

## OLIVE SCHREINER

### THE LIMITS OF COLONIAL FEMINISM

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**O**live 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. Though 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 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 bestselling writer and one of the most sought-after intellectuals of her time.<sup>1</sup>

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, the socialist and feminist upheavals of the fin de siècle, the Anglo-Boer War and the great European conflagration of World War I. Her books were written, as she put it, “in blood”; amounting 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 exceptional in her time.

At the age of fifteen, Schreiner joined the pell-mell rush to the diamond fields, where amongst the tents, brothels and tin shanties of New Rush she witnessed at first hand 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 publication in Britain of her novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, won her overnight fame, the admiration of some of the great luminaries of her time and the distinction of being the first colonial writer to be widely acclaimed in Britain.

In 1889, Schreiner returned to South Africa as a celebrity, but she immediately pitched her solitary voice against the swelling crescendo of British jingoism, publicly condemning the notorious Jameson Raid and Rhodes' bloody mauling of Mashonaland. From newspaper and podium, she decried the British ravaging of the Afrikaners during the Anglo-Boer War and 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 the publicity when it came. Insisting on women's right to sexual pleasure, she suffered torments in confronting her own urgent desires. At odds with her imperial world, she was at times the most colonial of writers. Startlingly advanced in her anti-racism and 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. After 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 continent to continent, farm to city, unable to settle. She was a political radical yet aligned with no party. A belligerent pacifist, she supported the Boers in their armed struggle against the British and the African National Congress when it emerged in 1912.

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

### DOMESTIC COLONIALISM AND THE CIVILIZING MISSION

Schreiner was born on March 24 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 AmaFingo, Sotho and some few surviving Khoisan. The nearest post office was a hundred miles away.

In 1837—the year that Queen Victoria ascended the throne—Rebecca Lyndall married Gottlob Schreiner. Born into the plush sobriety of a Dissenting Yorkshire parsonage, Schreiner’s mother, Rebecca, had been 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 fit her to be decorative, not practical, and the portals of university and hospital were closed to her. By her own account, her parents’ house was a sad place of cold meats and catechism, sinners and psalms. Destined for the “listless half-awake” slumber of bourgeois marriage and maternity, she glimpsed in empire the radiant promise of escape.<sup>2</sup> 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. In the nineteenth century, as the white nomads pushed steadfastly east and north, borne rapidly on their wasteful

system of farming, land become scarce, tensions flared over cattle and water and chafing wars broke out along the frontiers. When the British took over the Cape in 1806, most of the settlers were Dutch, so the British government sponsored the arrival of thousands more settlers in the 1820s 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 there amongst a settlement of KhoiKhoi in the Eastern Cape that Olive Schreiner's parents had their first mission station.<sup>3</sup>

Rebecca's life there refuted in almost every detail the stereotype of the faded, crushed petal of Victorian womanhood; the bourgeois ideology that her daughter later passionately denounced in her writings. At the same time, her life bore witness to the subtle betrayals of both empire and the cult of domesticity. During the wedding, the minister had brusquely torn 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. 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, the same year as the Great Trek and took his place among "the superfluous men," as 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 trials 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 fanaticism and her only solace 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 backward and forward 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 fall from class represented in miniature a more general crisis in the legitimacy of colonial power. Lacking the class 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. Schreiner described her mother's fall from class in the language of domestic commodity, likening her to a grand piano shut up and mistakenly "used for a common dining room table."<sup>4</sup>

More than Gottlob, Rebecca saw herself as the avenging angel of a punitive God. There is evidence that she abused her children, whipping them furiously for the smallest sin. The children were forbidden to speak Dutch, for English was the language of the racially elect and the borders of racial difference had to be violently policed. Schreiner's earliest memory is 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." 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 swept the heavens clear of her parents' creed and refused any longer to go to church. Schreiner learned the lesson of domestic violence and with it an "unutterable bitter rebellion" against "God and man." Henceforth, she would always feel an outcast and a pariah.

## COLONIALISM AND GENDER AMBIGUITY

Identity comes into being through community and from the outset Schreiner's earliest relations with her family were shaped by an obscure economy of feminine identity through denial. Like Cullwick, 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 only through a ritualistic negation of self, the sad logic of Christian masochism that left its mark on her life long after she rejected Christian dogma. Far from being a sacred refuge, the domestic realm held only martyrdom and betrayal.

Schreiner's identity was fashioned around a tortuous logic of gender 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. She discovered in language a magician's power to conjure from nowhere the miracle of her mother's approval. The sorcery of writing promised the radical project of self-justification and autonomy. Yet language was also the realm of peril, for words were always linked to transgression. 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. In language the boundaries of selfhood were permanently ambiguous and words could occasion, as she well knew, the swift annihilation of rejection and retribution, a sense that deeply shaped her future relations with her public. Moreover, her brother, Will, eavesdropped on her, then retold her stories to the family at dinner and claimed them for his own. The 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.

Negotiating the boundaries between private and public, identity and difference, desire and punishment, self and other became a lifelong activity fraught with peril. If the cult of domesticity charged women, in particular, with the maintenance of boundaries between private and public, domesticity and empire, marriage and market, all Schreiner's writings testify to the punitive cost this exacted from women. Throughout her 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.

Servants and visitors were struck by the eerie spectacle of Schreiner as a young child pacing feverishly back and forth on the verandah, hair disheveled, hands clenched behind her back, mumbling stories to herself—in a small mimicry of her mother's desperate pacing in the graveyard before giving birth. There on the verandah, the threshold between domesticity and empire, Schreiner began the radical project of reinventing identity through narrative. Throughout her life, she paced in this way, driving neighbors and landladies to distraction with her restless tread. Indeed, pacing to and fro between extremes can be seen to be the quintessential activity of Schreiner's life.

