrival in South Africa, the illusions of empire were as rudely snatched away. From the moment of beaching at the wind-tossed Cape, until she died a rancorous and destitute invalid in a convent, Rebecca's life was an inclement round of woe.

By all accounts, Gottlob Schreiner, Olive's father, sinned only in his lack of greed and guile. The son of a German village shoemaker, he had given up cobbling at the age of eighteen and set out to join the missionary throng. After an unpromising beginning, he was ordained into the London Missionary Society, then the largest evangelical institution peddling its spiritual wares in the arena of empire. Gottlob arrived in South Africa in 1837 and took his place among "the superfluous men" as H. Rider Haggard called them, the imperial ragbag of unemployed poor, the younger or ill-gotten sons of the clergy and fallen gentry, for whom an industrializing Europe had no place.

Nothing in Rebecca's background could have prepared her for the appalling trial that awaited her. For decades she and Gottlob trekked from mission to mission, lumbering in ox wagons across the scorching wastes of the frontier with their large family. Dogged by disappointment and poverty, natural hazards and the anger of Africans, Rebecca's only revenge was fanatacism, and her only comfort the perpetually deferred promise of heaven.

Rebecca ruled her mission household with unswerving ferocity. Pregnant for the better part of two decades, she had delivered eleven children by the time Olive arrived. Two boys died in infancy, and just before Olive's birth a third son died. Rebecca found solace only in pacing frantically back and forth in the churchyard until Olive was born. In a macabre requiem, Schreiner was named after her three dead brothers: Olive Emilie Albertina Schreiner. Her identity thus took its first shape around a female grief and the mourning of a lost male identity.

For Rebecca, the fanaticism of the civilizing mission cloaked a severe crisis in social identity, and her own fall from class somewhat represents in microcosm the more general crisis in the legitimacy of colonial power. Lacking the accoutrements of the croquet, the cricket, the brass bands, and the sundowners of the colonial gentry, Rebecca could distinguish herself from the Africans and the Boers only by a frank racism, an unswerving sexual puritanism, a diet of self-denial, and a regimen of guilt.

From her mother, Schreiner inherited her precocious intellect, her ethical fervor and her longing for the infinite, her tendency toward self-scrutiny and sexual guilt, her gifts as a raconteur, and her passion for medicine. Her mother also bequeathed to her the secret, ambiguous knowledge of the power of women.

Rebecca appears clearly to have abused her children, whipping them furiously for the smallest sin. More than Gottlob, Rebecca saw herself as the avenging angel of a punitive God. The children were forbidden to speak Dutch, for English was the

language of the racially elect. Schreiner wrote that her earliest memory was of receiving fifty vicious lashes from her mother at the age of five, for swinging on a door handle and using a taboo Dutch word, exclaiming: "*Ach,* it is so nice outside." At a stroke, she recalls, she inherited the "unutterable bitter rebellion" against "God and man" that would wreak havoc with her childhood (*Letters*) and last the rest of her life. The unfathomable injustice of the thrashings was the major reason she became a freethinker and why, at the age of eight, without precedent or example, she summarily swept the heavens clear of her parents' creed and refused any longer to go to church. Henceforth, she would always be an outcast and a pariah.

Identity comes into being only through community, and from the outset Schreiner's earliest relations with her family were shaped by an obscure economy of identity through denial. She learned very young that she would be rewarded with her mother's love only if she denied herself. As a result she fell into the quandary of winning affirmation of self only through a ritualistic self-negation, a sad logic of Christian masochism that left its mark on her life long after she rejected Christian dogma.

Schreiner might have learned to negotiate these childhood dilemmas more successfully had an obscure calamity not befallen her. Shortly after renouncing her parents creed, at the age of nine in 1865, she was punished by the death of her beloved baby sister, Ellie. Inconsolable with grief, she insisted on cradling the tiny corpse in her arms for an entire day and into the night. After the burial, she haunted the grave for weeks, crouching next to the small mound and talking fervently into the earth. Schreiner would later insist that the death of her sister was the most important event of her childhood: it was to Ellie that she owed her lifelong love for women, her mystic faith in the unity of the cosmos, her pacifism, and her desire to be a doctor (*Letters,* 29 October 1892). The death of a female child was an enigma that haunted her, and the premature mutilation of female life returns as a theme in much of her writing.

In the trauma of the early thrashings, her renunciation of Christianity, and her sister's death, Schreiner's identity became fashioned around a tortuous logic of rebellion and guilt, autonomy and punishment. Pleasure in the body, she learned, could be answered inexplicably by an annihilating pain. Transgressing the threshold of domesticity brought violent retribution, and an unholy alliance reigned between forbidden words and power. Transgression offered the shimmering promise of autonomy and the potency of self-creation, but it also threatened her with the catastrophe of negation, of herself or another. Negotiating the boundaries between identity and difference, desire and punishment, love of the other and loss of self became a lifelong activity fraught with peril. In all of Schreiner's writing boundary images preside: doorsteps and windows, seashores and deathbeds, noon and midnight. Characteristically, her imagination was pitched at the dangerous borders between domesticity and wilderness, love and autonomy, obedience and scandal.

At about this same time in her childhood, Schreiner became afflicted by phobias. She would awake at night crying and shouting, then clamber under her bed to lie face down on the cold floor for hours in a paralysis of dread. She found relief from "the agony of there being no Hereafter" (*Letters,* 4 December 1884) only in biting and mauling her hands and beating her head against the wall until she was insensible. Schooled in sacrifice, she went into the veld one day to solicit a final answer from

God, an event she recreates in *The Story of an African Farm*. On an altar of twelve flat stones, she offered up a fat lamb chop and waited in the sacrificial heat for the torch of God. But the conflagration never came, and in a paroxysm of disbelief, she smeared her body with dung. In this way, at the very moment of abandoning Christianity, she was rehearsing the masochistic logic of Christianity, mortifying the body in a bid for salvation from mortification of the soul. Inflicting punishment on herself preempted the power of the mother to punish her and at the same time licensed her own willful mutinies.

Clearly, these "desperate romps" of anger and bewilderment were a hysterical protest against her situation (*Letters*). From an astonishingly early age, Schreiner saw her suffering as gendered: "When I was a young girl – a child, I felt this awful bitterness in my soul because I was a woman" (*Letters,* 27 June 1908). The main force of her refusal of her colonial world came from a deeply felt sense of exile, and much of her motivation to write stemmed from her urgent yearning for an alternative community. Yet, at the same time, colonial life bequeathed to her as a white child a greater measure of physical freedom than that enjoyed by most British girls of her class and time. Easily dodging the overworked Africans and her distracted mother, Schreiner found in the vast veld the promise of redemption from the limits of her situation.

Beyond the sepulchral mission lay an immense, hot country of cactus and red sand, of flat rocks and aromatic thorn trees, where the only sounds were the cries of the sheep and the cough of baboons from the crags. In this beloved place, Schreiner wandered the streambeds and stood alone with her small bewilderments under a blue cathedral of sky. There she developed her precocious talent for introspection: "In such a silence," she later wrote, "one could only think and think" (*Letters*). Pondering the crystal drops of the ice plant and the spoor of leopard in the sand, tracing the enigma of origins in fossils, and examining the scarlet veins of an ostrich heart, she came to read in nature a hidden hieroglyphics of divinity.

Born of colonial stock, Schreiner inherited a Bible and a European culture out of place with the African history of her beloved karoo. With her renunciation of the Bible, she lost forever the dialogue of prayer and inherited instead a haunting sense of exile and solitude. Yet she was incapable of abandoning all solace, and she projected onto the steadfast immensity of sky and veld the metaphysical silhouette of her lost religion. The tendrils of the palm fern, the tracery of ants in the sand, the mierkat's small footfall all offered an alternative allegory of God. If the thunderous God of the Bible had lost his voice, that voice was now ventriloquized through nature. Nature drew her close "with that subtle sympathy which binds together all things, and to stones and rocks gives a speech which even we can understand" (*The Story of an African Farm*). In almost all of Schreiner's writings there is a ritualistic moment when a child frantic with despair is spoken to and calmed by nature. Moreover, Schreiner's god of nature is not a male god, but is consistently feminized. In her allegories and novels, nature is a projection of a female principle, speaking with a female voice, and figured as a long-robed mother bending over and smoothing her child's dishevelled hair.

In this way, the weird, compelling beauty of the karoo gave Schreiner the lifelong respite of a metaphysical solace: "The Universe is One, and It lives!" (*Letters,* 29 October 1892). A monist vision of the cosmos animates all her writing with a mystical

faith in the unity of all things. In her favorite allegory, "The Ruined Chapel," an angel of God exposes a human soul to an unbelieving man. In this soul the man discovers in its tiny drop" the whole universe, the inner nature of stars, lichen, crystals, the outstretched fingers of infants. Gazing at the fully naked soul, he shudders and whispers: "It is God" (*Stories, Dreams, and Allegories,* 1923). In *The Story of an African Farm,* Waldo moves his hands "as though he were washing them in the sunshine." So too Schreiner found absolution for unbelief in the sacrament of sun.

Yet there is a paradox. The vast veld gave Schreiner material grounds for her longing for the infinite, but it also concealed the very real history of colonial plunder that gave her privileged access to this immensity. There was nothing "infinite" about the karoo; it was fenced by land laws, the history of dispossession, and colonial rout. Schreiner's theological skepticism would always be tempered by a mystical faith in the divinity of the cosmos. Yet this faith was won at the cost of ignoring, for a long time, the history of colonialism that guaranteed her privileged access to the land. In later life, Schreiner wandered naked among the hot rocks and bush, calm in the knowledge that there was no one to disturb her. In her rhapsodies to the infinite, it was easy to forget she was walking on stolen land.

Her pantheism, for all its emotional integrity, was very much a metaphysical abstraction. As an abstraction, it served to conceal, and thereby to ratify, the very real imbalances in social power around her. Schreiner's early reluctance to look squarely at the politics of race is rendered most vividly and problematically in the figure of the hostile, ominous, and unsympathetic "Hottentot" that stalks many of her stories. Schreiner swore she never had a mother, yet in fact a number of mother figures attended her childhood. Essentially, it was to the shadowy presence of the African women in the household that Schreiner owed her sense of racial privilege, yet this presence was paradoxical.

