

Olive Schreiner's Colonial Allegory: "The Story of an African Farm"

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IN 1855, GUSTAVE COURBET finished a startling painting called *The Studio of the Painter*. Courbet pictures himself facing a large landscape, flanked by two groups of contemporary figures. To his left, "the figures represent various forms of commercial exploitation or victimization." To his right stand Proudhon, Champfleury, Baudelaire, and others Courbet called "shareholders" (*actionnaires*) because they supported or stimulated his work (Rubin 40, 44). Robert Alter thinks self-conscious art challenges our faith in realistic representation (x). If so, Courbet's exercise in the genre he called "real allegory" (Rubin 58-63) turns back the challenge by inviting into the studio the citizens and intellectuals of a simmering revolutionary city. The result is a mysteriously powerful tableau. Ignoring the crowd milling around him, the artist, watched by a dog, a child, and a half-draped model, applies a large brush to a strongly illuminated pastoral scene.

Courbet's concept of "real allegory"—fragments of artifice set in a realistic frame—suggests a new approach to Olive Schreiner's much-criticized allegorical digressions. These include the strange, mystical fragments collected in *Dreams* (1890), *Dream Life and Real Life* (1893), and the posthumous *Stories, Dreams and Allegories* (1923); the angry political fable against the Chartered Company's activities in the country to be named Rhodesia offered in *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897); the lengthy meditations, overtly didactic or rhapsodic, interpolated into *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and the posthumous *From Man to Man* (1926); and a series of shorter digressions lodged like concealed springs inside other parables or stories. Roughly

sliced into gripping stories of marital oppression or youthful self-destruction, passages such as the fable of the hunter in *African Farm* (also published separately in *Dreams*) or "Raindrops in the Avenue" in *From Man to Man*, a fifty page meditation on the new attitudes abroad on race, feminism, and the human spirit, challenge the attention of the average reader. Dragged through the narrative by a chain of such digressions, one reviewer transferred his sympathies from the abandoned wife to the philandering husband.¹ Others just skipped over the pages in question. Why did Schreiner run such risks with the sympathies of her readers?

One reason hinges on her need to offer British press and public (like most South African novelists up to the 1970s, she mainly published in London) a new image of African colonial life. No more hairbreadth escapes from wild beasts and even wilder savages. No more well-rewarded rural productivity. Instead, an unexplored moral realm, an area of problematic involvement and shifting commitment marked by "the golden claw" of "the speculator and monopolist" (Schreiner, *Trooper* 129, 130). In a veiled challenge to this powerful force, Schreiner peoples her farm with skewed versions of traditional pastoral figures: Waldo, a philosophic shepherd; Lyndall, a cruel shepherdess; Em, a homely farm girl; Tant' Sannie, a fat farmer.

These figures offer rich opportunities for moral and political digression. Even so, Schreiner worried about abandoning the female writer's accepted sphere—semi-autobiographical, realistic narrative—for the alpine zone of allegorized ideas. Even after the success of *Dreams* and *African Farm*, she wondered whether her poetic "Prelude" to *From Man to Man* appeared "a made-up thing, like an allegory," or something "real about myself."² But suppose the "essence" of that "self" reflects a set of cracked and imperfect cultural mirrors? Gerald Monsman has established that the first page of *African Farm* alludes to Carlyle, and that other sages emulated or echoed include Mill, Dickens, Disraeli, Kingsley, Emerson, and Herbert Spencer (18-19, 27-28, 63, 82-83). Some earlier critics viewed the novel as a set of brilliant rural observations marred by unfortunate lapses into feminist rhapsody (*Olive Schreiner: A Selection* 5). Perhaps we should think instead of Trollope's New Zealander going home to pursue his

reflections, only to glimpse the shades of the metropolis at every distant colonial step. Schreiner's novel could well be titled "The Dancing Mirror: A Colonial View of British Culture." (She herself thought of calling it "Mirage.") It turns a colonial consciousness back on the parent culture and trains a metropolitan consciousness on its African offshoot.