From an early age, Schreiner 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. Unable as a child to resolve the dilemmas that beset her, Schreiner became afflicted by phobias, feeling her inability to resolve the paradoxes with the force of an inconsolable grief. She lay awake at night crying and shouting, then clambered under

her bed to lie face down on the cold floor for hours in a paralysis of dread. She found relief from the “agony thinking there was no Hereafter” only in biting and mauling her hands and beating her head against the wall until she was insensible.<sup>5</sup> 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. At the very moment of abandoning Christianity, she rehearsed the masochistic logic of Christianity, mortifying the body in a desperate 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 wilful mutinies.

Her “desperate romps” of anger and bewilderment were an hysterical protest against her unacceptable situation as female. From an extremely 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.”<sup>6</sup> The main force of her refusal of her colonial world came from a deeply felt sense of feminine exile, and much of her motivation to write stemmed from her desire to invent an alternative community beyond the betrayals of colonial domesticity. For Schreiner, the invention of the boundary between private and public so central to the maintenance of middle-class colonial power held only frustration and outrage.

Schreiner’s childhood was marked by a sense of solitude that could be assuaged only by flight into fantasy and the autonomy of self-creation. As a girl she was destined to live in political and economic exile within her privileged white culture. 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.’”<sup>7</sup> 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 windowpane and pry open the stubborn shutters bears witness to Schreiner’s bleak sense of the barriers facing women’s power. If domestic colonialism fetishized glass as the icon of spiritual advance and rational knowledge as penetration, for Schreiner (as for Charlotte and Emily Bronte) window glass symbolized the often fatal limits to female power. For these women, glass became a symbol not of progress, but of female mutilation, domestic frustration and betrayal.

Unable to find clues to the social history of her loneliness, she took refuge in the solitary vocation of language. 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.

Schreiner's lifelong sense of exile was very much the outcome of the social alienation of the colonial intruder in a foreign land. As a white colonial, she was exiled from the Africans around her. Her blasphemy and disbelief had exiled her from her family. Her niggardly colonial culture would neither recognize nor nourish her intelligence and power. Nonetheless, colonial life bequeathed to Schreiner, 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, she 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, 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 of mimosa and mirage, 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." Nature baptized her with a new divinity: pondering the crystal drops of the ice plant and the spoor of leopard in the sand, tracing the enigma of origins in fossils and the scarlet veins of an ostrich heart, she came to read in nature the hidden hieroglyphics of God.

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 projected onto the steadfast immensity of sky and veld the metaphysical silhouette of the 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 male God of the Bible had lost his voice, it was now ventriloquized through a feminized 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."<sup>8</sup>

The weird, compelling beauty of the Karoo gave Schreiner the lifelong respite of a metaphysical solace: "The Universe is One and It lives!"<sup>9</sup> A monist vision of the cosmos animates all her writing with a mystical faith in "the unity of all things."<sup>10</sup> In her favorite allegory, "The Ruined Chapel," an angel of God exposes a human soul to an unbelieving man. 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."<sup>11</sup> 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.

Schreiner's sacrament of sun, however, blinded her to the colonial cast of her mystical monism. The vast veld gave her metaphysical grounds for her longing for the infinite, but 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 missionary intrusion, colonial 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 some time the history of colonialism. In Schreiner's rhapsodies to the infinite, it was easy to forget she was walking on plundered land.

Schreiner's childhood bewilderments 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 both 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, for the natives, they thought, were predestined to be no more than hewers of wood and drawers of water. Though Gottlob 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 chronic poverty and distress of his family.

Contrary to the cult of domestic colonialism, Schreiner's 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 was rewarded only by "disaster and disaster and trouble." The Victorian Family of Man was a mockery and a failure. All things considered, the evidence of Schreiner's life could admit no easy evangelism and the failure of empire to keep its promise bred in her a precocious pessimism.

At this time, 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 her baby sister, Ellie, died, after a number of dismissals and censures, he was finally expelled from the ministry for infringing a ban on 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 and hounded by debt and disgrace, he surrendered to his creditors and plunged into destitution. The family scattered. Rebecca went

to live in an outbuilding, and she and Gottlob 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 imbued in her a lasting sense of her intellect as a deformation and a crime: “He turned away so utterly when I began to think.”<sup>12</sup> At about this time Schreiner began to write.

From the outset, race formed an acutely ambiguous dimension of her early rebellion. Schreiner was caught in a paradox she would never fully resolve. 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. Her pantheism, for all its emotional integrity, was very much a metaphysical abstraction. As an abstraction, it served to conceal and thereby ratify, the very real imbalances in social power around her. The most troubling presence of these imbalances appears in her work on the racial doubling of the mother figure.

#### RACE AND THE DOUBLED MOTHER

Schreiner swore she never had a mother, yet in fact a number of mother figures attended her childhood. There is a ritualistic moment in almost all of Schreiner’s writings, when a child frantic with despair is spoken to and calmed by nature. Schreiner’s god of nature, however, is not a male god, but is consistently feminized. I wish to stress, however, that this female nature is also white and *anglicized*. In Schreiner’s allegories and novels, nature is a projection of a white female principle, figured as a long-robed mother bending over and smoothing her child’s disheveled hair.

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” (Khoikhoi) who stalks through many of her stories.<sup>13</sup> More than anything else, it was to the shadowy presence of the African women in the household that Schreiner owed whatever fragile sense of privilege she had. Yet this presence was paradoxical. Some of Schreiner’s experiences of the limits to power were at the hands of punitive black women. As a white child, she held potential racial power over the African workers in the home; but these women possessed a secret and appalling power to judge and punish her. *The Story of an African Farm*, “The Prelude” to *From Man to Man* and many of Schreiner’s early stories are haunted by the figure of the angry “old Ayah,” a reflection, however oblique and denied, of the domestic resistance and resentment of African women — a resistance and an ambiguity that would throw radically into question Schreiner’s monistic longing for a humanist unity, then later, a universal, feminist solidarity.