Some of Schreiner's first experiences of the limits to her power and pleasure, and hence to her identity, were forged about the figure of an angry and punitive black woman. *The Story of an African Farm,* "The Child's Day" (published as the prelude to *From Man to Man,* 1926), and many of her early stories are haunted by the figure of the angry "old Ayah," a reflection, however oblique and denied, of the resistance of African women. The African woman has no name, she bears only a labor category and the identity of servitude, and yet she possesses a secret and appalling power to judge and punish. In later life, Schreiner confessed to Havelock Ellis her phobic loathing of eating in front of strangers. In "The Prelude," Rebekah is similarly tormented by the African women who look from their corners with strong, steady disapproval while she eats (*From Man to Man*).

Schreiner was caught in a paradox she never resolved. Her mystical monism assuaged her loneliness and sense of exile, but was at odds with the social history of racial and gender difference that shaped her experience. She swung between an agnostic vision of the "awful universe" as capricious and blind and a contrary belief in a universal "Truth" driving the destiny of planets (*The Story of an African Farm*). For years she was tormented by an impossible choice between fidelity to an abstract, universal "Truth" and fidelity to the historical value of human community. The conflict between these values is a theme around which much of her writing revolves, and she

came to feel her inability to resolve the paradox with the force of a lifelong and inconsolable grief.

Schreiner's childhood was marked by a sense of exile that was twofold. As Lyndall cries in *The Story of an African Farm*: "To be born a woman is to be born branded." To the man the world cries "Work! To woman it says: Seem" (part 2, ch. 4). Lyndall's image of the girl sitting beside the window, her pale cheek pressed wistfully against the pane, symbolizes the invisible glass barriers that stand between women and the world. Her furious, failed attempt to smash the window pane and prize open the stubborn shutters bears witness to Schreiner's own bleak sense of the barriers facing women's power. At the same time, Schreiner's sense of exile was very much the outcome of the social alienation of the colonial intruder in a foreign land. Unable to find clues to the social history of her loneliness, she took refuge in the solitary vocation of language, in flights of fantasy and the autonomy of self-creation.

Schreiner was by all accounts an extravagantly intelligent child, a beautiful and ardent girl whom people remembered for her "flashing eyes" and brilliant conversation. Three of the Schreiner sons were sent to Cambridge; the youngest, Will, later succeeded Cecil Rhodes as prime minister of the Cape Colony. As a girl, Schreiner was deprived the formal education of her brothers, but her mother, "all intellect and genius" (*Letters,* January 1893), educated her at home, teaching her political philosophy, economics, theology, and history, indulging her passion for poetry, and imbuing in her a lasting love of medicine.

From the outset, books held an inordinate value for her. By the age of seven, Schreiner had fallen in love with John Milton , and could recite large sweeps of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Alfred Lord Tennyson . In books she glimpsed the delirious possibility that her solitude was not the affliction of an accursed infidel, but rather the mark of a persecuted community of truth-seekers and seers. When the family lived near Cradock, one of the garrison towns strung along the northern frontier, Schreiner was allowed to rifle at will through the local, privately endowed library, a freedom not available to many white girls of her time and certainly not to African women or men. She read voraciously, doggedly pushing her way through Plato , Percy Bysshe Shelley , Edward Gibbon , Baruch Spinoza, Henry David Thoreau , John Ruskin , Thomas Carlyle , William Lecky, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Heinrich Heine , Charles Dickens , the Brontë sisters, George Sand , Robert Browning , and Charles Darwin. By the age of twelve, she was spending six hours a day reading and writing. Discovering Ralph Waldo Emerson (after whom she named Waldo and Em in *The Story of an African Farm,* and from whom she took her own pseudonym, Ralph Iron) rescued her from a suicidal crisis, and "gave her more strength than anything else has ever done," her husband later recorded in *The Life of Olive Schreiner* (1924).

On one momentous evening, moreover, when Schreiner was sixteen, a traveler arrived wet and disheveled at the door. (He in fact became the model for the German "stranger" in *The Story of an African Farm.*) After conversing intensely with Olive, the traveler, Willie Bertram, lent her a copy of Herbert Spencer's *Principles.* She devoured it in three days, and she credited Spencer's rationalist arguments for cosmic unity as having reset the "broken leg" of her "blank atheism." "He helped me believe in a unity underlying all nature; that was a great thing" (*Letters,* 28 March 1884).

At about this time, at the age of sixteen, Schreiner summarily changed her name. She had been called Emily since birth, and now she insisted that she was to be called Olive. As Antoinette in Jean Rhys 's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), says: "Names matter." Names reflect the obscure relations of power between self and society, and women's names mirror the degree to which women's status in society is relational, mediated by a social relation to men: first father, then husband. Schreiner associated the name Olive with her mother's family, and her stubborn change of name expressed a newfound, willful determination to fashion her own identity. At the same time, the choice of the mother's name expressed an identification with her mother's history and power. Much of the inspiration for Schreiner's writings sprang from a desire to redeem the deformed narrative of her mother's life, and both Rebekah in *From Man to Man* and Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm* are named after her mother. Later, when she married, Schreiner refused the symbolic surrender of women's autonomy in names, and insisted that her husband, Samuel Cron Cronwright, take her name, while she kept her own.

Schreiner created stories from earliest childhood. Servants and visitors alike were struck by the eerie spectacle of the child pacing feverishly back and forth on the veranda, hair disheveled, hands clenched behind her back, mumbling stories to herself. There on the veranda, between domesticity and veld, scandal and decorum, autonomy and dependence, Schreiner began the radical project of identity and the vocation of selfhood. Throughout her life, she paced in this way, driving neighbors and landladies to distraction with the restless tread of her feet. Indeed, pacing to and fro between extremes can be seen to be the quintessential activity of Schreiner's life.

From the outset Schreiner's attitude to language was marked by paradox. She discovered in language a magician's power to conjure from nowhere the miracle of her mother's approval. The sorcery of writing promised self-justification and autonomy. Yet language was also the realm of peril, for words were always linked to transgression. In language the boundaries of selfhood were permanently ambiguous, and words could occasion, she had learned, the swift annihilation of rejection and retribution, a sense that deeply shaped her future relations with her public. Moreover, her brother Will, eavesdropping on her, retold her stories to the family at dinner and claimed them for his own. This male appropriation of language drove Schreiner into convulsions of rage and imbued in her a precocious sense of storytelling as a gendered contest over authorship and authority.

The bewilderments of Schreiner's childhood might have been less decisive had they not been overdetermined by the crises and contradictions of her colonial situation. Her father's life was in every sense marginal. As a German, Gottlob was an outsider to the British and the Dutch. As a colonial, he was an outsider to the Africans. The white farmers bitterly resented him for training the Africans in industrial skills, since Africans, they thought, were predestined to be no more than hewers of wood and drawers of water. If he was an honorary member of the white elite, the fiction of racial superiority was belied by his sheer lack of talent for any occupation and the consequent poverty and chronic distress of his family. From her docile and visionary father, Schreiner inherited her hatred of injustice, her generosity, her compassion for the dispossesed, and a lifelong sense of exile.

In the mid 1860's, the family narrative took shape around the disgrace of the colonial father. Meandering from mission to mission, Gottlob Schreiner was beset by failure and financial distress. In 1865, the same year that baby Ellie died, after a number of dismissals and censures, he was finally expelled from the ministry for his infringment of laws banning trading. After twenty-seven years of mission work, the aging and inept preacher tried his hand at commerce. Ambling about the country on horseback, he peddled eggs, hides, coffee, and pepper to the Africans, but one after the other his stores failed. Hounded by debt and disgrace, he surrendered to his creditors and plunged into destitution.

The family scattered. Rebecca went to live in a outbuilding, and Schreiner's parents spent the rest of their lives leaning on the charity of their children. Olive was farmed out to her older brother Theo, a headmaster at Cradock, under whose tyrannical tutelage her life became a "hell on earth." Theo embued in her a lasting sense of her intellect as a deformation and a crime: "He turned away so utterly when I began to think" (*Letters,* 10 July 1884).

All the elements that shaped Schreiner's attitude to writing and the vocation of selfhood were now in place. Her childhood and adolescence were rife with contradiction. Contrary to colonial dogma, her family lived scarcely better than the fairly prosperous African farmers around them. Contrary to patriarchal dogma, her mother was the dominant power in the household. Contrary to Christian dogma, her parents' faith had been rewarded only by "disaster and disaster and trouble" (*Life*). The Victorian ideology of the family was a mockery and failure. All things considered, the evidence of her life could admit no easy evangelism, and the failure of empire to keep its promise bred in Schreiner a precocious pessimism.

Nonethless, her mystical experiences in the immensity of the veld and her timely contact with Spencerian ideas of progress and cosmic unity rescued her from the sense of being everywhere in exile and from the blank atheism toward which she tended. Her love for her sister, too, released her from the lonely soliloquy of selfhood, from the terrors of solipsism. She recalled, "I had no self, she was myself. . . . I sometimes think my great love for women and girls, not because they are myself, but because they are not myself comes from her" (*Letters,* 29 July 1893).

In writing, as in love, the boundaries of identity were blurred and there she could glimpse a longed-for community of identity. Feminists have commented on this characteristic feature of women's social identity: it is figured not as autonomous or inherent, but rather as coming into being *in relation* to an other, through community. Indeed, Schreiner frequently revealed the degree to which her writing was not only an expression of her identity, but an *extension* of her identity: "My work and my people seem more real to me than I myself" (*Letters,* 29 March 1885). She had great difficulty distinguishing between her characters and herself: "Sometimes I really don't know whether I am I or one of the others. Bertie is me, and Drummond is me, and all is me" (*Letters*).

