

*Napoleon and the Giant:
Discursive Conflicts in Olive Schreiner's
"Story of an African Farm"*

MALVERN VAN WYK SMITH

IN THE PREFACE to the second edition of *The Story of an African Farm*, Olive Schreiner, in the *persona* of "Ralph Iron," famously suggested that her narrative of "human life" might have been "painted according to two methods," which she defined—with evident preference for the second—as "the stage method" and "the method of the life we all lead." Her brief exposition of the two modes makes it clear that she regards the "stage method" as superficial, explicit, reliant on plot and event, and heavily predicated on closure—in short, stage-managed. Her second method is just as clearly offered as densely inward, contemplative, psychological, unpredictable, resistant to closure, and thematically much more congenial to what Schreiner purports to be doing.

Critics taking Schreiner at her word have assumed habitually that the reader is expected to find the meaning of the novel in the obliquities, disjunctions, and symbology of the second method. Much critical effort has been devoted to argument that, *pace* William Walsh's notorious claim that the novel is "structurally a jumble and emotionally a chaos" (36), Schreiner's Menippean structuration is organically sound, polyphonic, and thematically appropriate both to the diffracted colonial world she depicts and to her own disrupted experience of it (see, for instance, Clayton 20; Murray 22).

But if Schreiner truly intended her reader to take her second method as the only organizing principle of her narrative, she was surely wrong about her own novel. Any careful reading must reveal that she uses *both* methods; the text is carefully divided into two parts, each of which resembles fairly neatly the two kinds of narrative the Preface envisages. As many readers have noticed,

the first part of the novel relies heavily on plot and event, on dramatic—even farcical—action, on exaggerated characterization—even caricature—and on an elaborately stage-managed closure, complete with trapdoors, barrels of pork, and flying coat-tails. This part is broadly Dickensian, in the most melodramatic and exuberant sense of that term.

The second part is just as obviously constructed along completely different lines. It is inward, agonized, psychological, lacking in event and action, and it offers us a closure which leaves everything open-ended, unresolved. If the first part owes much to Dickens, the second broadly anticipates Virginia Woolf who, of course, would later acknowledge her debt to Schreiner.

However, even though the two halves so neatly illustrate the narrative dualism offered in the Preface, I suspect Schreiner was not herself fully aware of this striking correlation. Tempting as it may be to suggest that she deliberately divided the novel in this way to illustrate the two narrative strategies she proffers, it must be obvious that she could not have discriminated so strongly in favour of the second method—the Modernist as against the Victorian method, one might say—if she took herself to be confessing to employing both. This obvious division of the novel not only into two parts, but into two quite different kinds of narrative, seen in the light of a Preface that seems to want to divert our attention away from treating both modes equally seriously, suggests an unrecognized ambivalence at the heart of Schreiner's own epistemology. The novel displays a rich thematic indeterminacy, which seems to derive as much from any conscious intention on her part as from the complex exploratory polemics that the work pursues.

Gerald Monsman has claimed that "Schreiner was an immensely self-aware artist" (xv), but I would argue that she was just the opposite, and that the words she assigns to Waldo's stranger—"the attribute of all true art . . . is this—that it says more than it says, and takes you away from itself" (169)—more nearly describe her own deeply unconscious art. Paradoxically, one might say that her self-awareness is at its most acute where she acknowledges her own lack of it. When Waldo ponders whether a story could "be told in opposite ways and both ways be true" (67),

Schreiner further demonstrates adroit but unconscious insight into her own procedures.