Almost without exception, black women in Schreiner's fiction are servants. In *The Story of an African Farm*, Africans pass like fitful shadows through the white people's lives, unnamed and without identity. The notion that they might have lives of their own is not entertained. In "The Prelude" to *From Man to Man*, the African woman is simply called Old Ayah. She has no name; she bears only a labor category (nurse) and the identity of servitude. In Schreiner's fiction, the black woman stands at the threshold of domesticity as a figure of intense ambivalence.

For Schreiner, as for most colonials, African women serve principally as boundary markers. Their chief labor function is to perform boundary work. They stand at thresholds, windows and walls, opening and shutting doors: "Old Ayah opened the door."<sup>14</sup> In "The Prelude," the white child asks the African nurse to let her out. "The handle was too high for her. The woman let her out."<sup>15</sup> The black women minister to colonial and domestic boundary rituals, marking day from night, order from disorder and life from death. They scrub verandahs, clean windows, wash clothes, welcome newcomers and generally mediate the traffic between colonials and between Africans and colonials, marking by their presence and maintaining through their labor the newly invented borders between private and public, family and market, race and race.

In "The Prelude," the Old Ayah, rather than the white mother, polices the inclement barriers between black and white, guaranteeing racial difference and decorum: "Get down from that wall, child, will you! . . . You'll be burnt as black as a Kaffir before your mother gets up. Put your kappie on!"<sup>16</sup> In a curious reversal of colonial dogma, African women preside over the civilizing mission and the cult of domesticity: "And get your face washed and your hair done . . . and tell Mietjie to put you in a clean dress and white pinafore."<sup>17</sup> At a symbolic level, Schreiner's tales express the unbidden recognition that African women hold the keys to the domestic power of white people: "Old Ayah locked the door and put the key into her pocket."<sup>18</sup> Yet, like Freud, Schreiner never brings this insight to fictional or theoretical fruition. Instead, I suggest, she displaces her rage at the cult of domesticity onto black servants.

Why are African women figures of such ambivalence for Schreiner? In her more mature political writing and activism, Schreiner was unusual in her anti-racism and sympathy for black people, yet in her fiction Africans are, more often than not, forbidding ciphers. In the eyes of her fictional white children especially, African women bear an aspect of vengeful authority. *From Man To Man* portrays the Old Ayah, not the "little" English mother, as the ominous figure of domestic prohibition: "Old Ayah . . . shook her by the shoulder. 'What are you doing here? Couldn't you see, if the door was locked, that you weren't to get in here?"

. . . Aren't you a wicked, naughty, child." The "little mother" by contrast is gentle and accommodating. The white father, to all intents and purposes, is absent.

In Schreiner's fiction, one witnesses a displacement and a double disavowal. Schreiner's own mother, the evidence attests, was cold and punitive, prone to fits of temper and what her husband called "inflammation of the brain." Contrary to patriarchal decree, she, rather than Gottlob, wielded authority in the family. Bearing twelve children in twenty-four years, she suffered acute domestic deprivation, living without domestic comforts, often without sanitation, sometimes even without a home. Even when they found temporary respite at Wittebergen, where Olive was born, Rebeccah was bent under an overwhelming regime of domestic work: whitewashing the rooms; sewing clothes, curtains and sheets; making shoes; cooking; sweeping and cleaning; growing produce and raising children, while pregnant every second year. For the Schreiners, the cult of domesticity was a betrayal and a grief and their household a place of constricted rage.

Much of the inspiration for Schreiner's writings appears to have sprung from a desire to redeem the mutilation of her mother's life. Both Rebekah in *From Man to Man* and Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm* are named after her mother. As Antoinette in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* says: "Names matter." Names reflect the obscure relations of power between self and society and women's names mirror the degree to which our status in society, is relational, mediated by our social relation to men: first father, then husband. At the age of sixteen, Schreiner summarily changed her name. She had been called Emily since birth, but she insisted that she was to be called Olive from then on. Schreiner associated "Olive" with her mother's family, and her willful change of name expressed a newfound determination that she would be the one to fashion her own identity. Later, when she married, Schreiner refused the symbolic surrender of women's autonomy in names and insisted that Cronwright, her husband, take her name, while she kept her own. The choice of the mother's name and the fictional naming of her characters after her mother expressed an intense identification with her mother's history and thwarted power. Nonetheless, the redemption of the (white) mother figure held very real paradoxes, of which the major dimension was race.

In her fiction, I suggest, Schreiner splits the ambiguous power of the mother both to love and to punish, and projects it onto three distinct figures, which take their historical meaning from colonial hierarchy: the good English mother, the repulsive Boer Tannie and the surrogate mother figure of the ominous black nurse. Quite unlike Schreiner's own mother, the English mother is a sanitized figure, loving and mild. In *The Story of an*



*African Farm*, where there is no mother proper, Tant (Aunt) Sannie is a gross parody of women's punitive power. It is telling, here, that the figure of negative femininity is Afrikaans, not English. Schreiner thus manages the dilemma of female betrayal by projecting it either onto the figure of the degenerate Boer (a racist British stereotype she would later vehemently oppose), or onto the hostile but safely distanced figure of the African woman. In her fiction, in other words, Schreiner redeems the idea of the white mother, but only at the cost of black women.

Schreiner's redemption of the white mother is won at the expense of a double disavowal: denial of the historical memory of her own mother's anger and denial of the agency of black women—beyond their subservience, that is, to the logic of the colonial narrative. In "The Prelude," the white child's uncomprehending grief at the death of her newborn sister is projected away from the white mother onto the black nurse as the principle of difference and death. "You are killing it like the other one!" Rebekah cries. "Rebekah turned her eyes onto the old Ayah and gazed at her. . . . 'I hate you so!' she said."<sup>19</sup>

#### RACE, MIMICRY AND THE ABJECTION OF BLACK WOMEN

One can add a further dimension. In Chapter 2, I argued that Munby, like many other male Victorians, managed the class divisions of domestic labor by projecting them onto the invented domain of race. How, in the colonies, does the racial division of domestic labor, overdetermined by class, play itself out in the identity of a white child? If, as I argue, British middle-class identity took formative shape around the abjected labor of working-class women (repudiated but indispensable), in the colonies the contradictions of identity were deeply fractured by race. White children—nursed, tended, caressed and punished by black maids and nurses—receive the memory of black women's power as an ambiguous heritage. Part of the white child's earliest identity is structured around the strength and authority, however restricted, of the black mother figure. Coming to adolescence, however, white children are obliged, by colonial decree, to detach themselves from identification with the African women with whom they have been so intimate and thus also from significant aspects of their own identity. Black women come to form the abjected, inner limit of the white child's identity: rejected but constitutive. In the process, a number of morbid symptoms appear.