In the semiautobiographical prelude to *From Man to Man,* which Schreiner first conceived in a flash of intuition in 1887, we find almost all the obsessive themes that characterize her writing. A "little mother" groans in the agony of childbirth. Abandoned in the spellbinding heat of a mission garden, a child uncovers her head to

the forbidden sun and make' her way to a secret place in the veld, where in a small allegory of the mother's labor of creation, she builds a tiny house of stone. There she waits for a visitation that never comes. This is an almost ritualistic moment in the colonial narrative: a solitary self sits alone in the wilderness waiting for communion. Bereft of response, she cups her fingers into the shape of a mouse and projects herself into an other-self, confusing the boundary of flesh and symbol, self and other, and in this commerce with creativity redeems the lost moment. Returning to the house, the child crosses a forbidden boundary, climbs through a closed window, and finds in the cool, dim room a sleeping child. Careful not to wake her, she bequeathes the child her gifts: an alphabet book, a Bushman stone, a silver needle and thread, a Queen Victoria's head, and a chocolate. Thereby she symbolically restores to her sister the sacred elements stolen from women: writing, history, creative labor, political power, and sensual pleasure. Yet the gift giving is aborted, for her sleep next to her sister is interrupted by the wrathful "old Ayah," the unforgiving midwife of death and difference, who berates her for her trespass and furiously points out that the baby is dead. Returning to the veld, the girl lies under a tree, cradling in her arms a book instead of a baby, and enters a series of dreams within dreams in which the eternal symmetry of the cosmos and her unity with nature is revealed to her. From the house, there comes the cry of a newborn child.

In this small parable of female creativity one finds many of the themes that preoccupied Schreiner throughout her career: her sense of exile from social community redeemed by a revelation of cosmic unity, the interdependence of women, the fluid sliding between the roles of mother and child, the allegorical association between writing and childbirth, her projection of the principle of difference onto the anger of African women, and her sense of writing as a radical project of self-creation and self-justification.

Just at the time when Schreiner was beginning the lifelong task of fashioning her own identity, a new economy began to be forged in South Africa. So it is not surprising that the contradictions of her society entered her life and writings with overwhelming force.

FIRST WRITINGS

UNTIL THE 1860's, South Africa held scant allure for the imperial powers. But in 1867 a small child happened to pick up the first diamond discovered in South Africa, and with it drew this unpromising outpost of empire into the turbulence of modern imperial capitalism. Overnight, South Africa was transformed from an isolated, pastoral land into a modern industrial economy. Overnight, a motley scramble of thousands of adventurers, fortune seekers, and entrepreneurs tumbled ashore and rushed up-country for the mines. In 1871, a surveyor's wife, while on a picnic, chanced upon another diamond, revealing at a stroke the world's richest deposit of blue diamond-bearing kimberlite. The discovery sparked the New Rush; within a few months thousands of frantic diggers were gouging a huge hole in the bare hillside where the diamond had been found.

Next to the hole a town called Kimberley was born. From the town emerged a small syndicate of ambitious white capitalists jockeying for control of the riches. From the syndicate was formed the De Beers Consolidated Mines, a monolithic corporation

destined to control two-thirds of the world's entire stock of diamonds. One of the most flamboyant and ambitious of these ambitious men was Cecil John Rhodes, a vicar's son from England and the future prime minister of the Cape, who summed up the spirit of the age when he said, "I would annex the stars, if I could."

In 1872 Olive Schreiner, destined to become one of Rhodes's most famous and vexing antagonists, joined her brothers at New Rush in the pell-mell dash for the diamonds. There, standing on the tip of the gaping, noisy hole, among the black diggers and their frenzied white overseers, Schreiner witnessed the beginning of a new and cataclysmic economic dispensation for South Africa.

Those who were called the "diggers" at New Rush were nothing of the kind. The "diggers" were white, and did no digging: the men who dug were black. At the same time, Africans were entirely denied possession of the diamonds they dug from the earth. A law was quickly rushed into force by the white invaders: no African would be allowed to own, buy, or sell a single diamond.

Britain, until then indifferent to the region, quickly threw its paramountcy over the territory, and the lieutenant governor of Natal, supposedly adjudicating between the rival claims of the Boers and the Africans for the land, awarded the fields to a tractable man of Khoi descent called Witbooi. Without any ado, Witbooi requested and received British citizenship, whereupon the diamond fields passed immediately and conveniently into British hands. It was there in the diamond fields in 1872, amid the hubbub and tumult of the new history, that Schreiner began to write in earnest. She was seventeen.

The same year, at Dortrecht while visiting relatives, Schreiner met a man named Julius Gau, the brother of an intimate friend of hers. She traveled the long, slow journey of a hundred miles home with Gau, alone and unchaperoned, an unusual and decidedly improper event at the time. In a letter dated 18 August 1872, after an inexplicable silence in her letters about the journey, she summarily announced to her sister Kate that she was engaged to marry Gau, adding enigmatically: "It may be very soon, that is in four or five months, or it may not be for at least a year to come. I will be able to tell you more definitely next week." Yet nothing was ever again said of the matter, and Gau vanished from the scene.

The incident might have been inconsequential, were it not soon apparent that Schreiner was suffering a severe breakdown, unable to sleep or eat. While any conjecture about the incident remains hypothetical, the semiautobiographical recreations in her novels suggest that she had sexual intercourse with Gau, and that she had been swiftly abandoned. Whatever the event, Schreiner seems to have inherited from it an intense terror of sexual involvment, an abiding fear of rejection, and a lifelong fury at the social hypocrisy of sexual relations. In her unforgiving mission community, the squandering of virginity outside the sanctity of marriage was as great a sin as a woman could commit, tantamount to losing all celestial and earthly credit in the eyes of God and the world. Sexual desire could be answered only by guilt and punishment, and Schreiner marked in her journal: "To be carnally minded is death" (*Life*).

From this time on, Schreiner was tormented by incessant bouts of asthma, and the restless migrations of her life were to a large degree shaped around this malady. Beaten as a child for speaking out of turn, unable as an adolescent to discuss religion, politics, or philosophy with her family, and now unable to speak to anyone about this latest calamity, her life's breath, cheated and strangled like her words, turned inwards. For Schreiner, asthma represented a way of voicing her voicelessness; it served as a form of symbolic protest or a kind of convulsive bellowing for help. Indeed, Schreiner often expressed frustration at the inability of other people to interpret the malady allegorically: "It's as much my mind as my body" (*Letters*). Illness features prominently in her novels and yet medical reasons for the ill health of her characters are never given: illnesses are emotional affairs, physical protests at insoluble conflicts. By heaving and gasping for breath, by physically exhibiting her suffocation and voicelessness, in a voice like a "rusty bellows," she maintained that she was attempting to give voice to her inability to speak. A woman deprived of love, she wrote in the preface to *Woman and Labour* (1911), could only draw a "half-asphyxiated" life.

Asthma was thus a portmanteau malady, rich in paradoxical meaning. It gave Schreiner a motive for mobility, as well as an excuse for failure. It gave her power over people, when she appeared at her most vulnerable. As soon as a relationship became stifling, asthma allowed her to pack up and leave. Asthma absolved her of the sin of self-sufficiency and autonomy: it was not her fault she had to leave her family, live in boarding rooms, live apart from her family and husband. Asthma muted her power, and thus made her appear more "feminine." At the same time, when she was well, she could be free to enjoy the robust strength and physical prowess of which she was alternately proud and ashamed. Asthma allowed her to punish herself and thus preempt the punishment of others.

UNDINE

LIVING among the tents and shacks of New Rush, in 1872 Schreiner began to write *Undine,* and this semiautobiographical tale, written over a period of two years, marks her first willful assumption of the vocation of selfhood. Drawing on her experiences at the diamond fields, and motivated by a haunting sense of exile, *Undine* – although not published until 1929 – was Schreiner's first, halting effort to find clues to the history of her solitude. The words that open the novel, "I was tired of being called queer and strange and odd," belong as much to Schreiner, as her motive for writing the book, as they do to the heroine Undine. Writing in itself became for Schreiner a plea for self-justification, and creating *Undine* amounted to a fierce rebuttal of male, colonial decree and an effort to reinvent the scope of women's identity in a world mismanaged by men.

Undine, the daughter of a devout Boer family, is beset, like Schreiner, by precocious disbelief, and she suffers, like Schreiner, the scourge of social stigma for her temerity and tomboy ways. Militantly "unwomanly," she refuses to genuflect to convention or creed and flouts at every turn her family's dogmas and decorum. She forgets to wear her bonnet in the flaming sun, risking a dark complexion – the ungodly sign of racial and gender transgression. She scandalizes propriety by rescuing her monkey, Socrates, from a tree, enacting a small, allegorical rehearsal of Schreiner's lifelong effort to rescue for women the right to natural intelligence and freedom of the body. Yet if

Undine is a vehement defense of female mutiny, the narrative also bears testimony to the tragic limits of women's revolt, and it initiates Schreiner's abiding theme of the intolerable impasse between love and autonomy.

When Undine sees Albert Blair, the uncaring object of her adoration, she lets fall the book she is reading, symbolically abandoning the world of the mind for the traitorous allure of love. Blair schools Undine in submission, adjusting her gloves, forcing her to betray her convictions in the hypocrisy of church-going, and proclaiming that the essence of femininity is the mediocre and the mundane: "A woman to be womanly should have nothing striking or peculiar about her; she should shun all extremes in manners and modes of expression; she should have no strong views on any question" (ch. 8).

At the diamond fields, Undine discovers that she is the victim of a far more perilous exclusion. As a woman, she is historically barred from the male contest over the diamonds and the economy of mining capitalism. Denied the right to labor, land, and profit, peering into the forbidden depths of the mine, she mourns: "If she had been a man, she might have thrown off her jacket and set to work instantly, carrying the endless iron buckets and coils of rope" (ch. 15). Henceforth money, public autonomy, and sexual power will be reserved for white men, while her alloted fare is dependency and servitude, ill health and grief, and her only profession the vocation of matrimony.