Does allegory thicken, or dispel, Schreiner's colonial mirage? If, as Abdul R. JanMohamed puts it, "the colonial mentality is dominated by a manichean allegory of white and black, good and evil, salvation and damnation" (4), then allegory and colonial narrative should be separated at all costs. To measure the distance between a religion and its adherents, as in Jacob's dream of a heavenly ladder; to chart a correct course through a set of moral obstacles, as in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; to trace a fixed cultural trajectory, as in the nineteenth-century idea of African Bushmen squatting at the foot of a scale of civilization that sets Europeans at its top—for all these operations, allegory offers the mode of choice. Today, many commentators prefer a more level hermeneutics to allegory's one-way vertical ascent. Where earlier critics obediently "followed the directives of the specific works," Sharon Cameron ignores the promise of higher meaning in Melville's tales of dismemberment or Hawthorne's "allegories of the heart" (2). Eric Cheyfitz detects a nascent evolutionary scheme in Tzvetan Todorov's critique of Aztec civilization, an allegory of the superiority of capitalism to communism that rejects the oral and communal aspects of the American tradition (xviii-xix).

If religious allegory both aids and thwarts our human apprehension of the divine, then its secular counterpart teasingly compares different species and societies. But for several reasons the shift from a spiritual to a cultural and from a cultural to a colonial framework complicates and eventually unhinges these comparisons. First, even the most contemptuous initial rejection cannot stop the creeping assimilation that marks long-term relationships between competing cultural groups. Second, misplaced sympathy, wilful misunderstanding, and deliberate invention play an equally important part in cultural interaction. J. M. Coetzee's warning that early travellers in Africa exhibit "the

temptation to say that there is something *at work* when there is nothing" (34) applies to modern commentators as well. A revisionary colonial theory should not substitute one hidden agenda for another. In its role as *imago mundi*, allegory must register the lack of meaning of many modern social actions, and the over-determined quality of the rest. Finally, even the most privileged writers move in different orbits around the sources of colonial power. Nonhegemonic colonial texts, observes JanMohamed, "tend to be less preoccupied with maintaining the stability and coherence of the individual and the community" and, conversely, "more tolerant of heterogeneous definitions of self and society" (267).

Does allegory support, or undermine, the heterogeneity of Schreiner's writing? A judicious selection of easily assembled quotations would convey the ineradicable impression of a conservative, elitist, and racist writer. Yet in certain narratives and for certain characters, allegory's hegemonic elements either fall into question or fall away. This is especially the case in *African Farm*, which I shall read as a test case for the recuperability of allegory in progressive social narrative. First I shall look at Schreiner's allegorists, the stories they tell, the shifting and insubstantial interpretations they offer. Then I shall examine the larger structural problem posed by her fiction: the contamination of allegory, the instrument, by colonial life, the material. At the back of Schreiner's novels lurks a half-examined link between allegory and colonial occupation: the first, a trope based on parallels between different orders of experience; the second, a kind of nightmare comparison, proceeding by physical as well as verbal expropriation, between two cultures, a "higher," colonizing power, and a "lower," less developed culture, to be attacked, absorbed, emptied, and cast aside.

The official unifying principle of *African Farm* derives from *Sartor Resartus*. Schreiner's novel, like Carlyle's, proceeds by a kind of visionary dialectic. The two main characters' young dreams of personal and social regeneration give way to a revulsion from dream world and real world alike, a refusal to honour any higher values in nature or human life. The third stage in their development, although less clear-cut for Waldo and Lyn-

dall, who both die abruptly and inconclusively, than for Sartor himself, unfolds a new understanding of the way poetic imagination can inform ordinary human life.

Unofficially, however, *African Farm* poses a new, post-Carlylean set of social problems. In particular, Schreiner combines an interest in the visionary sensibility with a desire to illustrate the range of yet-unpainted types in an existing Cape community. This explains why her novel introduces such a large number of allegorizing characters. Besides Waldo and Lyndall, characters such as Em, an aspiring homemaker, Tant' Sannie, a multi-wedded Boer farmer, Gregory Rose, an effeminate expatriate Briton, and Bonaparte Blenkins, an Irish confidence man, interpose numerous allegories and interpretations of allegories. This broad canvas encompasses a range of competing visions, rather than a slowly solidifying, authorially sanctioned, secular creed. The effect is a kind of fractured ecology. On Schreiner's farm, as on Orwell's, different species coexist, some perhaps superior, others perhaps not. The connection between them is theoretically admitted but practically denied.

Because it converts *entities*—people, objects, ideas—into *emblems*, and sets any number of emblems inside the same frame, allegory solves Schreiner's most urgent social dilemma: her simultaneous assertion of human unity and human difference. Unfortunately, Schreiner, like Carlyle, views society as an allegory of mind, and social difference stockpiles mental lumber. For Carlyle, allegory afforded a principle of stability in change and intimacy in alienation. For Schreiner, allegory does not so much humanize change as canalize it through the individual consciousness, which becomes a site where mass-produced images settle, battle, and imperceptibly decay.