Schreiner's fictional portrayal of African women betrays an unresolved recognition of their anger and strength, as well as resentful memories of their power over her. 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. The black women, derisive and insulting, have a terrible power to objectify and negate the white child's identity: "They talked of her as if she were a stone wall. 'Look at her now!', said the Kaffir maid, 'How she eats! She's trying to devour the spoon'. . . . It hurt her so that they talked of her."<sup>20</sup> In Schreiner's fiction, the angry Ayah "casts a long dark shadow on the wall."<sup>21</sup>

The power of black women is a colonial secret. White domestic life enfolds itself about this secret, as its dreaded, inner shape. Displaced and denied, its pressure is nonetheless felt everywhere, managed by multiple rituals of negation and abasement, suffused with unease. The invisible strength of black women presses everywhere on white life so that the energy required to deny it takes the shape of neurosis. Laboring by day to uphold the white cult of domesticity, black women are shunted by night to tiny backyard *khaya's* (homes) without water, sanitation, heat or light. The furtive intimacies between black women and their white charges; the forbidden liaisons between black women and their white male employers; the fraught relations of acrimony, strained intimacy, mistrust, condescension, occasional friendships and coerced subservience that shape relations between African women and their white mistresses ensure that the colonial home is a contest zone of acute ambivalence.

Schreiner gives her African characters no agency beyond the colonial narrative. The black servants are reflector figures, casting light or shadow on the white people, their imaginations wholly absorbed in the colonial drama, assisting the white's comings and goings, bearing witness to their scenes, but never acting in their own regard. They have no family life of their own; their houses are a shadowy tumble on the edge of domesticity, marking the limits of colonial space. Their genealogies are broken; their names, like their children, are stolen from them. They facilitate plot, but only as vehicles, not as agents.

Semi-domesticated Griet, with her yellow petticoats and her clowning mimicry, embodies Schreiner's half-formed sense of the myriad forms of African women's domestic resistance. Luce Irigaray first suggested that mimicry might be a form of women's revenge. With her "small, yellow-brown Bushman face, with its touch of Hottentot," with her yellow dress and unruly ways, Griet serves in part as the parodic embodiment of domestic mimicry: "giving pretended orders to the Kaffir maids"; or howling, "covering her face with her pinafore . . . but partly peering out from the side of her pinafore now and then to see what effect her grief had."<sup>22</sup> In her campaign of hate against the white woman, Veronica, Griet wages a small solo war of domestic disruption, ruining the food with too much salt, putting frogs in the bath,

dropping cups, severing the garden plants at the root, "setting Veronica the cracked plate at teatime and the bluntest knife at dinner; and . . . putting a small drop of aloes into the coffee."<sup>23</sup>

In colonial homes, African women perform myriad such small acts of refusal: in work slowdowns, in surreptitiously taking or spoiling food, in hiding objects, in chipping plates, in scolding or punishing children, in revealing domestic secrets, in countless acts of revenge that their white employers identify as laziness, clumsiness, incompetence, gossip, and theft. In her sympathetic portrayal of Griet's rites of rebellion, Schreiner shows an astute understanding of women's hidden, domestic refusals, but Griet's resistant force is contained and diminished by her childish status, her failure to change anything and her early disappearance from the text. If Griet turns domestic colonialism into parody, she nonetheless remains a sad testimony to the need for caution against too lyrically glamorizing the subversive power of mimicry and hybridity.

While *From Man to Man* is a fiery denunciation of the traitorous cult of domesticity, Schreiner seems moved only by its impact on white women. The colonial underpinnings of slave labor and the dragooning of African women into domestic service in her white heroine's households passes unexplored. Even Griet's familial origins are buried in a throw-away comment. One of the few Africans to be named, the mischievous little Khoikhoi girl "had been got from her drunken mother a little while before for a pair of old shoes and a bottle of wine."<sup>24</sup> Despite Schreiner's towering indignation at the fact that "All women have their value in coins," the white sisters' intimate involvement in the coercion of child-slave labor passes unremarked and is never brought into literary focus as a moral dilemma for feminism.

It may of course be argued that anachronistic moral hindsight serves little purpose, considering the colonial context when Schreiner wrote. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that her anguished denunciation of the commodification of white women in prostitution and marriage does not extend to the domestic commodification of African women by these same white women, who escape her literary censure.

What, then, does Schreiner make of black motherhood? Despite her preoccupation with the self-sacrificial sacraments of maternity, Schreiner arranges her plots so that the two black children who are named, are removed from their (drunken, uncaring and otherwise unfit) black mothers into the hands of kindly white women. Griet scampers through the colonial plot like an elfin waif, seemingly untouched by her dramatic coercion into labor and her separation from her mother, serving merely as a vehicle for the reader's merriment and sympathy with the white heroines.

If the male colonial narrative is fatally corrupt, Schreiner seems to suggest that civilization can be redeemed through the self-sacrificial

graces of white motherhood. However, there is no room for the black mothers in her fiction; once their role in providing children for the plot has passed, they disappear without trace. The white mother, it seems, can redeem African childhood, but only at the expense of the black mother. When Rebekah adopts the mixed-race offspring of her husband's adulterous affair with their black serving girl, the black mother (who may well have resented the snatching of her child by the white wife of her white lover) is conveniently portrayed as unsympathetic, uncaring and malicious and can therefore be packed off without compunction. The mixed-race woman, or *mestiza*, throws flagrantly into question the "purity" of the oppositions of black and white.<sup>25</sup> Thus Rebekah's adoption of her husband's illegitimate daughter is so designed as to illuminate her spiritual largesse; nonetheless, she raises this "daughter" to call her "mistress." The child's origins remain a family secret—to the child, to her white father and to her half-sisters and -brothers. The household, like the narrative, enfolds itself about the denial of the black mother, and the idea of the maternal is fissured by race.