Here arises one of Schreiner's obsessive themes: "All women have their value in coins." Throughout her life, Schreiner responded to the matrimonial trade in women – the barter of female bodies to guarantee male privilege and power, and the rites of domestic dependence – with loathing and fear. For Schreiner, "the unenviable fate of both women and pictures" is to be bought and sold by men (*Undine*). Undine's only access to capital is vicarious: bartering her body to Albert Blair's unsavory father, on the condition that he offer a tidy sum of money, she is seduced and betrayed by the false promise of matrimony, and she ends her life betrothed only to grief. At its heart, *Undine* is a fraught attempt to answer the question that the French feminist Luce Irigiray posed a century later in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985): "Can the commodity refuse to go to market?" If Schreiner seems to answer here in the negative, the novel *Undine* prefigures the necessity of a far more incendiary, if at that moment unimaginable, revolt.

In *Undine,* Schreiner was indifferent to the racial implications of the plundered profits of the diamonds. Undine's gendered rebellion is not matched by any more-radical racial or class rebellion, and her understanding of her social situation remains stillborn. Frustrated by her inability to express the truth of her situation, Schreiner denounced the book as unformed and incomplete, and she later begged Havelock Ellis to have it burned.

THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN FARM

DENIED the pulpit of her father and the political podium of her brothers, Schreiner's only destiny was domesticity. Since no husband seemed imminent, it was inevitable that she enter paid domestic work, and from the ages of fifteen to twenty-two Schreiner worked as a governess in colonial homes.

The colonial governess was in every sense a threshold creature. Graced with an education but not with the opportunity to use it, racially a member of the white elite but in reality a member of the serving class, protected by racial privilege but not by economic security, lodging among black servants but not with them, paid for work that the housewife did for free, the white governess embodied some of the abiding contradictions of the colonial economy of female labor. Schreiner's early experience in domestic service gave significant shape to her later feminism, and an acute understanding of the contradiction between paid and unpaid work animates *Woman and Labour*.

In March 1875, when she was twenty, Schreiner took a position as governess with the Fouché family, on a remote farm in the karoo called Klein Ganna Hoek. There she lived in a single, mud-floored room under the roof of the kitchen, washing in the cold water of a nearby stream. The roof of her room leaked, so she sat under an umbrella, scribbling and jotting, and it was there at Ganna Hoek, in the stolen, exhausted hours after work, that she wrote most of the novel that secured her fame, *The Story of an African Farm.*

The Story of an African Farm is a towering denunciation of the unholy trinity of empire, family, and God – the three grandiose illusions that had graced Schreiner's infancy with their radiance, only to become the traitorous figures of her despair. The animating vision of the book is the failure of both empire and patriarchy to keep their promises, and the radical significance of the book lies in Schreiner's conviction that a critique of the violence of colonialism also entails a critique of the patriarchal family and the institution of marriage.

From the outset, the "African farm" is figured as pathological. The colonial family is in disarray. The white father has vanished, lingering only as an obsolete afterimage in the figure of Otto, the quixotic, dreaming, German overseer, modeled on Schreiner's own father. There is no mother. The household is presided over by a grossly animalistic and monstrous aunt, Tant' Sannie, a deformation of maternal power. Lyndall is an orphan, Waldo a disinherited son. Although Schreiner offers no explicit critique of the white ownership of the farm, it is clear that there will be no legitimate colonial heir to the future. The movement of the plot is flight: flight from the patriarchal house and the economy of colonial agriculture. Waldo flees to the coast, Lyndall flees to the mines, but the ultimate destination is death. Neither marriage, nor empire, nor God can redeem the colonial narrative.

The Story of an African Farm begins, like many of Schreiner's allegories, pitched under a midnight moon, a complex symbol of the uncertain half-light of transcendence. The moon, promising but not ensuring redemption, casts its eerie radiance over the ostrich farm, which lies still under the rule of sleep. Waldo, son of the hapless German overseer, Otto, lies awake in the wagon house, swathed in solitude, listening with dread to the clicking clock. The clock is a repeated motif in Schreiner's tales: almost all Schreiner's children lie in the dark, spellbound by fear of the clock's metronome, measuring time with death: "Dying, dying, dying . . . Eternity, eternity, eternity!" (part 1, ch. 1). For Schreiner the clock symbolizes the grotesque parody of the Victorian concept of industrial progress: mechanical, mundane, deadly. The clock, like the multiplication table, like ancient arithmetic, like the Latin grammar, offers only the cold algebra of reason. The soul, however, "has seasons of

its own; periods not found in any calendar" (part 2, ch. 1). The singular struggle of the novel, indeed the struggle of much of Schreiner's life, is to discover, and to render in words, an alternative, redemptive calendar of the soul.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Schreiner preferred the literary form of the allegory. All of her writings are allegories: "except in my own language of parables I cannot express myself" (*Letters,* 29 October 1892). All of her plots are interrupted by allegories, parables, and dreams that flash their crystalline uncertainties like prisms, refracting themes and images in myriad directions and dispersing their irregular radiance slantingly across the linear progress of plot. From the outset Schreiner wanted her writing to imitate the unpredictable disorder and imprecision of life, "the method of the life we all lead. Here nothing can be prophesied. There is a strange coming and going of feet. Men appear, act and re-act upon each other, and pass away" she says in the preface to *The Story of an African Farm.*

Waldo, like Schreiner, is afflicted with insomnia of the soul. For Waldo, as for all allegorists, the world is the word made flesh: "has it never seemed to you that the stones were *talking* with you?" (part 1, ch. 2). In the beginning was the Word, and nature is the book of God, a divine script destined to be read by visionaries and poets. Nature is the "open secret." The fossil footprints of great birds, the skeletons of fish, the filaments of a spider's web are miniature allegories of an unchanging reality that animates all things: "All true facts of nature of the world are related" (part 2, ch. 2). Under the allegorist's gaze, the varied and multitudinous forms of life dissolve into a many-colored, many-shaped singular form of existence: the thorn tree sketched against a midwinter sky has the same form as the tracery of crystals in a rock, which has the same form as the beetle's tiny horns. The human body, too, is a hieroglyph, offering hints and intimations of divine meaning. The underlying unity of all things is revealed in this beautiful similitude of form: "How are these things related that such deep union should exist between them all?" Schreiner questions in *The Story of an African Farm* (part 2, ch. 1).

For Waldo, books, like nature, reveal "the presence of God." Books offer the delirious, imperial promise of knowing the final secrets of the world: "Why the crystals grow in such beautiful shapes, why lightning runs to the iron, why black people are black." Books offer Waldo, as they did Schreiner, a refuge from cosmic abandon and the scourge of loneliness: books reveal men and women to whom not only kopjes and stones were calling out imperatively, "What are we, and how came we here? Understand us, and know us," but to whom "the old, old relations between man and man . . . could not be made still and forgotten. . . . So he was not alone, not alone.

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* Walter Benjamin asserts that allegory is always shadowed by its dark side. The allegorical vision is guaranteed by an occult faith that the relation between words and things is cosmically ordained, yet the allegorical project is inherently ambiguous. Allegory has its etymological origins in the Greek words *allos* and *agoreuei*: to speak in public of other, or secret, things. Allegory's power is precisely this doubleness, speaking to the chosen few of secret truths, concealing them from the profane. All allegories involve a doubling, or even multiplying, of a text by another. "Art," as Schreiner put it, "says more than it says." Yet, allegory, as a result, is paradoxical and perilous, its ambiguity always threatening to undermine its intelligibility. When Tant' Sannie finds Waldo's book on political

economy, his precious "pollity-gollity-gominy" is unintelligible to her, and she feeds it to the bonfire.

Hence the tragic quality of allegory: "Words are very poor things" (*Letters*). Oblique and strangely incomplete, with its origin in exegesis, allegory both solicits and frustrates desire for original meaning. Words are the sacred emissaries of truth, but they are never fully adequate to their burden, and thus they both illuminate and obscure meaning: "If I say that in a stone, in the wood, in the thoughts of my brain, in the corpuscles of a drop of blood under my microscope, in a railway engine rushing past me in the veld, I see God, shall I not be darkening counsel with words?" (*Letters,* 29 October 1892).

Allegory, moreover, lies on the cusp of memory and forgetting: it points beyond itself to an originary history that at every moment threatens to vanish. In Benjamin's words: "An appreciation of the transience of things, and a concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegories" (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama.*) Here we come directly upon one of Schreiner's central motivations to write: the desire to rescue history, the flesh, and language from oblivion – her cry "not to let the thing die!" Language was a passionate rebuttal of the intolerable enigma of death and the inevitable process of dissolution and decay. Allegory offered Schreiner the promise that language could redeem matter – as she believed as a child, talking for days down into her dead sister's grave. Hence Schreiner's entirely modernist fascination with ruins, with the breathing dead, the interred living. As Lyndall remarks darkly in *The Story of an African Farm*: "Not all that is buried is dead" (part 2, ch. 4).

Yet, for Waldo, "writhing before the inscrutable mystery," such intimations of immortality are repeatedly imperiled by the catastrophic possibility that all is illusion: "If there should be no God" (part 2, ch. 1). Wandering clumsy and ragged in the veld, he scans the stubborn sky and sand for signs of God, yearning "for a token from the inexorably Silent One." Here Waldo rehearses a recurrent, almost ritualistic moment in colonial narratives, whereby the solitary self, standing dumbfounded before an inexpressible landscape, cries out "This *I,* what is it?": "For an instant our imagination seizes it; we are twisting, twirling, trying to make an allegory. . . . Then suddenly a loathing comes to us; we are liars and hypocrites" (part 2, ch. 1). That man in the pulpit lies! The brass-clasped hymn book lies! The leaves of the Bible drop blood; the stones do not give voice to God.

Waldo's crisis, however, which Schreiner here figures strictly as the existential crisis of the universal soul, is more properly speaking a crisis of colonial legitimacy. The sorrow of finitude that haunted Schreiner is a peculiarly colonial predicament. The colonial intruder who cannot find words to fit the landscape stands in a world gone suddenly quiet. The effort to give voice to a landscape that is felt to be unspeakable because it inhabits a different history creates a deep confusion, a kind of panic, which can be warded off only by adopting the most extreme of defensive measures. A colonial culture, Dan Jacobson says in the introduction to *The Story of an African Farm,* "is one which has no memory.