Who distributes these allegories through modern mass society? Her answer to this question brings us to Schreiner's most serious departure from the Victorian buoyancy of the early Carlyle. Her answer, triumphant or defeated according to her final valuation of the trope in question, is that women offer themselves on the altar of allegory. Babies come plastically into the world (188), to be shaped, not by words, but by images provided by their mothers. "*We* bear the world, and *we* make it," says

Lyndall (*Farm* 193). Men provide "our goods, our merchandise, our material for operating on" (192). Viewed one way, this sounds heroically productive. Viewed another way, it unfurls a cultural phantasmagoria willingly acted out by women. An age of mechanical reproduction compromises women's role as culture-creators by unleashing a flood of deceptive messages and signals, false allegories indistinguishable from the true. In *African Farm*, the same signals interfere between colony and metropolis, impeding, not just mutual cultural growth, but even a basic exchange of information. Accordingly, as a female allegorist, Schreiner seems uncertain whether she speaks through images or whether images speak through her. As a female colonist, she functions not so much as a recipient of metropolitan values as a relay station retransmitting a set of mediated, partially reconstructed values back to the parent culture.

From this half-built, half-way station, Schreiner's storytellers advance and discard a series of images of colonial life. These stretch from Lyndall's evocation of Napoleon's life in exile, to Blenkins's fables of adventure and industrial opportunity, to the German overseer's visions of a "land where all things are made right" (94). Waldo, the most frequent allegorist, explodes an arsenal of images of human redemption or improvement. On one page, he dreams of a green land where he meets a tortured Jesus face to face; on another, he paints a John Martinesque canvas showing a barren pinnacle where a solitary human soul cries out in anguish for a sustaining creed. At the start, Waldo dreams of unknown male heroes. By the end, he envisions a recognizable woman, Lyndall. Where Waldo's allegories swell with spiritual aspiration, Lyndall's have a distinctly Wildean thrust. She enjoys allegory for allegory's sake, and tells obscurely subversive stories for her own pleasure or for public consumption. If Waldo discovers spiritual humility, Lyndall learns that life includes pathos as well as wit.

In this novel, the producers of allegory range from the most intellectual characters—Lyndall, the new woman, Waldo, the bookish shepherd—to the most "primitive," the Boer woman Tant' Sannie. Tant' Sannie uses dream images as anagrams for individual fates, asserting a point-by-point relationship between

personality and sign. Waldo evolves a larger theory of allegory when he offers Lyndall a decorated box carved not just with recognizable flowers but with abstract conical shapes. Empty of significance, these exert, like a Mondrian painting, a more impersonal psychological force.

Between Tant' Sannie's dyed-in-the-wool particularism and Waldo's emergent formalism lurks a deep chasm. How does Schreiner negotiate it? At times, she posits a clear-cut, three-pronged division: between the traditional rural consciousness of Tant' Sannie and her niece Em; the consciousness of dull respectability signified by the shopkeepers and schools in neighbouring towns; and the avant-garde consciousness of Waldo, Lyndall, and the strangers who pluck each of them from rural life. But a more troubling distinction turns on the farm as an area of imaginative autonomy versus the world outside it as an area of imaginative capitulation. In this book, the only characters who do not allegorize are those colonized by the larger commercial culture. When Waldo enters the urban shadow land beyond the farm, he discovers shop assistants behaving like "worms with oil on" (252), reading pulp literature such as *Black-Eyed Creole* (253). Down on the farm, people create and interpret stories; beyond it, they just consume them.

Yet even this distinction fades as different characters take centre stage. Novelists from Defoe to Conrad portray Africa as the ultimate biological continent, an area of unrestrained human predation. Her title for a planned book, "My Double Self and I" (Cronwright-Schreiner 152), underlines Schreiner's aversion to this common European attitude. Lyndall, the least tolerant of her creations, concedes that the roughest sketch of humanity has an "embryonic doubling somewhere indicative of a heart" (*Farm* 198). Doubled protagonists, twinned strangers, quixotic villains, inwardly delineated buffoons—these devices situate Schreiner's farm with Raymond Roussel's "Africa of impressions," a region mapped by shifting signifiers rather than fixed, opposite-pointing signs.