For all Schreiner's blistering critique of the middle-class ideology of the family, white motherhood in *From Man to Man* is rhetorically constructed as the norm. In the process, black women are elided. This elision creates an abiding paradox, for it fractures Schreiner's monism and her yearning for a universal feminism. The repression of African women disrupts the text, surfacing again in the narrative as an excess, in the unresolved form of the African women's anger. In the liminal, angry figures of African women, Schreiner's feminism finds its aesthetic and political limit.

## MINES, MARKET AND MARRIAGE

In the semi-autobiographical 'Prelude,' written years later in a flash of intuition, we find almost all the obsessive themes around which Schreiner's writing would revolve. A "little mother" groans in the agony of childbirth. Abandoned in the spellbound heat of a mission garden, a child uncovers her head to the forbidden sun and makes 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 whereby 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

bequeaths 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 would preoccupy Schreiner: 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.

At this very 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.

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In 1871, a surveyor's wife, while on a picnic, chanced upon a diamond, revealing at a stroke the world's richest deposit of blue diamond-bearing kimberlite. The discovery sparked the New Rush and, within a few months, thousands of frantic diggers were gouging a huge hole in the bare hillside. 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 Company, 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 men was Cecil John Rhodes, a vicar's son from England and 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' most famous and vexing antagonists, joined her brothers at New Rush in the pell-mell dash for the diamonds. Standing on the rim 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, but did no digging: the men who actually dug were black. At the same time, Africans were violently denied possession of the diamonds they dug from the earth. A law was quickly rushed into force by the white invaders: no African would ever 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 Lieutenant Governor Keate 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 further ado, Witbooi requested and received British citizenship, whereupon the diamond fields passed immediately and conveniently into British hands. At the diamond fields in 1872, amidst the hubbub and tumult of the new history, Schreiner began to write in earnest. She was seventeen.

From about this time, Schreiner became tormented by incessant bouts of asthma. Beaten as a child for speaking out of turn, unable as an adolescent to discuss religion, politics or philosophy with her family and unable to speak to anyone about an obscure sexual calamity that befell her at this time, her lifebreath turned inwards, cheated and strangled like her words. In a sense, asthma offered Schreiner a way of voicing her voicelessness. A form of symbolic protest, her asthma was a kind of convulsive bellowing for help. Indeed, Schreiner would often express frustration at people’s inability to interpret her malady allegorically: “It’s as much my mind as my body.”<sup>26</sup> Illness features prominently in her novels, yet medical reasons are never given: illnesses are emotional affairs, physical protests against insoluble conflicts. By heaving and gasping for breath, by physically exhibiting her suffocation and voicelessness in a voice like a “rusty bellows,” she was attempting to give voice to her inability to speak. A woman deprived of love, she wrote, could only live a “half-asphyxiated” life.<sup>27</sup>

Asthma was 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 female sin of self-sufficiency, allowing her to punish herself and thus preempt the punishment of others.

## WHITE ABJECTION

### THE GOVERNESS AS BOUNDARY MARKER

Living among the tents and shacks of New Rush in 1872, Schreiner began to write *Undine*, a fierce rebuttal of male colonial decree and a

contorted 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 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 the right to natural intelligence and freedom of the body for women. Yet if *Undine* is a vehement defense of female mutiny, the narrative also bears testimony to the tragic limits to women's revolt and initiates Schreiner's abiding theme of the impasse between love and autonomy.

At the diamond fields, Undine discovers that she is the victim of a perilous exclusion. Like Africans, she is barred from the white male scramble 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."<sup>28</sup> Henceforth she knows that money, public autonomy and sexual power are reserved for white men, while her allotted fare is dependency and servitude, ill health and grief and her only profession the vocation of matrimony.

Here we come at once upon the obsessive theme about which much of Schreiner's writing turns: "All women have their value in coins."<sup>29</sup> Throughout her life, Schreiner responded to the matrimonial trade in women and the rites of domestic dependence with loathing and fear. She insisted that domesticity was commodification and marriage was a market. As she put it, "the unenviable fate of both women and pictures is to be bought and sold by men."<sup>30</sup> Undine's only access to capital is vicarious: bartering her body to Albert Blair's unsavory father on condition he make over a tidy sum of money, she is seduced and betrayed by the false promise of matrimony and ends her life betrothed only to grief.

If *Undine* answers in the negative, the book prefigures the necessity of a far more incendiary, if at that moment unimaginable, revolt. In *Undine*, Schreiner was indifferent to the racial question of the plundered profits of the diamonds. Undine's 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 later begged Havelock Ellis to have it burned.

Schreiner herself was destined for domesticity. Denied the pulpit of her father and the political podium of her brothers and because no husband was imminent, Schreiner worked as a governess from the age of fifteen to twenty-two in colonial homes. 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 Labor*.

As Mary Poovey has written, the Victorian governess was "like the middle-class mother in the work she performed, but like both a working-class woman and man in the wages she received."<sup>31</sup> She was necessary to uphold the domestic ideal of leisured monogamy, but she also threatened to destroy it. Lest her domestic loyalties be divided, she had to be unmarried. Yet an unmarried woman was an affront to nature: a temptation to men, a threat to wives, a danger to herself. In intimate liaison with her charges, she was obliged to appear asexual. Like a lady, yet not a lady, like a maid, yet not a maid, she was tasked with presiding over the contradictions of the domestic sphere as if they were a decree of nature. Small wonder that the governess was widely perceived as a social problem.<sup>32</sup> In the colonies, to compound matters, the starched white governess stood between wretchedly paid black women and privileged but unpaid white wives, mediating acute social differences within a common identity of labor. In the colonial family, the fractures in the domestic scene became severe.