Cut off from the metropolis and arrogantly ignorant of indigenous culture, estranged from all tradition, the colonial is marooned in a time and place bereft of history. At the same time that Schreiner expressed the hope of redeeming history through

allegory, her imperial faith that a singular universal meaning animates the world, that the radiance of a "naked simplicity" imbues the colonial landscape with intelligible form, also confirmed the degree to which, despite herself, she was still a colonial writer (*Letters*).

BRITAIN AND FEMINISM

FOR seven years Schreiner worked as a governess in colonial homes. Then in 1881, she left South Africa for Britain, to fulfill her long desire to become a doctor. From childhood, Schreiner had shared her mother's thwarted ambition to enter medicine: "I could not remember a time when I was so small that it was not there in my heart" (*Letters,* 2 May 1884) As a child in the veld, she dissected the hearts of ostriches and sheep, unfolding their sacred centers "with a startled feeling near akin to ecstasy" (*The Story of an African Farm,* part 2, ch. 1) The scarlet, lacy filaments and mysterious chambers of blood yielded intimations of infinity, and the allegorical promise that "in the center of all things is a Mighty Heart" (part 2, ch. 1).

If part of Schreiner's ambition to be a doctor flowed from her imperial desire to penetrate to the heart of the universe, it also flowed from a stubborn determination to redeem her mother's disappointed life. Thus Schreiner took her place in women's historic attempt to reclaim the traditionally female skill of healing, so violently wrenched from them in the centuries before. In this way, medicine offered Schreiner the hope of reconciling the conflict between her imperial, and conventionally male, "impulse to span the infinite," and the conventionally female activities of duty, service, and compassion (*The Story of an African Farm*). Becoming a doctor, she hoped, could satisfy her "hunger for exact knowledge of things as they are" (*From Man to Man, ch. 7*), while at the same time rescue her from the guilt of her intelligence. "A doctor's is the most perfect of all lives; it satisfies the craving to know, and also the craving to serve" (*Letters,* 2 May 1884).

In South Africa, however, the medical profession was jealously closed to women and black men. In Britain a medical college had recently opened its doors, so in 1881, at the age of twenty-six, Schreiner reversed the trajectory of her mother's life and traveled back to the metropolis, carrying with her two completed manuscripts, *Undine* and *The Story of an African Farm,* and an unfinished work titled "Saints and Sinners."

The years Schreiner spent in Britain, from 1881 to 1889, were momentous ones. Social crises were reverberating through the country and its colonies. The land crisis loomed, as economic power passed from the ancient gentry to the desks of manufacturers and mining magnates. Vast industrial fortunes were made in the great shipyards and the belching mills, while mass unemployment and strikes, the diseases of poverty, and the hardships of economic depression signaled a profound crisis in class relations. The first socialist party, the Democratic Federation, was formed in 1881, the same year Schreiner arrived in Britain.

The class crisis was matched by an acute crisis in gender relations. Mutinous women were crowding and buckling the doors of male privilege. Since midcentury, working-class women had become militant in an effort toward fairer working rights and conditions. Now middle-class women were clamoring for better education, the right to paid work, the right to the franchise. The Married Women's Property Act was passed

in 1882, the Guardianship of Infants Act in 1886, and women won the right to divorce in France in 1884. The "new woman" became a figure deeply feared and derided by many men, emblematic of social chaos and misrule. Masculinity itself was under contest, in the discovery of the Cleveland male brothel in 1889, the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895, and the pathologizing of homosexuality. Ruling class men lashed back, rioting at Cambridge to oppose women's admission to the brotherhood and voting overwhelmingly at the Oxford Union in 1896 against allowing women to receive the B.A. degree. The police drove their horses against the suffragettes, who were arrested, beaten, and violently force-fed in the prisons. William Gladstone opposed the amendment to England's Reform Bill that might have granted women suffrage, and the franchise became a dead issue until 1905.

The metropolitan calamities were compounded by crises in the colonies: sporadic rebellion and chronic agrarian unrest in Ireland, the upheavals in the Caribbean, the aftershocks of the 1857 Rebellion in India, and the ignominious defeat of General Charles Gordon by an Islamic fundamentalist at Khartoum in 1885. England's Great Depression coincided, not accidentally, with the rise of the new imperialism. In 1886 gold was discovered in South Africa. That same year, the European powers sat down at a table in Berlin and carved up Africa among them; not one African leader was present.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the social crises of Victorian industry and empire were figured increasingly within an intricate discourse on evolutionary theory. Beginning about midcentury, scientists, medical men, and biologists became enthralled by the magic of measurement, tirelessly calibrating skulls and skeletons from around the world and pondering the evidence of racial and gender degeneration. From geometric allegories of the body's skeleton, they improvised multifarious legends of racial and sexual difference, baroque in their inventive intricacy and flourish of fictive detail. Scientific racism attempted to grace social inequity with the sanction of science and nature.

At the same time, the Woman Question was fiercely debated at every level of society, and the "riddle" of female identity was answered in a way that placed gender at the center of an imperialist politics. Female sexuality was figured, in Freud 's words, as "a dark continent," and a host of expert geographers and explorers set out to chart the terra incognita of the female body. An intricate analogy between race and gender, women and the colonized, figured women who insisted on working for wages – mining and factory women, domestic workers, prostitutes – as a race apart, as barbaric survivals of a degenerate prehistory, and as an imminent threat to the moral and economic rectitude of the imperial body politic. The analogy between race and gender reached into almost every nook and cranny of British social life, influencing at least two generations of writers and scientists, politicians and lawmakers, theologians and doctors. Indeed, it is Schreiner's immense distinction to have been the only intellectual in Britain to offer a sustained public challenge to these racial and gender stereotypes.

From the outset, however, Schreiner's ambition to become a doctor was doomed by asthma. After a few days at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, ill health forced her to abandon her training. In despair over the ruination of her dream, she began peddling her manuscripts to publishers, concealing her female identity under the pseudonym

Ralph Iron. *The Story of An African Farm* was quickly accepted and published in 1883. The book won instant acclaim, and almost overnight this obscure colonial governess became one of the most sought after intellectuals of her time. Gladstone sent his congratulations; George Moore and Oscar Wilde were eager to meet her; Edward Avering reviewed the book favorably in *Progress*; Rider Haggard praised it as among the most meaningful of the age; the politician Sir Charles Dilke compared it with *Pilgrim's Progress*; and a Lancashire working woman voiced its importance for women: "I think there is hundreds of women what feels like that but can't speak it, but *she* could speak what we feel." Hugh Walpole declared that it marked an epoch "as scarcely any other book can do" (First and Scott, *Olive Schreiner,* p. 347).

Schreiner was courted as a celebrity, invited to hobnob with the intellectual elite of the time. She developed intimate friendships with such luminaries as Eleanor Marx (Karl Marx's daughter) and Havelock Ellis; these two attachments in particular lasted for the rest of her life. Temperamentally averse to the glare of podium politics, she was reluctant to join organizations, and, despite her acclaim and august acquaintances, she led a solitary, fitful life, wandering from boarding house to boarding house, driven by asthma and the "hidden agony of her life" to the continent and then back to London (*Letters,* 18 March 1889). As a single woman living alone, she cut an improper figure, and outraged landladies would burst into her room, insinuating scandal, when she was visited by male friends. She swung between elation and despondency, taking large doses of potassium bromide and reaching out to the people she loved in voluminous epistolary outpourings.

Schreiner was soon invited to join the elite coterie of the Men and Women's Club. Karl Pearson, the renowned eugenicist and enthusiast of empire, founded the club in 1885, inspired, it seems, by both matrimonial and scientific ambitions to gather about him an assemblage of socialist and feminist intellectuals to discuss, without emotion or prurience, the great sexual issues of the time: prostitution and pornography, marriage and monogamy, and, above all, the vexing and inevitable Woman Question. The women of the club were mostly middle-class philanthropists and reformers, single, demure, and a trifle intimidated by the membership's overbearing men. The men were tweedy Oxbridge types, who moved easily between the old-boy enclaves of the aristocratic clubs and the radical bohemia of London's avant-garde. By and large, the club was elitist in its atmosphere. The odors of cigar and port and the faded perfume of philanthropy hung about its discussions, despite its revolutionary agenda and scandalous topics. In this decorous Victorian setting, with its pretensions to rational sobriety, Schreiner's loud gestures and extravagant voice, flashing eyes and passionate tirades disquieted some of the more primped and coiffured members, who privately patronized her as a colonial upstart who had lived too long among coarse and brutal natures." Schreiner viewed them in return as "a lot of old maids and manhaters" (*Letters,* 11 October 1885).

The privileged language of the club was Darwinism. The object was to discover the precise and scientific nature of women's role in the evolutionary advancement of the race and to bring the alarming feminist upheavals under male scrutiny and guidance. Feminism was seen as the maidservant of evolution, necessary but dangerously fickle. Women's proper vocation was service to the species, their rights secondary to their duties: "We must first . . . settle . . . what would be the effect of her emancipation on

her function of race reproduction before we can talk of her rights," Pearson proclaimed grandly (Walkowitz, p. 45).

Schreiner, unused to Victorian restraint, was quick to criticize Pearson's condescension and inconsistencies. Women, as Schreiner rightly noted, were seen by the male club members as the objects, not subjects, of study, while male sexuality was a natural given. The male insistence on the language and "revealed truth" of science shrouded the men's own imprecisions, their vested interests, and unconscious desires. Charlotte Wilson, likewise, scolded Pearson roundly for his assumption that women's lusts were less than men's. Women's chastity, she argued, was "a hard battle," enforced by male society and won only at the cost of extreme toil. Nevertheless, Schreiner's frank independence of mind did not prevent her from developing an equally frank but calamitous passion for Pearson. A cold fish by all accounts, Pearson was bent on keeping his fixation with female sexuality under the wraps of scientific pretensions. Obsessed with race survival and scathingly scornful of the female "shopping dolls" of the middle class, he publicly advocated female sexual power, but was clearly unmanned in reality by passionately sexual and intellectual women. Schreiner's relationship with Pearson became increasingly unsteady; he rebuffed her advances with characteristic iciness, and she left the club in emotional disarray.