As Africa changes, so does the colonial process. Some Victorian writers explained the need for African settlements by citing the Latin word *coloniae*, swarmings from an old hive. Schreiner

understands these "swarmings" in a less organic way. Erratic, replicable, easily led, her characters are all "colonial," whether or not they inhabit a designated subject world. Yet, ironically, the more they appropriate each other's substance, the larger their differences loom. "There are different species that go under the same name," Lyndall teases Gregory Rose (*Farm* 228), even though she earlier turned the same thought into a roseate image of representative lives set together as in a stained glass window (or a Pathe News feature). "When my own life feels small," she confesses to Waldo,

I like to crush together, and see it in a picture, in an instant, a multitude of disconnected, and unlike phases of human life—medieval monk with his string beads pacing the quiet orchard . . . little Malay boys playing naked on a shining sea-beach; a Hindoo philosopher alone under his banyan tree . . . a Kaffir witch-doctor seeking for herbs by moonlight, while from the huts on the hill-side come the sound of dogs barking, and the voices of women and children. . . . I feel it run through me—that life belongs to me . . . it breaks down the narrow walls that shut me in. (214-15)

The challenge for this expanded colonial consciousness, Schreiner suggests in *Trooper Peter Halket*, is to substitute an open-hearted, Whitmanesque spirit for the structures of exploitation set in place by capitalists and entrepreneurs.

But in *African Farm* she has not yet reached this political crux. Whether fragmentary dream-images or grand evocations of human unity, the allegories in this book address the desires of the characters who invent and consume them more confidently than the world in which their patterns of invention and consumption ultimately nest. In a clutch of scattered episodes that, brought together, echo the Doubloon chapter in *Moby Dick* or the casket scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, three characters successively climb up to the farmhouse loft. Waldo finds a book hoard, which he promptly settles down to read. Fat Tant' Sannie finds a food hoard, which she promptly begins to eat. Man-girl Gregory Rose finds a set of women's clothes, which he promptly tries on. These wishes come true, but many others apparently do not. When Waldo offers up "a mutton chop and a large slice of brown bread" (40), the gods refuse to ignite his symbolic fire. When Lyndall

tries to burn down the farmhouse, her fire, which encodes a different symbol system, also fails to light.

The same pattern governs the book at the interpretative level: a set of episodes that threaten larger meaning but never quite ignite. This even applies to the section Schreiner reprinted separately. A passing stranger of worldly manners and appearance interprets Waldo's rustic memorial to his dead father. The latter, in oracular vein, sputters out the deep thoughts that went into his carving while pointing to the artwork intended to capture them. From these disparate sources, the stranger evolves the allegory of the hunter. Set like a capstone half-way through the book, this lengthy digression crowns the younger characters' colonial hopes and terrors in a story of a man who leaves conventional society and its pieties to search for an elusive winged bird of truth. The bird, he is told, will be found at the top of an almost vertical mountain. The hunter devotes his life to harrowing a path up this mountain. Yet his only reward is a single feather, which arrives when he realizes that others will travel the path he has begun. Dan Jacobson, the novel's editor, is one of many critics to attack this narrative as an unsatisfactory digression. Here, he asserts, is an allegory not of engagement with the world but of retreat into "lacerated self-exaltation" (*Farm* 17).

This line of interpretation has its own problems, however. First, as Angus Fletcher points out, allegory is inevitably a discontinuous mode, "lavish of fragmentary detail" (102). Precisely because they are isolated, the images in allegory must be delineated with great precision. The sharp details that Jacobson admires in the rest of the book stem from an allegorizing consciousness.

Second, the story of the hunter offers only one of many intercalated visions, prognostications, sermons, and satires. Throughout her narrative, Schreiner empties the world of "reality" only to saturate it with stories told by alien, potentially treacherous guides. In *African Farm*, everything is mediated and everything is overdetermined, for the point is precisely the predominance, and the danger, of illusion in modern colonial life. In a society fed from the ashes of other cultures and histories, allegory becomes an interpretative habit that itself asks for interpretative

scrutiny. In all these ways, Schreiner's narrative already articulates Jacobson's doubts.

Third, allegory, her recurring trope, and colonial life, her recurring topic, both combined positive and negative associations for Schreiner. She pronounced allegory the highest symbolic mode of art and her book of allegories, *Dreams*, her favourite book; but she also said that she could produce such stories at will, and that she attached little value to them. The same ambivalence governed her responses to Africa. About to leave Britain for the Cape, she said that England was the focus of all her ambitions and that to sail away would leave her spiritually dead. Yet her return to Africa elicited appreciative comments on a range of colonial types, from huge Boer Tants scowling at the English intellectual from their donkey carts to African women stoically working their traditional fields.³

For a flood of prospectors, South Africa of the Rhodes era encoded a similar range of competing meanings, some hard and gemlike, others shifting chimeras. On one side, dusty craters layered with precious stones; on the other, familiar settlements wrapped miragelike in "empty" veld. These perceptual deficits and surpluses echo the doubled world of allegory, which, says Fletcher, rests on "parallels between two levels of being that correspond to each other" (113). Yet in colonization, as in allegory, the parallels prove strained and flawed ones; the correspondences will not quite match. European settlers mirror the ideals of a parent society in an environment that undermines their codes of dress, work, and behaviour, their moral and religious pieties. Partially adapting to local conditions, the same settlers also mirror their new environment, borrowing the long-evolved adaptive behaviour of the native people—the shoes they wear, the materials for their houses, crops raised and animals herded—even as they impose on those people their own imported valuations.