The colonial governess was in every sense a threshold creature. Graced with an education, she did not have the opportunity to use it. Racially a member of the white elite, she was in reality a member of the serving class. She was protected by racial privilege but not by economic security. She lodged among black servants, but not with them. She was paid for work, which the housewife did for free. All in all, the white governess embodied some of the most abiding contradictions of the colonial economy of female labor. In this sense, the white governess, like the African maid, is an abjected figure: rejected but necessary, the boundary and limit of domestic colonialism. But the historical abjection of the white governesses is played out differently from the abjection of black women, in such a way as to throw into question any appeal to abjection as an invariant universal.

In March 1875, at the age of twenty, Schreiner took a position as governess in the Fouche 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 what would eventually be called *The Story of an African Farm*.



## THE FAILURE OF THE FAMILY OF MAN

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DOUBLE CROSSINGS

*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 the cult of progress and the Family of Man 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 domesticity and the institution of marriage.

From the outset, the colonial farm is figured as pathological. The colonial family is in disarray. The failure of filiation is everywhere apparent. 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, who is soon to die, unable to bequeath to the future the patrimony of paternal authority or to redeem history. 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: from the patriarchal house and the economy of colonial agriculture. Waldo flees to the coast and Lyndall flees to the mines, but the ultimate destination is death. Neither marriage, 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 promises but does not ensure redemption, casting its eerie radiance over the ostrich farm, which lies under the rule of sleep. Waldo, son of the hapless 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 of Schreiner’s children lie in the dark, spellbound by fear of the clock’s metronome, measuring time with death: “Eternity; eternity; Die! Die! Die!”<sup>33</sup>

For Schreiner, the clock is a grotesque fetish of Victorian industrial progress: mechanical, mundane, deadly. If male colonials extolled the redemptive fetish of clock-time, for Schreiner the missionary bell tolls death; the clock, like the multiplication table, the ancient arithmetic, the Latin grammar, offers only the cold algebra of reason. For Schreiner, the colonial fetish for rational time and progress is a macabre aberration of the spirit. The soul, however, “has seasons of its own; periods not found in any calendar.” The singular struggle of Schreiner’s novel, indeed the struggle of much of Schreiner’s life, is to render an alternative, redemptive calendar of the soul.

## FEMALE ALLEGORY IN THE RUINS OF HISTORY

It is not surprising that Schreiner preferred the literary form of allegory. All her writings are allegories: "Except in my own language of parables I cannot express myself."<sup>34</sup> All 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 life we all lead. Here nothing can be prophesied. There is a strange coming and going of feet. Men appear, act and react upon each other and pass away."<sup>35</sup>

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?" 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 or the world are related." 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?"<sup>36</sup>

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 abandonment 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."<sup>37</sup>

Yet, as Walter Benjamin has intimated, allegory is always shadowed by its dark side.<sup>38</sup> 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; it speaks to the chosen few of secret truths and conceals 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."<sup>39</sup> Oblique and strangely incomplete, with its origin in exegesis, allegory both solicits and frustrates the desire for original meaning. Words are the sacred emissaries of truth, but they are never fully adequate to their burden and thus 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?"<sup>40</sup>

Allegory, moreover, lies on the cusp of memory and forgetting; pointing beyond itself to an originary history that at every moment threatens to vanish. In Walter 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."<sup>41</sup> 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 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."

Yet, for Waldo, "writhing before the inscrutable mystery," such intimations of immortality are repeatedly imperiled by the catastrophic possibility that all is illusion: "no God! not anywhere!" 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, in which 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." 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, which Schreiner figures 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, as Dan Jacobson has said, "is one which has no memory."<sup>42</sup> Cut off from the metropolis and arrogantly ignorant of indigenous culture, estranged from all tradition, the colonial is marooned in a time bereft of history. Allegory, for Schreiner, expressed the hope of redeeming history and the will to remember; it was a stratagem against oblivion. Yet at the same time, 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 confirms the degree to which, despite herself, she was still a colonial writer.<sup>43</sup>

## DOUBLE CROSSINGS

### THE IMPERIAL METROPOLIS

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 be 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." As a child in the veld, she dissected the crimson hearts of ostriches and sheep, unfolding their sacred centers "with a startled feeling near akin to ecstasy." 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."<sup>44</sup>

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. 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.<sup>45</sup> Becoming a doctor, she hoped, could satisfy her "hunger for exact knowledge of things as they are,"<sup>46</sup> and at the same time rescue her from the guilt of her intelligence. "A doctor's life is the most perfect of lives; it satisfies the craving to know and also the craving to serve."<sup>47</sup>

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 to white women, 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 called *Saints and Sinners*.

The years Schreiner spent in Britain (1881–1889) were momentous ones. Social crises of shocking magnitude were reverberating throughout 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 belching mills, while mass unemployment and strikes, the diseases of poverty and the Great 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. For decades, working-class women had militated for 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 for many men a deeply feared and derided figure, emblematic of social chaos and misrule.<sup>48</sup> Masculinity itself was under contest, with 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 against the admission of women to the BA degree in 1896. The police drove their horses against the suffragettes, who were arrested, beaten and violently force-fed in the prisons. Gladstone opposed the amendment to the 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 Gordon by an Islamic fundamentalist at Khartoum in 1885. The Great Depression coincided, not accidentally, with the rise of the new imperialism. In 1886 gold was discovered in South Africa. That same year, the heads of the European powers sat down at a table in Berlin and carved up Africa among them; not one African leader was present.