FROM MAN TO MAN

NONETHELESS, the club offered Schreiner an unprecedented arena for enriching and expanding her ideas on women's sexuality and labor. During these years she wrote many of the dreams and allegories that would be bound in *Stories, Dreams, and Allegories* (1923). During this time, she also worked almost continuously on *From Man to Man,* the novel in which she gave fictional form to her twin obsessions, the issues of marriage and prostitution. This was the book of her heart: "I love it more than I love anything in the world, More than any place or person" (*Letters,* 11 April 1889). Dedicated to her dead baby sister, and later to her own dead daughter, *From Man to Man* is an impassioned homage to women. "The most womanly book that ever was written," as Schreiner wryly put it, the novel is "the story of a prostitute and of a married woman who loves another man, and whose husband is sensual and unfaithful" (*Letters,* 2 February 1889).

Set in colonial South Africa and London, *From Man to Man* is a radical rebuttal of the presiding tenets of late Victorian and colonial society: evolutionary Darwinism, the imperial ideology of racial and gender degeneration, and the bourgeois Victorian institution of the sexual double standard. The thematic center of the book is the dialectical relation between monogamy ("for women only," as Friederich Engels pointed out in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*) and prostitution for men. In this fictional account of two sisters, one wretchedly bound in marriage to a careless philanderer, the other a prostitute, Schreiner adamantly refuses the Victorian dichotomy of housewife-madonna and whore. For Schreiner, like Engels, the matrimonial trade in women's bodies was the "crassest prostitution," and marriage without love "the uncleanest traffic that defiles the world" (*The Story of an African Farm,* part 2, ch. 4). At the same time, prostitution was a source of unceasing grief and anger for her: her singular outrage was that the professions of marriage and prostitution were well-nigh the only vocations open to the majority of women.

Born into the luxuriant beauty and torpor of a Cape colonial farm, and hungering restlessly for knowledge of the world, Schreiner's character Rebekah can attempt to escape the inertia of her parents' colonial life only through marriage. In Cape Town her husband indulges in a careless round of inamoratas – their African maidservant, actresses, pimply schoolgirls, and respectable matrons – yet Rebekah is forbidden the balls and parties, lest she discover her husband's infidelity and lest she attempt to do the same. The novel is a scorching, griefstricken indictment of the lethal tradition of the sexual double standard. Baby-Bertie, Rebekah's sister, is seduced by her beloved tutor, who immediately bolts for Europe, and when she confesses this indiscretion to her fiancé, she is again summarily abandoned. As in *The Story of an African Farm,* the movement of plot is flight from the family and social constraint. Bertie escapes to join her sister in Cape Town, where she becomes the pretty darling of society, until a jealous socialite discloses her shame to the world. Ostracized and vilified, she takes up with a wealthy man, who sets her up in his boudoir before throwing her to the streets and a life in prostitution.

From Man to Man bitterly condemns the suffocation of the female intellect in matrimony. Immured in the matrimonial house, Rebekah's longing for truth is encaged in her tiny closet of a study; her writings dwindle to a trickle of fragments and outlines. Muffled in the torpor of maternity, she is condemned to soliloquy. Neglected and alone, pacing feverishly in her airless study, she expounds her creed of cosmic monism, the same creed that sustained Schreiner through the blank atheism of despair: "Rebekah is me; I don't know which is which anymore" *(Letters).* In the central, allegorical chapter, Rebekah ventriloquizes Schreiner's challenge to the "old Christian conception" of the universe as the creation of a single, male "individual Will," capricious and violent, capable on a whim of reducing the "shreds and patches and unconnected parts" of existence to nothingness (ch. 7). Refusing to be the figment of a single, male mind, Rebekah offers an alternative vision of cosmic unity: the sheen on a bird's feather, the tilt of the planets, the rainbow lights in a crystal all partake of the great universal life. The prism flings light on the sun, the fossil illuminates the structure of the hand that holds it. Every fragment is a tiny allegory of the whole truth, enigmatic yet redolent with meaning.

Yet here we come upon the familiar paradox in Schreiner's vision. Rebekah finds phantasmagoric solace for her very real social alienation by projecting onto the "great, pulsating, always interacting whole" (ch. 7) of the universe the hope of metaphysical communion. The problem of social community is thus deferred and postponed, and her historical, gendered travail is rendered as a universal condition of the human soul. The book initially poses marriage as a social problem, then displaces the dilemma of female community onto the metaphysical realm. As a consequence, no social solution to the problem of marriage can be found.

To Schreiner, marriage in its present form was a "barbaric relic of the past" (*Letters,* 4 December 1893), but she was always baffled when people reviled her as an advocate of free love or promiscuity. On the contrary, she protested, from the age of thirteen she had held the view that the only ideal was the perfect mental and physical lifelong union of one man with one woman" (1889). True marriage, a sacred and deathless thing, was a mutually contracted monogamy. "No kind of sex relationship can be good and pure but marriage" (4 December 1893). The legal and ceremonial aspects of marriage, however, were "a mere bagatelle" (1895). True marriage was a question of

mutual mental, spiritual, and erotic fulfilment. But the Victorian institution of marriage was no more than the symbolic and contractual surrender of a woman's sexual, property, and labor rights to a man. As a result, it was deeply inconsistent with women's freedom, and Schreiner herself feared she could never marry under such a system: "If I am to live I must be free" (5 January 1886).

Schreiner's critique of Victorian matrimony was fundamentally economic. A true marriage, "the most holy, the most organic, the most important sacrament of life," should be entirely "independent of monetary considerations." "The woman should be absolutely and entirely monetarily INDEPENDENT OF THE MAN" (*Letters,* 1895). Without economic independence, women had no power and no redress. Here Schreiner went beyond the emergent feminist critique of marriage, which tended to focus on sexual and emotional exploitation. Unlike most Victorian feminists who came from comfortable middle-class homes, Schreiner's own class background was so contradictory, and her economic situation so precarious, that she was more aware than most that the real issue was "the sex purchasing power of the male" (*Woman and Labour*).

Schreiner was most vehement in her denunciation of the paucity of professional options available to women outside of marriage. To those who argued that women were free to choose not to marry, she retorted, as Lyndall does in *The Story of an African Farm*: "Yes – and a cat set afloat on a pond is free to sit in the tub till it dies there" (part 2, ch. 4). Lyndall, who refuses to marry without true love, is forced to iron and wash men's shirts for a pittance until she starves to death. To those who argued that women did not want independence, Schreiner retorted: "If the bird does like its cage, and does like its sugar, and will not leave it, why keep the door so very carefully shut?" (part 2, ch. 4).

At the same time, Schreiner was almost alone among her contemporaries in insisting that women's sexual needs are as urgent and compelling as men's. Women's desires are laced and corsetted, crimped and curtailed, she maintained, while men were given privileged access to prostitution, the marriage market, and the double standard. For a woman, unlike a man, premarital or adulterous sex was fraught with punitive dangers. In a world without dependable contraception or legal, safe abortion, "a woman's character is like gossamer (*From Man to Man,* ch. 7). If a woman bartered her virginity outside the matrimonial contract, she was seen by God and the world as having squandered forever her moral and social credit. Bertie, for one, having spent her virginity, has no recourse but to become a "kept women, languishing in opulent ease among the scarlet cushions and chandeliers, the ornamental kittens and ribbons of the wealthy man's apartment, prone to ennui and weeping fits.

The radical thrust of the book, in fact, is that Bertie's luxurious confinement and Rebekah's martyred solitude in marriage are merely different kinds of prostitution. "All other matters seem to me small compared to matters of sex, and prostitution is its most agonising central point," Schreiner once asserted (*Letters*). Prostitution always held a fascination and horror for Schreiner, and she seems to have identified deeply with prostitutes themselves: perhaps, in a way, as the mirror projection of her own sexual guilt. Her fictional portrayal of Bertie's social ostracism and frantic flight from social shame might be read as a semiautobiographical attempt to exorcise the trauma

of Schreiner's own feelings of ostracism following the Gau fiasco. The novel would thereby offer some insight into Schreiner's own incessant patterns of flight.

Yet it is Schreiner's distinction that, almost alone of her contemporaries, she gives prostitution a *social* history. *From Man to Man* is a massive refusal of the often "documented" Victorian stereotype that prostitution was a genetic flaw, an atavistic regression and racial pathology of the body politic. Instead, Schreiner, like Engels, locates prostitution historically alongside the cultural structures of traditional matrimony and the fetish of virginity. "The man with the long purse" has the buying power (*Woman and Labour,* ch. 6); women are driven by economic duress into bartering their sexual services for profit.

In her obsession with prostitution, Schreiner was very much Victorian. Until the 1850's, the widespread tolerance of prostitution in England was reflected in the absence of any serious legislation. But from the 1850's onwards, a discourse on sexuality and venereal disease entered parliamentary debate with great heat and ferocity and became ever more deeply informed by constructions of race, gender, and imperialism. In the 1860's the notorious Contagious Diseases Acts were passed and only repealed after a national avalanche of protest. The acts were clearly designed less to abolish prostitution than to place control of "sexwork" in the hands of the male state. The initial impetus for the legislation had come from the recent blows to male, national self-esteem in the arena of empire. The public argument ran that the real threat to the prowess and potency of the national army lay in the syphilitic threat that prostitutes supposedly posed to the genital hygiene of the army. If women who served the garrison towns could be forcibly examined and cordoned off, the purity of the army and of respectable middle-class patrons could be assured. The acts therefore gave police the right forcibly to impose physical examinations, registration, and incarceration on working-class women thought to be working as prostitutes in designated garrison and naval towns. At the same time, the regulation of sexual behavior served as a means of policing the unruly working-class population at large.