Schreiner's fictional personae reflect just such a multiplication of colonial mirrors. Despite the tranquil, almost Keatsian, title of her *African Farm*, she shows little interest in settled rural life. Her earliest manuscripts date from her two-year stay, during the early 1870s, at the diamond diggers' settlement of New Rush.

From 1874 to 1881, when she sailed for England, she worked as governess, store clerk, and general help at a succession of remote Cape farms and settlements, where she spent her spare time concurrently writing *Undine* (published posthumously in 1928), *From Man to Man*, and *The Story of an African Farm*. These upheavals, first involuntary, in later life anxiously sought, explain the mutations of tone and atmosphere that make her novels so difficult, finally, to interpret or assess. The heroine of *Undine* moves from a stifling Dutch farmhouse in the desertlike Karoo, through fruitless relationships with men and women of many types and nationalities, to her most destructive experience of all, the "wild, free, true life" (244) of the newly established Diamond Fields. The children in *African Farm* anticipate their own future displacement in a painted cave that mirrors drastic earlier disturbances of the local San. Their poignant conversation foreshadows the coming clash between an established but unstable rural order and an influx of distantly manufactured moral entrepreneurs. New machines and new attitudes are already hovering around Schreiner's African farm, and impinging first on the lives of its women. "They say, 'God sends the little babies'," observes Lyndall. "Of all the dastardly revolting lies men tell to suit themselves, I hate that most. . . . Men do not say God sends the books, or the newspaper articles, or the machines they make" (209).

Mechanization tolls out the old myths. But what new ones will it ring in instead? Schreiner joins Frederic Harrison and J. A. Froude in questioning the imperial theory of colonial settlement: the idea that an initial clash of settlers and natives yields a new stability that will draw from and reinforce the stability of the colonizing power. Schreiner's cult of mobility encourages a different view. She equates colonization with unsettlement, and traces colonial unsettlement, not to the depredations of the surrounding natives, nor even to the greed of the colonists, but to cultural contradictions in the parent society. At one point, Blenkins moves, with the lightning quickness of the trickster figure, from a tale of colonial life as hairbreadth escapes from wild animals to a quintessential fable of colonial capitalization. "There is Africa, a struggling country; they want capital; they want men of talent. . . . I bought eight thousand pounds worth of

machinery—winnowing, ploughing, reaping machines; I loaded a ship with them. Next steamer I came out—wife, children all. Got to the Cape. Where is the ship with the things? Lost—gone to the bottom!” (61).

Students of social life in the period described in *African Farm* often posit radical differences between the new industrial consumerism and the old world of frugal home production. Rachel Bowlby outlines “momentous changes in the scale and forms of commercial activity” (1), while Rosalind Williams’s *Dream Worlds* speaks of the “fabulous prospect of a vast and permanent fair” (3). Unlike these writers, Schreiner detects a transitional stage between the old order of rural self-sufficiency and the new order of mass production. Fragments of the latter attach seamlessly to the former when Gregory Rose buys rose-coloured crested notepaper and lines his colonial den with pages from the *Illustrated London News*; when Em uses a machine to sew the wedding linen she dare not show to Lyndall; and when even Tant’ Sannie pins to her bedroom wall “a gorgeous creature from a fashion-sheet” (46). Nostalgic expatriates and irreclaimable rural Boers—as Schreiner paints them, they appear equally susceptible to the new commercial order. However, she offsets this portrait, which is hung on British class condescension as well as witty *reversio*, by exposing her more intellectual protagonists to an equally chimerical order of ideas. Lyndall returns from town shorn of her part in a feminist *Bildungsroman*. Waldo jettisons his belief in a higher learning derived from books for a blind Spencerian faith that all creation hangs together, however diverse its component parts.