In 1883, *The Story of an African Farm* was published under the pseudonym Ralph Iron, to instant acclaim. The 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 Aveling reviewed the book favorably in *Progress*; Rider Haggard praised it as among the most meaningful of the age; Sir Charles Dilke, the politician, 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 it marked an epoch "as scarcely any other book can do."<sup>49</sup>

Schreiner was soon invited to join the elite coterie of the Men and Women's Club. Karl Pearson, famous 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. The club's aims were 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 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 odor 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 primed and coiffured members, who privately patronized her as a colonial upstart who had lived too long among "coarse and brutal natures." "A lot of old maids and manhaters," she called them.<sup>50</sup>

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.<sup>51</sup> 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 entirely unwonted 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 pretension. 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.

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 published in *Stories, Dreams and Allegories*. At this time, she also worked almost continuously on *From Man to Man*, the novel in which she gave fictional form to the twin obsessions about which much of her writing revolves: 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.”<sup>52</sup> 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.”<sup>53</sup>

## PROGRESS AND THE FAMILY OF MAN

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 Engels put it) and prostitution (for men only). 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 Madonna housewife 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."<sup>54</sup> At the same time, prostitution was a source of unceasing grief and anger for her. The 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, 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 amorous affairs with their African maidservant, actresses, pimply schoolgirls and respectable matrons. Rebekah is forbidden the balls and parties, lest she discover her husband's infidelity and attempt to do the same. The novel is a scorching, grief-stricken 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 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 Jew, who sets her up in a 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 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 the same creed of cosmic monism that sustained Schreiner through the blank atheism of despair: "Rebekah is me; I don't know which is which anymore."<sup>55</sup> 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. 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" 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 is offered.

Schreiner's critique of the Victorian institution of matrimony was fundamentally economic. As she saw it, marriage in its present form was a "barbaric relic of the past," but she was always baffled when people reviled her as an advocate of free love or radical 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 life-long union of one man with one woman." True marriage—a sacred and deathless thing—was a mutually contracted monogamy. "No kind of sex relationship can be good and pure but marriage."<sup>56</sup> The legal and ceremonial aspects of marriage, however, were "a mere bagatelle."<sup>57</sup> True marriage was a question of mutual mental, spiritual and erotic fulfillment. But the Victorian institution of marriage as it stood was no more than the symbolic and contractual surrender of a woman's sexual, property and labor rights into the hands of 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."

The fundamental issue was 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."<sup>58</sup> Without economic independence, women had no power and no form of 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."

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." 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, she 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?"

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 were laced and corseted, crimped and curtailed, while men were given privileged access to prostitution, the marriage market and the double standard. For a woman, unlike a man, pre-marital 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."<sup>59</sup> 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 having spent her virginity, has no recourse but to become a "kept woman," languishing in opulent ease among the scarlet cushions and chandeliers, the ornamental kittens and ribbons of the Jew's apartment, prone to ennui and weeping fits. The radical thrust of the book, however, is that Bertie's luxurious confinement and Rebekah's martyred solitude are merely different kinds of prostitution. Indeed, Bertie's strange, rich laugh at the end hints at a fate more free and vital than the suffocating tedium of her velvet jail.

The second related theme of *From Man to Man* is prostitution. "All other matters seem to me small compared to matters of sex and prostitution is its most agonizing central point."<sup>60</sup> Prostitution held a lifelong fascination and horror for Schreiner. She identified very deeply with prostitutes themselves. At one level, they figured for her as the mirror projection of her own sexual guilt: she clearly felt she had prostituted herself with Gau and her fictional portrayal of Bertie's social ostracism and frantic flight from social shame was a semi-autobiographical attempt to exorcise the trauma of Schreiner's own feelings of ostracism following the Gau fiasco. The novel offers thereby 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 dominant Victorian stereotype of prostitution as a genetic flaw, an atavistic regression and racial pathology of the body politic. Schreiner locates prostitution historically alongside the institution of monogamous matrimony and the fetish of virginity. "The man with the long purse" has the buying power; women are driven by economic duress into bartering their sexual services for profit.

In her obsession with prostitution Schreiner was very much a Victorian. Until the 1850s the widespread tolerance of prostitution was reflected in the absence of any serious legislation to curtail it. But from the 1850s 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 1860s the notorious Contagious Diseases Acts were passed and were only

repealed after a national avalanche of protest. The Acts were designed less to abolish prostitution than to place control of sex work in the hands of the male state. The initial impetus came from the recent blows to male national self-esteem in the arena of empire. The 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 to forcibly 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 set London aflame with his lurid revelations about child prostitution, published as "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon."<sup>61</sup> Stead's tales of hapless virgins entrapped by lascivious aristocratic rouses gave middle-class women a language in which to express for the first time the sexual distress, frustration and secret terrors of Victorian marriage. As a result, the prostitute became the projection of middle-class anxieties and hypocrisy. Prostitutes' own voices, lives, motives and powers were swept away in the electrifying storm of middle-class outrage and voyeurism.

Schreiner was all too Victorian in 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 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 sex work 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 one hand, with her Spencerian faith in a cosmic unity and design governing the universe, on the other. For the remaining span 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 couldn't entrust "this greatly loved offspring of her mature mind" to the public.<sup>62</sup> Closure

eluded her and she died with it unfinished. As was only fitting, the scandalous, incomplete book was published posthumously; for, as Lyndall says in *The Story of an African Farm*: "We can say things to the dead that we cannot say to the living."

By the middle of 1889, Schreiner had made up her mind to return to South Africa. In 1886 gold was 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 that same year, Schreiner set sail for South Africa.

## WOMAN AND LABOR

The country was brewing for war, though few besides Schreiner could see it. Schreiner settled in the lonely town of Matjiesfontein. There she formed the habit of meeting traveling politicians on the station platform to engage in deep conversation before the train departed. There, too, she began a series of brilliant and prophetic articles on South African political life, later collected in *Thoughts on South Africa*. In 1892, Schreiner met Samuel C. Cronwright, a farmer and former member of the Cape Parliament and married him two years later. He was priggish and pedantic, yet every inch the colonial male. 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, she gave birth to her longed-for baby girl. The child lived only until morning, to Schreiner's lifelong and unstaunched grief.