In 1885, a few years after Schreiner arrived in Britain, W. T. Stead had set London aflame with his lurid revelations about child prostitution, published in *The Pall Mall Gazette* as "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon." Stead's tales of hapless virgins entrapped by lascivious aristocratic roués gave middle-class women a language in which to express for the first time the sexual distress, frustration, and secret terrors of Victorian marriage. The prostitute became the projection of middle-class anxieties and hypocrisies, while prostitutes' own voices, lives, motives, and powers were swept away in the ensuing storm of middle-class outrage and voyeurism.

Schreiner was thoroughly Victorian in the way that prostitutes figured in her writings as objects of grief and rage. Like many Victorian women, she had virtually no knowledge of prostitutes' real lives, and her identification with them, intense and heartfelt as it was, served more as a projection of her own very real sense of sexual exploitation and vulnerability. Like most Victorians, she saw prostitution as a reflex of male sexual needs, and it never occurred to her that sexwork could also be a form of resistance to patriarchal control in the family and marriage, as well as to economic distress and social immobility. For many women prostitution was preferable to marriage and expressed a stubborn refusal of precisely the "sex parasitism" that Schreiner condemned in the marriage of convenience.

Certainly, Schreiner was never able to resolve satisfactorily the tension between her feminist and socialist understanding, on the one hand, with her Spencerian faith in a cosmic unity and design governing the universe, on the other. For the remainder of her life, Schreiner carried the manuscript of *From Man to Man* about with her, working and reworking the remarkable book, able neither to finish nor abandon it. In the same way that she carried the small white coffin of her dead baby with her, unable to entrust it to the earth, she could not entrust "this greatly loved offspring of her mature mind" to the public (*Life*). Closure eluded her, and she died with the novel still unfinished. As was only fitting, the scandalous, incomplete book was published posthumously. As Lyndall says in *The Story of An African Farm,* "We can say things to the dead that we cannot say to the living" (part 2, ch. 4).

While in Britain, Schreiner was besieged by social invitations and a sprinkling of marriage proposals, and she fled for a while to London's East End to evade callers. Although she was averse to meetings and public gatherings, in the next few years she met Gladstone and Spencer; the Sheffield socialist Edward Carpenter; the novelist George Moore; and also W. T. Stead and Arthur Symons. An unsystematic commitment to socialism drew her to the large socialist crowds that were swelling in the East End, and to the river during the great Dock Strike of 1889, when casual labor finally won the right to unionize. But by the middle of 1889, she had made up her mind to return to South Africa.

In 1886 gold had been discovered in the Transvaal. A year before, Rhodes had formed the De Beers Consolidated Mines Company, and in 1889 he received a charter from the imperial government to operate in Rhodesia. In October of 1889, Schreiner set sail for South Africa, with the "nervous feeling" that she would marry Rhodes (*Letters*).

SOUTH AFRICA AND WAR

RHODES became prime minister of the Cape Colony in 1890, and far from marrying him, Schreiner's attraction paled almost immediately. While she continued to admire the man personally, and while he never withdrew his great admiration for her and her writing, she became his most vocal opponent, devoting herself to public denunciation of his imperial policies. The country was brewing for war, though few observers besides Schreiner could see it.

Schreiner settled in the lonely town of Matjesfontein. There she formed the habit of meeting traveling politicians on the station platform to engage in conversation before their trains departed. There, too, she began a series of brilliant and prophetic articles on South African political life, collected in 1923 as *Thoughts on South Africa.*

In 1892, Schreiner met Samuel C. Cronwright, a farmer and former member of the Cape Parliament. She married him two years later. He was priggish and pedantic, yet every inch the colonial male. A surviving photo of the couple is revealing: Cronwright-Schreiner stands fully erect, head back, legs apart, his hands thrust manfully in his pockets, the image of the proprietory husband. Olive sits on a log at his knee, self-consciously coy and a trifle smug. Their dog is resting its dutiful head on her knees. This traditional family tableau notwithstanding, Schreiner was clearly

the dominant party, obliging Cronwright to leave his beloved farm and move to Kimberley on account of her asthma.

In 1895, at the age of forty, Schreiner gave birth to a longed-for baby girl. The child seemed sturdy, but it lived only until the next morning, and Schreiner's grief was unstaunchable. The baby's death coincided with national crisis. Afrikaner agitation against British maneuvers in the Transvaal began to swell. Schreiner and Cronwright publicly denounced the incipient capitalist and Bond brotherhood, and they condemned Rhodes's African policy of dispossession, a brutal policy neatly summed up in his frank admission: "I prefer land to natives." Schreiner vehemently opposed the Flogging Bill for which Rhodes voted: "Edward," she wrote to Edward Carpenter, "you don't know how bad things are in this land; we flog our niggers to death and wealth is the only possible end and aim in life" (*Letters,* 23 November 1892).

In 1899 Schreiner published her antiwar pamphlet, *An English South Africans View of the Situation,* and delivered speeches as part of the women's protest movement in the Cape. In 1896 she and her husband had published *The Political Situation* – a document that cried out presciently, if fruitlessly, against the "small and keen body of men amalgamating into rings and trusts" who were quickly settling "their hands round the mineral wealth of the country." Indeed, the deep-level gold mining of South Africa needed huge inputs of capital, advanced technology, and very cheap, ample labor. But the labor requirements of the mines came into swift competition with the labor needs of the farmers. Moreover, the miners' need for a centralized transport system and a unified economy and state began to strain against the rustic economy and political structure of the Transvaal. Out of these contradictions exploded the bloody Boer War.

In 1896 Rhodes had been briefly disgraced by the failure of the notorious Jameson Raid, the botched outcome of a plot by two of the largest mining companies, among others, to take over the Afrikaner Transvaal for the British. Schreiner publicly deplored the raid, an extremely unpopular position and one that earned her the enmity of the British settlers and her family's outraged contempt. Rhodes was indeed obliged to resign as prime minister of the Cape, but in the uncertain aftermath of the raid he busied himself further north in Matabeleland, where the infamous Rudd Concession of 1889 had given him a monopoly over all the minerals in Lobengula's kingdom in return for some guns and ammunition, a paltry annual grant, and a steamboat. In 1893 Rhodes had marched on Lobengula's seat, Bulawayo, with a column of white mercenaries, and in the next three years Matabeleland was subjected to an unrelentingly brutal mauling, during which almost all the Africans' land and all their cattle passed into white hands. The country was christened Rhodesia: the name summing up that inimitable colonial presumption that the entire history of a land and people can be subsumed under the personal identity of a single white male. Rhodes returned to the Cape a hero.

One morning, during the time that Rhodes was "pacifying" Rhodesia, Schreiner awoke with her allegorical novella *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897) "full fledged" in her mind (*Letters,* August 1896). The allegory is a visionary diatribe against the Mashonaland massacres, centering on the lynching of three Africans, and it is structured as a dialogue between Christ and Trooper Peter Halket. Schreiner wrote the piece in anguish, terrified of the risks she was taking in condemning Rhodes,

dreading her family's response, but unable to keep silent. That year she suffered three miscarriages, two of them probably due to the trauma of the isolation and rejection that followed the book: "The attacks from my family . . . kill me," she wrote (*Letters,* October 1896). But despite the great personal cost to Schreiner herself, and despite the book's immense circulation, *Trooper Peter Halket* could do nothing to prevent the eruption of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899.

Schreiner did everything she could to alert the public in Britain and South Africa to the impending calamity. She sent cables, held interviews, attended congresses against annexation, and suffered a heart attack under the pressure. During the war, at women's congresses, she vehemently protested the British burning of the Boer farms; she cried out against the infamous concentration camps into which the British herded Afrikaner women and children. Twenty-five thousand women and children died of starvation and ill-treatment in these frightful places. Schreiner was renowned as an incendiary public speaker – when she spoke, according to one source, "she was transfigured into flame."

The thrust of her great prose collection, *Thoughts on South Africa,* is a fiercely protective defense of the Boers. Having lived among the Afrikaners as a governess, she had "learnt to love" them, particularly the Boer woman, who was "the true citadel of her people" (*Thoughts on South Africa*). She voiced her admiration of Boer women in the language of the international women's movement, praising their rugged strength and labor and urging them never to give up their wagon whips and white caps for hats with paper flowers and croquet mallets: "The measure of its women is ultimately the measure of any people's strength and resistile power" (*Thoughts On South Africa*). Although the Boers had admittedly been cut off from the Enlightenment, she wrote, they were also untouched by the "god of commerce." In her paeans to the Boers, Schreiner refused the dominant British stereotype of Afrikaners as a racially fallen, idle, and degenerate race, but her arguments were riven by a fundamental flaw. In her sentimental fidelity to the besieged Boers, she represented the war as an agon between two white cultures, and the fundamental issue of the preeminent African claim to the land and minerals went for the moment ignored. The Afrikaners were ferocious racists, and their labor practices were by and large appalling. Yet Schreiner was uncritical of the Boer republics until after the war, when she saw them coming to power and no longer felt they needed her protection: "It is the Boers who are top dog now" (*Letters*).

WOMAN AND LABOUR

WHILE the Boer War was shaking the country, Schreiner wrote her great prose work *Woman and Labour.* She had begun a book on the Woman Question in her youth, despite her isolation from any feminist inspiration. Motivated only by her own precocious sense of gendered travail, she had set herself the task of uncovering the historical clues to the "hidden agony" of her life. In the decades that followed she worked continuously at this monumental "sex book," until 1888, when she had only the last section to complete.

In its original form, the most notable feature of Schreiner's "sex book" was the sheer immodesty of its scope. Like Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State,* the book was frankly audacious in its attempt to embrace the whole of

human history in a grand global schema. Borrowing its form from the bildungsroman and the narrative of evolution, the book attempted to chronicle the epic unfolding of the world historical condition of women. Beginning in prehistory, the narrative traced the shambling climb of humanity through the tumultuous centuries into the rattle and glare of industrialism.

Almost none of this vast and ambitious undertaking survives. The introduction to *Woman and Labour* is a truncated requiem to the lost labor and the lost years. In 1899 Schreiner left Johannesburg because of ill health. Two months later, the Anglo-Boer War broke out, and martial law confined her to the Colony. In her absence, British soldiers broke into her study, forced open her desk, and lit a bonfire in the center of the room with all her papers. When she returned, the great intellectual labor of her life was a bundle of charred and blackened scraps that fell to ash as she touched them. She had no copy.