Both change in the course of the book, but not necessarily equally. Despite her well-thought-out feminist *credo*, Schreiner’s writing exhibits recurrent anti-female thrusts, and, in deciding the fate of her two main characters, she apparently favours Waldo. Certainly, Theodore Dreiser’s suggestion that “We are, after all, more passive than active, more mirrors than engines, and the origin of human action has neither yet been measured nor calculated” (78), makes the pacific Waldo, not the self-assertive Lyndall, the true centre of Schreiner’s book. Where Lyndall’s plan for global self-development fades into Little Nell-

like dependency, Waldo's troubled passage through received ideas makes him a less marginal rural figure. Herbert Spencer's evolutionary psychology reconciles both these authors to a new world of mass humanity. Yet Schreiner's problem, far more than Dreiser's, is to reconcile Spencerian determinism to the struggle for emancipation she invariably recommends to women. Her fascination with the rich structures of modern humiliation undermines her insistence that feminism means more than equality under existing laws. Even more than industrial raw materials, colonies yield regular images of human subordination, and Schreiner's allegories digest endless supplies of these.

Like the heroes of other late nineteenth-century novels, Waldo dreams of a world beyond commodities—mass things and mass ideas—shared by a few sensitive, unconventional spirits. He scornfully rejects the stranger's offer of money for his carving, while absorbing, starry-eyed, his story of a hero who leaves conventional society to search for truth. But suppose distantly manufactured images colonize Waldo too? Do these images constitute his lifeline to the larger world, or a creeping erosion of his rural integrity? Towards the end of the novel, the narrator reasserts the author's official conclusion, that "without dreams and phantoms man cannot exist" (291), that even "the inverted image of a mirage" may prove to be "the reflection of a reality" (285). Even so, the abandoned epigraph reported by Havelock Ellis—"Life is a Series of Abortions" (qtd. in Cronwright-Schreiner 124)—supplies a more astringent commentary that has several echoes in the published text. The returning Lyndall, the two strangers—a stream of visitors views the farm as a newly opened colony, a reservoir to be fished at will. "I was a stranger, and ye took me in." This is how Waldo's holy-minded father interprets the arrival of Bonaparte Blenkins, Irish confidence man. As a result of his rashness, the father dies and his son is whipped almost to inanity. In this case, the creed for which allegory provides an all-too-durable vehicle matches neither colonial idealism nor European decline.

Allegory promises a point of entry for European values, a *lingua franca* tying the colony to its metropolitan parent. Yet the course of the colonial transaction undermines the promised

pattern of stable exchange. Colonies remedy trading deficiencies and surpluses in the parent economy, but with little value added for themselves. The result is a play between two orders of settlement that dissolves into a mirage, an erosion of cultural identity rather than a fructifying birth. To remedy this yawning cultural tension, Schreiner moves her most favoured allegorists from the ready-made images of Jesus and Napoleon with which they start the book to more personal symbols incorporating their own experiences and emotions. Waldo's final dream of Lyndall, first as a child and then as a woman, collecting and dropping shells on the sea-shore, is the first allegory to picture an idealized human figure who is known to the dreamer and who changes in the course of the dream. But before he dies Waldo moves even further, and his creator one step further still. He decides there is no individual communion beyond death, no way of rejoining an abstract, purified Lyndall on an abstract, stoneless beach. The same thought modulates into a final, half-planetary, half-satirical image of Waldo's body as a mountain to be explored by a party of chickens. In the end, the narrator remarks, Waldo is just one more "uncouth" creature bearing "no part in the world's life" (299).

This suspended ending, to be echoed by Gordimer in *The Conservationist* (1974), represents the characters as allegorical figures in an allegorical field, symbols possibly, but suffering, and separated, bodies first. This field changes in colour and perspective as its human figures suffer and age. As chickens clamber over Waldo's body and we look on him as dead, Schreiner's central allegory leaps into startling focus. For this is an allegory, not just of the body, but of the corpse as described by Benjamin, a decaying, putrefying figure whose material encrustations, which conceal its inner meaning, are supposed gradually to fall away (217-18). This ghastly figure explains why Lyndall and Waldo have to die, and why their physical sufferings—Lyndall's bloated feet, Waldo's shivering limbs and beating heart— attract such ghoulish attention. Even so, there is no "higher" meaning to be recuperated here, no spiritual message in their humiliating decline. For this is the endlessly disappointing world of colonial allegory, a world where Chinese women bind their daughters'

feet because the foot should fit the shoe (*Farm* 189); where African women bend their backs to beatings and polygamy as well as farm work, because the elephant's foot rests on the back of the tortoise, who cannot stir because she fears the destruction of the world, which the elephant holds up (*Thoughts* 206-07).