In other words, I am suggesting that *The Story of an African Farm* is marked throughout by a tension between intent and performance, between explicit statement and implicit theme, between text and sub-text. My paper attempts to show that the novel's formal antitheses derive from and indicate a deep ambivalence in Schreiner's understanding and execution of her project. This ambivalence manifests itself as a rift between an intentional, polemical discourse of gender and power on the one hand, and an unconscious discourse of the atavistic and numinous on the other. Behind these dichotomies, I contend, lurks a deeper epistemological split, a split between, on the one hand, Schreiner's explicit commitment to a Cartesian rationalist, positivist notion of cognitive power and experience vested in the autonomous individual which she deploys in a feminist cause, and, on the other hand, her implicit, imaginative fascination with a non-centred, intuitive, provisional self. On another level, one could describe this conflictual theme as a dilemma that confronts Schreiner's two protagonists as much as herself. This dilemma is whether, like Hamlet, to take up arms against the world and oppose it, or, like D. H. Lawrence, to tap into the hidden harmonies of the circumambient universe.

I argue my case by looking at a few crucial moments in the narrative. The first, not surprisingly, is the duplicated opening tableau of the novel: the farm by moonlight and the farm by daylight. These descriptions are evidently intended to introduce a powerfully contrastive symbology into the narrative. The moonlight sequence is mysterious, dreamlike, numinous, otherworldly; the daylight sequence is harsh, despiritualized, dero-manticized, and evidently designed to present the farm as it "really" is. But this neat division obscures a number of complexities and counter-indicators that emerge in the text.

Presumably we cannot miss the heavy symbolism of the moonlight playing on the naked, "elfin-like" Lyndall, who becomes here the "naked, new-born babe" of *Macbeth* and Blake. In Lacanian terms, she is the unconscious child still secure in the domain of the Real, the terrain of the Mother, unaware of

the divided self produced by consciousness of the world and entry into the realm of Language and Law, the domain of the Father. But the symbolism is nonetheless ambivalent. As Roberta Mazzanti has pointed out, the scene is also a baptism of Lyndall as "daughter of the moon," "mysterious Queen of the Night," and as such would suggest that Lyndall might be expected to reveal in due course "the archetypal attributes of the moon-goddess in her three incarnations as Virgin, Mother and Witch" (123). But these attributes, in the context of a novel explicitly dedicated to the polemics of feminism, are profoundly troublesome, and, of course, they quite subvert the peaceful image of the sleeping child.

In contrast to the oblivious Lyndall, Waldo is shown to be lying awake, in the dark, fully entered into the adult world of sin, guilt and fear, terrorized by the ticking clock, which, in direct contrast to the moon, signals not a numinous, cosmic time, but human, rational, linear progression, here represented as the relentless accountancy of the dead and dying.

In light of the subsequent narrative, however, it could be argued that Schreiner has got the symbolism attached to Lyndall and Waldo at their first appearance the wrong way round: Lyndall bathed in moon-time, Waldo trapped in clock-time. For it is soon clear that Lyndall is the rationalist, the accountant of patriarchal power and gender politics, whereas it is Waldo who has or seeks access to the intuitive world and subliminal forces of the unconscious and the imagination.

But then again, *does* Schreiner have it the wrong way around? On further thought the apparent inversion is seen to be diagnostic of how the narrative constantly and ironically off-sets and transposes the conscious and the unconscious, the rational and the subliminal. Lyndall remains, as here, largely oblivious to the intuitive numinous world around her—she is, in an important sense, impervious to moonlight—whereas Waldo, also as here, is almost neurasthenically attuned to a shamanistic world around him, to cosmic realities of which the ticking clock is a subversion rather than a manifestation. Furthermore, not only is Lyndall impervious to the forces of the moon, but when she later explicitly, somewhat flippantly, compares women to the moon, she

does so in terms that reveal an alarming split in her own consciousness between a volitional and an unknown self: "Men are like the earth and we are like the moon; we turn always one side to them, and they think there is no other, because they don't see it—but there is" (199).

The ironies here are many and powerful, residing first in the unlikelihood that Lyndall does actually have access to that other side; second, in her conception of herself and womanhood in such radically manipulative though actually disabling self-divisive terms; and, third, in the hubristic implications of her comment. This dualistic self-image will return to haunt Lyndall in several increasingly troublesome encounters with mirrors towards the end of the narrative, just as her stark dichotomy of men and women will be challenged by the compassionate, dutiful, though deeply disturbing, androgyny of Gregory Rose. (I use the term "disturbing" because the plot does not require Rose's transvestism at all; Lyndall has already asked him to marry her—"You could serve me by giving me your name" (232)—so there is no need to attend on her in disguise, a ploy which, as the action now unfolds, effectively turns him into a voyeur.)