Some months later, interned by the British for her pro-Boer sentiments in a house on the outskirts of a village, surrounded by armed guards and a high barbed-wire fence, forbidden reading material or news, Schreiner resolutely forced her thought "from the horror of the world . . . to dwell on some abstract question" and rewrote from memory one chapter of the larger book of twelve. The chapter was published as *Woman and Labour* in 1911, a broken shard of the original monument, yet hailed by many prominent feminists of her generation as the Bible of the women's movement.

The circumstances of *Woman and Labour* bear tragic testimony to the gist of its argument. Incomplete and mutilated, radical and incendiary, and, above all, stubbornly and triumphantly rebellious, the book amounts to a miniature allegory of Schreiner's life. Condemned to labor in the shuttered dark, forbidden consort with the public world of news and history, surrounded by the male technology of violence, her life and labor were subject to the disfiguring violence of male imperatives.

The fundamental point of the book is its attempt to give to women's labor and women's subjection a social history. Schreiner dismantles women's subjection as universal, natural, and inevitable. The stories of women's disempowerment and revolt are historical and political stories: the lessons of gender are not written immemorially in the blood. Morover, women have power, and women resist; they are not the mute and passive sufferers of victimization. But the effects and potential for resistance take different forms in different social moments and are shaped by the enabling conditions of the time.

For Schreiner, rifling through the ancient and modern tomes of biology and science, medicine and botany, the lesson of evolution was that "sex relations may assume almost any form on earth." In the majority of species, she argued, the female form exceeds the male in size, and often in predatory nature. Nor are parenting tasks inherent in nature. Contrary to the dominant Victorian notion that saw the male hunter as the herald of history, Schreiner placed historical agency into the hands of women, offering the life-giving mother, who, carrying both child and fodder, stood erect to take history forward. Nonetheless, Schreiner never fully throws off the evolutionist mantle. As she saw it, the custodian of progress is "ancient Mother nature sitting as umpire" (ch. 4). Here the familiar contradiction emerges: she debunks the ancestral

opposition between a male culture and female nature, but then reinvents history as presided over by a benificent – and natural – female force.

Woman and Labour has been best remembered for Schreiner's analysis of women's labor, and the condition of "sex-parasitism" to which many women were then condemned. The fundamental tense of *Woman and Labour* is the imperative: "*Give us labour and the training which fits us for labour!*" (ch. 1). Schreiner's was a cry to open up all labor for women and to reclaim for women their ancient economic power. Henceforth, there was no fruit in the garden of knowledge that women were not determined to eat:

> From the judge's seat to the legislator's chair; from the statesman's closet to the merchant's office; from the chemist's laboratory to the astronomer's tower, there is no post or form of toil for which we do not intend to fit ourselves. (ch. 4)

Moreover, contrary to Victorian dogma, women had always worked: "We hoed the earth, we reaped the grain, we shaped the dwellings, we wove the clothing, we modelled the earthen vessels." In the now-famous slogan of the feminist movement: "Women have always worked, we have not always worked for wages." As herbalists and botanists, women were the "first physicians of the race." As childbearers, they bore the race on their shoulders. But as society progressed in technical skills, she wrote, men no longer spent their lives in fighting, and they returned from the hunt to invade the women's realm. The spinning wheels were broken, the hoes and grindstones were taken from women's hands, the rosy milkmaids vanished. Women's "ancient field of labor" shrank (ch. 1), and they were condemned to a passive and incessant "sex-parasitism" upon the male (ch. 2).

Yet there are points where Schreiner's sense of historical agency is uncertain. She does not question the gendered division of labor between hunting and agriculture, nor does she offer a systematic theory of historical change. No reason is given why men should want to wrest economic control from women, nor why they were able to. Beyond a vaguely Spencerian notion of inevitable progress, Schreiner lacks a theory of gender conflict and a theory of historical change.

Nonetheless, Schreiner's radical challenge was to address the doctrine of "separate spheres" and the emergent Victorian image of the "idle woman." She denounces Victorian middle-class hypocrites who oppose women's waged work because they see it as contrary to an idealized female role as "divine childbearer"; she points out that this same oppression does not carry over into anguish for the "woman who, on hands and knees at tenpence a day, scrubs the floors of the public buildings." For the Victorian male, she notes, "that somewhat quadrupal position is for him truly feminine" (*Woman and Labour,* ch. 6). Such men were not disturbed by the old tea drudge bringing them tea in bed, but rather by the woman doctor with an income who spent the evening smoking and reading. Schreiner's insight here is into the class hypocrisy of the objection to women's work: men only wanted women out of the prestigious, powerful, and profitable realms of labor. As Lyndall cries in *The Story of an African Farm,* "When we ask to be doctors, lawyers, lawmakers, anything but ill-paid drudges, they say, No" (part 2, ch. 4).

An equal amount of Schreiner's fierce indignation is directed at the systematic inequities of women's recompense for "equal work equally well performed." She was unusual among feminists for her recognition, born from the contradictions in her own class background, that the "idleness" of middle-class women depended on the vast, invisible labor of working-class women, both black and white: "Domestic labor, often the most wearisome and unending known to any section of the human race, is not adequately recognised or recompensed" (introduction to *Woman and Labour*).

She was also exceptional in her insistence that women's sexual needs are as powerful as men's. Yet here, too, Schreiner's arguments are ambiguous, for she deplores the ravages of celibacy, yet she also sees sex as a sacred sacrament, properly taken within the context of a monogamous love. Yet, in a world lacking anything close to reliable contraception, where abortion was a grisly, agonizing, and often fatal last resort, where loss of virginity outside of marriage carried, as she well knew, catastrophic social stigma, Schreiner knew that women were condemned to a social situation where sex could not be "taken" otherwise. The material conditions were not yet present for a fundamental transformation of sexual relations. Schreiner, in fact, never condemns the monogamous, heterosexual family. Furthermore, her views on male homosexuality were no more enlightened than the prevailing depictions of perversion and pathology, and there seems to be no evidence that she had any interest in lesbianism.

Schreiner's special distinction, however, lies in the extraordinary foresight of the views on African politics that she developed at this time. Yet despite the brilliance of her political essays, they remain by far the most neglected aspect of all her writing – a neglect stemming no doubt from the very ethnocentricism and racism she attempted to challenge.

During the decades surrounding the turn of the century, Schreiner formulated a view unique to herself alone: that the Labor Question and the Native Question in South Africa were inseparable. Her analysis of race was founded on an analysis of class, and she saw the African and land questions as an extension of the Labor Question of Europe, only deeply complicated by race. Almost alone, she recognized that the fundamental issue was territory: in order to understand South Africa's political problems, "the first requisite is a clear comprehension of their land."

Certainly, Schreiner's views on Africans are at times blemished by condescension and a patronizing pity, but in her political analyses, she was breathtakingly ahead of her time. As early as 1891 she had foreseen some form of union between the various states, and she even predicted the date: 1910, off by exactly five months. She foresaw that the country was "bound ultimately to become free, self-governing, independent and republican," decades before South Africa did indeed become a republic, albeit a racially exclusive one. More profoundly, she argued that solutions such as separate territories for the different South African peoples were unthinkable, despite the fact that the Bantustan, or black state, solution was not systematically implemented until after 1948. She recognized the Africans "as the makers of our wealth," and deplored the shunting of the Africans into locations and slums. She stressed the political indivisibility of all South African peoples, anticipating by decades the nonracial position of the African National Congress. Indeed, she argued in *Thoughts on South Africa* that the distinctive bond uniting all South Africans "is our mixture of race

itself." She recognized the problem of a racially divided working class, which even the South African Communist party did not see in the 1920's, at a time when white workers mobilized under the banner Workers Unite for a White South Africa.

Schreiner forecast, moreover, that a time would come when the future of the world would be in the hands of the American and Russian nations. She was, at the same time, vehemently opposed to the virulent anti-Semitism that contaminates much white South African culture, and she insisted on the need for recognizing the invaluable contribution of the Jewish people to the world. She was also prescient in deploring the senseless slaughter of the African wildlife and in calling for conservation and wildlife reserves.

It is to Schreiner's lasting credit and distinction that she was a political activist as well as a political writer. In the last years of her life, she struggled to implement her vision of racial and gender equality within the political activism of the international suffrage movement. The Cape Women's Enfranchisement League hailed her as the genius of the suffrage movement of South Africa. She was in close contact with the British suffrage movement through radical friends like Constance Lytton and Emmeline Lawrence. It is also to Schreiner's credit that she, alone of all the others, insisted that the franchise could not be seen as a gender issue alone. She was fully, if uniquely, aware that the issue was as much an issue of class and race, and when the Women's Enfranchisement League, a white, middle-class group, refused to demand a nonracial franchise, she resigned in protest in 1913 – the year of the notorious Native Land Act by which black South Africans were allocated a meagre 13 percent of the most broken, arid, and devastated land in the country.

Indeed, in all her writings and political work, Schreiner took the contradictions of colonialism, and women's situation under colonialism, to the very edge of historical transformation. Yet, as she herself well knew, social transformation is a collective issue, and no single visionary is capable of inaugurating a new epoch. Perhaps a fitting epigraph to her situation is found in the lines from Antonio Gramsci's prison notebooks: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.

Schreiner left South Africa for the Continent in 1913, a year after the African National Congress was formed, and she was traveling in Germany when the darkening cataclysm of World War I engulfed the globe. In 1920 she sailed back to South Africa, a year after the peace treaty of Versailles. She died – at Wynberg, on 11 December 1920 – as she had lived, in a boarding-house room between homes, alone, a book against her heart, her pen still held firmly in her hands, her eyes steadfastly open to the darkness around her.

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Source Citation

Anne Mcclintock. "Olive (Emilie Albertina) Schreiner." *British Writers*. Ed. George Stade. *Supplement 2: Kingsley Amis to J. R. R. Tolkien*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 4 May 2010.