"I would like *him* [unidentified] to tread on me and stamp me fine into powder," Schreiner told Havelock Ellis (qtd. in First and Scott 132). Benjamin speaks of the presence in every allegory of a "figural centre" (188) without which it becomes a mere agglomeration of concepts. The figural centre of Schreiner's fiction is the body, often the female body, a mountain trodden by alien species and stamped into a bewildering variety of sizes and shapes. In *African Farm*, the topiary world of the female body merges into the world-in-flux of the colonial farm. Both attract dominating powers ignorant of the real needs of the territory claimed. Both propitiate cultural interests formulated and fed elsewhere. As the colony stands to the metropolis and the allegory stands to the encoded truth, so the female stands to the male. Women are pictures to men, who respond generously to their beauty and creativity while ignorantly provoking their self-inflicted pain.

Channelling this pain into irony and pathos, the last chapters of *African Farm* groan with bodies—sick bodies, dead bodies, black bodies, male bodies dressed in female clothes, human bodies paired with every form of animal life. This Rabelaisian confusion multiplies the characters' sorrows without reducing the anguished isolation that Schreiner's shorter pieces, un-leavened by comedy, make even starker. For instance, "The Artist's Secret" describes a monochrome painter whom everyone admires for his ability to capture a mysterious "glow." Where did it come from? they wonder after he dies. It comes, they discover, from an old wound above his heart. What does this allegory "mean"? A standard decoding replaces the gruesome physical implication—that the mysterious pigment is artist's blood—with a more elevated message about the dependence of art on personal suffering. Schreiner thinks both meanings coexist: spiritual messages do not staunch bloody wounds; public pity does not ease artistic isolation. But, unlike an earlier generation of

visionaries, she cannot make unity from coexistence. For her, the human contact fostered and undermined by a new mass culture breeds anxiety more than dynamic growth. Beyond the holy immersion of Waldo's missionary father and the opportunistic immersion of Blenkins the entrepreneur, she senses a larger, looser, perhaps a more feminist, perspective. "The woman who does woman's work needs a many-sided, multiform culture" (193), says Lyndall, and Schreiner does not directly disagree.

Even so, Wilson Harris's observation that, as a colonial writer, "You may live somewhere in the world and you know you are not fixed there" (Slemon 55), explodes the sexual limits Lyndall wants to fix. Harris, who shares Schreiner's interest in shifting patterns of allegorical imagery, also speaks of the parallels between the doubled loyalties of the colonial writer and the double vision of allegory. Citizens of the former colonies bear the burden of rethinking, not just the inherited European past, but the not-yet-inevitable technological future. In a colonized society, parts of the parent tradition wither away very quickly, while others enjoy a protracted artificial life. To negotiate the shifting sands beneath the half-built colonial city a writer needs allegorical "guides," who may or may not prove reliable negotiators and may or may not illuminate the paths they strike up. Allegory can problematize the relationship between author and character in a way that corresponds better than realistic narrative to the violent, narcissistic relationship between a dominant and a subject culture. Excavation of this relationship proceeds by the erosion of conventional value and meaning, in search of uncharted, perhaps destructive, revelations of identity and filiation. Despite its risks, Harris prefers this destabilizing allegory, with its shifting, tentative commitments, to the discourse in which an inviolable, Prospero-like author shapes a series of colonial destinies, not allowing his characters even the space to retreat from their own positions.

Positioning herself between and beyond her two main characters, Schreiner explores problems of allegorical interpretation following the disappearance of an earlier era's "human-like driver and guide" (*Farm* 150). In a long meditation set like a warning before the parable of the hunter, the narrator suggests

that human existence "has its roots far down below in the dark, and its branches stretching out into the immensity above" (153). Deeper than the deepest canonical book, vaster than the richest language or the most pristine colony, this is an area of vacancy intermittently lit by a thunderous clap:

One day we sit there and look up at the blue sky, and down at our fat little knees; and suddenly it strikes us, Who are we? This *I*, what is it? We try to look in upon ourself, and ourself beats back upon ourself. Then we get up in great fear and run home as hard as we can. We can't tell anyone what frightened us. We never quite lose that feeling of *self* again. (139).