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 Afrikaner Bond brotherhood and condemned Rhodes' 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."<sup>63</sup>

In 1895 she and her husband wrote *The Political Situation*—a Cassandra 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." In 1899 Schreiner published her antiwar pamphlet, *An English South African's View of the War* and delivered speeches as part of the women's protest movement in the Cape.

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 and the infamous concentration camps into which the British herded Afrikaner women and children. Schreiner was by all accounts an incendiary public speaker—when she spoke, as one record had it, “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 “learned to love” them, particularly the Boer woman, who was “the true citadel of her people.”<sup>64</sup> 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 croquet mallets and hats with paper flowers: “The measure of its women is ultimately the measure of any people's strength and resistible power.”<sup>65</sup> Although, she wrote, the Boers had admittedly been cut off from the Enlightenment, 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.”<sup>66</sup>

While the Anglo-Boer War was shaking the country, Schreiner wrote her great prose work, *Woman and Labor*. 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 all the decades that followed, she worked continuously at this monumental “sex book,” until 1888, when she had only the last division to complete.

The first thing to note about the “sex book” is the sheer immodesty of its scope. Like Engels' *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 from the viscid, ameboid night through the tumultuous centuries into the rattle and glare of industrialism.

The second feature to note about Schreiner's "sex book" is that almost none of it survives. The introduction to *Woman and Labor* 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. Published as *Woman and Labor* in 1911, the chapter was a broken shard of the original monument, yet it was hailed by many prominent feminists of her generation as the "Bible of the Women's Movement."

The circumstances of the writing of *Woman and Labor* bear tragic testimony to the gist of its argument. Incomplete and mutilated, radical and incendiary and, above all, stubbornly and triumphantly rebellious, the book amounted to a miniature allegory of her 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, Schreiner's life and labor were subject to the disfiguring violence of male imperatives.

The fundamental point of the book is the attempt to give women's labor and women's subjection a social history. Schreiner dismantles the popular notion of women's subjection as universal, natural and inevitable. The stories of women's disempowerment and revolt are historical and political: the lessons of gender are not written immemorially in the blood. Moreover, women have power and women resist; they are not the mute and passive sufferers of victimization. But the effects of 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 inherently female in nature.

Contrary to the dominant Victorian notion that saw the male hunter as the herald of history, Schreiner gave women historical agency, offering the life-giving mother, who, carrying both child and fodder, stood erect to take history forward. Nonetheless, Schreiner never fully threw off the evolutionist mantle. As she saw it, the custodian of progress is “ancient Mother nature sitting as umpire.” 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 beneficent and natural female force.

*Woman and Labor* 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 voice of the book is the imperative: “Give us labour and the training which fits for labour!”<sup>67</sup> Schreiner demanded that all labor be opened to women, and that women reclaim 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.<sup>68</sup>

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 modeled the earthen vessels.”<sup>69</sup> 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 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 and they were condemned to a passive and incessant “sex-parasitism” upon the male.

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 oppose the doctrine of separate spheres and the emergent Victorian image of the idle woman. She denounced Victorian middle-class hypocrites who opposed women's waged work because of their role as "Divine Childbearer" yet felt no anguish for the "woman who, on hands and knees at ten pence a day, scrubs the floors of the public buildings." For the Victorian male, she noted, "that somewhat quadrupal position is for him truly feminine."<sup>70</sup> 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 exiled from 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."

Schreiner's fierce indignation was directed also 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 recognized or recompensed."

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 also sees sex as a sacred sacrament, properly taken only within 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, a catastrophic social stigma, Schreiner knew that women were condemned to a social situation in which they could not take sexual control. The material conditions were not yet present for a fundamental transformation of sexual relations. Schreiner, in fact, never condemns the monogamous, heterosexual family. Her views on male homosexuality were no more enlightened than the prevailing depictions of perversion and pathology, and there seems to be no record of her taking any interest in lesbianism.

Schreiner's special distinction, however, lies in the extraordinary foresight of 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 ethnocentrism and racism she attempted to challenge.



## SOUTH AFRICA AND THE LABOR QUESTION

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DOUBLE CROSSINGS

During these decades in South Africa, Schreiner formulated a view unique to herself alone: that the labor question and the “native question” 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 “Labour Question of Europe,” only deeply complicated by race. Almost alone, she recognized that the fundamental issue was land: in order to understand South Africa’s political problems, “the first requisite is a clear comprehension of their land.”

All too often, Schreiner’s views on Africans are blemished by condescension and a patronizing pity. In her political analyses, however, she was often ahead of her time. As early as 1891 she had foreseen some form of union among the various states and 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,” only 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 solution would be systematically implemented only after 1948. She recognized Africans “as the makers of our wealth,” and deplored the shunting of the Africans into reserves, locations and slums. She stressed the political indivisibility of all South African peoples, anticipating by decades the non-racial position of the African National Congress. Indeed, she argued that the distinctive bond uniting all South Africans “is our mixture of race itself” (*Thoughts on South Africa*). She recognized the problem of a racially divided working class, which even the South African Communist Party didn’t see in the 1920s, 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 insisted on the need for recognizing the invaluable contribution of the Jewish people to the world. She was prescient in deploring the senseless slaughter of African wildlife and in calling for conservation and wildlife reserves (“Our Wasteland in Mashonaland”).

It is to Schreiner’s lasting credit and distinction that she was both a political activist and 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 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 insisted that the franchise could not be seen as a gender issue alone. She was fully aware that the issue was as much an issue of class and race. When the Women's Enfranchisement League, a white, middle-class group, refused to demand a nonracial franchise, she resigned in outraged protest in 1913—the year of the notorious Land Act by which black South Africans were allocated a meager 13 per cent 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 no more fitting epigraph can be found than Antonio Gramsci's lines: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms."<sup>71</sup>

Schreiner left South Africa for the Continent in 1913, a year after the African National Congress was formed and 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 as she had lived, in a boarding 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.