Lyndall's pronouncement that "men are like the earth" shifts the attention to Waldo and allows us to move to the second crucial incident in the novel, the first major discussion among the children, now 12 years old, in Chapter Two. The two girls are sitting on the koppie which exerts its silent presence in the opening scenes and will do so throughout much of the narrative. Significantly, they are sitting "with their backs to the [Bushman] paintings," which thus exert only a silent pressure on their discussion. Lyndall is holding forth on the advantages of knowledge as power—"There is nothing helps in this world . . . but to be very wise, and to know everything—to be clever" (45)—as Waldo approaches to announce the arrival of Bonaparte Blenkins, an announcement that elicits from Lyndall an astonishing avowal of admiration for Napoleon Bonaparte, seeing him as "the greatest man who ever lived," whom she liked "best," and as the "master of the world at last" (47).

Her enthusiasm for Napoleon is remarkable not so much for its explicit content—it introduces Lyndall's commitment to a

discourse of appropriative cognitive power, centred on the individual consciousness, which she is to enunciate frequently in the course of the narrative—but for the place and context in which she utters it. We know that Lyndall's admiration for Napoleon here is Schreiner's own, derived from her reading of Emerson's romantic positivist *Essays* (Havelock Ellis, cited by Clayton 41), yet Schreiner seems to discredit Lyndall's avowal even as the child utters it by at least two narrative gestures that follow immediately.

First, although Bonaparte Blenkins is no more than an awful travesty of Napoleon, he will nevertheless exhibit, through his petty tyranny, the appalling effects of such boundless power and the children are about to feel the full force of it. The proleptic irony is inescapable. Second, Waldo invokes in response to her Napoleonic urgings a totemic concept of power that resides in the landscape around them. Pointing to the koppie and the paintings he exclaims: "If *they* could talk, if they could tell us now! . . . then we would know something. This 'kopje,' if it could tell us how it came here!" (48). He goes on to conjure up "the little Bushmen [who] lived here," and their commitment not to a power of conquest and rule but to a shamanistic power of capturing their world in painting. "He did not know why he painted, but he wanted to make something, so he made these" (49). But even more ingenuously, Waldo speculates on the power of the koppie itself: "I always looked at it and wondered, and I thought a great giant was buried under it" (49).

Who is this giant? There are several possibilities, all resonating ironically with Lyndall's admiration for another "giant"—Napoleon. One figure that comes to mind is Camoes's Adamastor, that atavistic spirit of Africa opposing Portuguese imperialism, a numinous presence in the land, threatening revenge on behalf of its vanished or displaced people, and a powerful trope in South African English writing right from its beginnings, as I have argued elsewhere (in *Shades of Adamastor*). The archetypal propriety of Camoes's figure, however, suggests that Schreiner need not have read the *Lusiads* to have arrived at a symbolic representation of an alien, resistant immanence in the landscape similar to Adamastor and in complete opposition to Napoleon.