Schreiner was among the first South African writers to articulate this existential colonial angst, and echoes of this passage appear in a number of later works. A good example is Gertrude Page's *Love in the Wilderness: The Story of Another African Farm* (1907), which adapts Schreiner's views on dreams, youthful aspiration, and the advancement of women to the prejudices of a more popular audience. Page repeatedly emphasizes that fear is a new emotion to her conventional, middle-class, expatriate heroine. Enid Davenport is just confident enough to come out to Africa alone, but eventually Africa frees her so radically that she struggles to refuse a bigamous proposal. Even so, during her early months in Rhodesia, fear is a constant sensation for Enid: fear of the stunted *kopjes* that seem to wall her around; fear of her fellow settlers, who press themselves on her to the point of rape; and fear most of all of a mysterious something in the colonial situation. In one of many echoes of Schreiner's novel, the heroine, out alone on the veld, "looked up to the stars, and felt as remote as they from the life of the world. . . . Fear, in the form of some unspoken dread . . . was creeping into her heart, a wholly new visitant. . . . Here, where, brimming over with hope, she had come across the sea to find a Beginning" (59-60). Towards the end of the book, Page even uses a biblical analogy to underline the gravity of her heroine's situation. Enid's failure to adapt to the "Promised Land" would reduce her existence to "one Vague Terror" (224). Retreat here could prove, Page implies, fully equivalent to a second Fall.

From Sir Percy Fitzpatrick's collection *The Outspan* (1897) to Sheila Fugard's *Rite of Passage* (1976), this objectless, existential terror is a recurring theme in South African settler literature. In Fitzpatrick's story "The Pool," inexplicable psychic fear precedes an incident (the discovery in a mysterious veld pool of three mutilated bodies, one black, two white) that physically reinforces it. In Pauline Smith's *Platkops Children* (1935), the children in bed are fearful, the jackal out on the veld howls from fear; and the ultimate terror is that these twin fears should meet. The coloured narrator of Daphne Rooke's *Mittee* (1951) survives the fear of leopards, baboons, lions, "shadows on the veld," the violence of her employers towards each other and herself. Yet at the end, as she flees to a mountain hide-out from yet another settler war, these earlier fears "fell from my sight and I was alone, separated from all things by terror" (296).

In each of these stories, a displaced, distantly evoked terror inscribes itself at the very heart of colonial life. The recurrence of this terror in so many different books unfolds two other important points: the harder, more defiant emotions massing in its wake; and the tacit authorial approval underpinning, in many cases, the characters' rejection of the African experience. These authors agree with Schreiner that Africa challenges new human responses and creates new human types. But they also think that the nurturing of those responses must be a deeply private matter. The newly hatched colonial self cannot look to the parent society to overcome its terrors; nor can it seek support from the indigenous culture it has happily dispossessed. By a neat *reversio* that represents colonial conflict as a matter of "own affairs," an existential clash between an abstractly oppressive colonial landscape and an abstractly vulnerable colonial self, these novelists mask the burning point at issue, the effect of aggressive colonization on those who never chose to participate in the colonial process, those who stand to gain least and lose most.

How far does this devastating criticism apply to Schreiner? Does she move colonial fiction beyond narrow escapes from man-eating lions only to fall into a higher sensationalism, a Paterian quest for nuance that masks the stable continuities represented by Sol Plaatje or Bessie Head? Those authors look

before and beyond the colonial state, rather than flutter ineffectual allegorical wings deep inside it. Schreiner lays out instead the troubled existential path followed by many English-speaking South African writers. Her interpolated stories formulate no convincing alternatives to the existing order, even though her story-tellers, some of them identified with the author, others ghastly parodies of her more exalted positions, create a mosaic of competing fables in the course of each of her books. At best, these fables picture her characters' fleeting fears and glimmering revelations as personal and projective rather than racial and environmental. Schreiner shows that colonization has imported into Africa its own conflicts, its own anxieties, its own inner darkness. To light up this darkness with a hand-made, hand-held torch: this, as she sees it, is the fearful but necessary task of the newly awakening postcolonial self.

NOTES

- 1 Hugh Walpole, "The Permanent Elements in Olive Schreiner's Fiction," *New York Herald Tribune* Books Section, 1 May 1927, qtd. in First and Scott 178.
- 2 Letter to Mrs. Francis Smith, 1918. Extracted by S. C. Cronwright-Schreiner in "A Note on the Genesis of the Book," *From Man to Man* xxviii.
- 3 Cronwright-Schreiner quotes her remark to Arthur Symons, that allegory was "the very essence of art," a form of "pure symbol . . . the only artistic expression of the passion of abstract ideas" (185). See *Olive Schreiner Letters* 1: 184 for her valuation of *Dreams*, and 1: 53 for her view that her "real life" was in England. *Thoughts on South Africa* discusses Boer and African women (see especially 219, 206-07).

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