But an even more apposite figure is the classical precursor of Adamastor himself, namely the giant Antaeus, son of Poseidon and Ge, Sea and Earth, also associated with Africa, who derived his strength from his contact with his mother earth. In his famous contest with Hercules, Antaeus would weaken each time Hercules lifted him up to cast him down but then rise with renewed power from his contact with Ge. He is relevant here not only because of Lyndall's pairing of women with the moon and men with the earth, but particularly because of Waldo's persistent association with the earth. We repeatedly see Waldo sitting or lying "on his stomach on the sand" (137), for instance when he makes his childhood sacrifice to test the power of prayer (chapter 1), when Blenkins crushes his sheep-shearing machine (chapter 10), at the beginning of both chapters one and two of Part Two, and, of course, at his death. In this regard, the allegory of the Hunter told by "Waldo's Stranger" is strikingly inappropriate to Waldo, and leads one to wonder again about the match between Schreiner's intention and intuition. The story's obsessive concern with a quest for absolute Truth, a truth associated with mountain tops, the sky and a mysterious bird, already made somewhat suspect by the authorial narrator's open disregard for its teller, is even more firmly challenged when Waldo, despite the ecstasy aroused by the departing stranger, "Stooped and kissed passionately a hoofmark in the sand" (173). Like the giant under the koppie, like Antaeus, Waldo is a "son of the earth" and, unlike Lyndall, "daughter of the moon," he is intuitively responsive to forces and presences that lie outside her positivist horizons.

There are further important permutations of koppie and giant in the narrative. Much later, in the "Second-Part" chapter significantly titled "The Koppie," Gregory Rose encounters Lyndall at this by now thickly symbolic site and taunts Rose with what looks at first like a callous and casual reference to a "Kaffir": "There at the foot of the 'kopje' goes a Kaffir . . . he is a splended fellow—six feet high, with a magnificent pair of legs. . . . He wakes thoughts that run far out into the future and back into the past" (227-28). She adds: "He is profoundly suggestive" (227), but we are left wondering if either she or Schreiner is fully aware of just

how suggestive he is. Not only is he a powerful metonym of all the vanished precolonial inhabitants of the farm, but his physical magnificence turns him into a living representative of the Adamastor-Antaeus figure, the giant under (or "at the foot of") the koppie. Moreover, the erotic elements in Lyndall's description (she is, incidentally, already pregnant, as we soon discover, and she is about to exploit Rose's passion for her) turn the black man into a "suggestive" sign of his sex rather than of his humanity, and turn him into the kind of man from whom Lyndall, daughter of the moon, might wish to hide her shadow side in order to exploit his masculinity. Still, Lyndall acknowledges here that the black man "wakes thoughts that run far out into the future and back into the past." In the immediate context, she seems to intend only speculations about racial survival and progress, but once again we sense that Lyndall (or is it Schreiner?) verges on the recognition of other modes of being and knowing, other time-scales and primordial forces which then elude her.

Nor is the "Kaffir . . . at the foot of the koppie" the only reminder that, *pace* Dan Jacobson and many another sociopolitical critic of the novel, the "black people in [the novel] are [*not*] merely extras, supernumeraries, part of the background" (*Story* 21)—part of the background, yes, but a background so powerful and resonant that it becomes the deep ground of the novel. Another black figure with an intensely symbolic presence is the shadowy but ubiquitous Hottentot woman, who ostensibly acts as interpreter between Tant Sannie and Bonaparte Blenkins, but subtextually seems to serve as an irreverent chorus, repeatedly seen to be rocked by Rabelaisian laughter directed indifferently at whomever happens to be in trouble, from the amiable Otto to the scurrilous Blenkins. As an "interpreter" she gestures not only towards the problems and confusions of cross-cultural relations in the text, but even more provocatively toward the dense and meaningful silences and ambivalences which confront the reader. At an even more obscure level, she is the mocking voice of all those people, powers and presences excluded from the explicit world of the farm and the positivist horizons of Lyndall. It is not fanciful to suggest that her indiscriminate derision is also the Gargantuan laughter of the giant under the koppie, and as such

another powerful indicator of how Schreiner, perhaps only half-consciously, subverts her main character even as she is supposed to be propagating Schreiner's own views.

Lyndall does, or course, eventually glimpse possibilities of knowing and being outside the confines of the Cartesian discourse of (largely patriarchal) power which she espouses for much of the narrative. Tragically, such illumination comes to her when she has already fallen pregnant and has thus, in the colonial world of mid-Victorian South Africa, lost the precious personal liberty on which her arguments are predicated. Lying in the waggon with Waldo on the night of Tant' Sannie's wedding, Lyndall confesses to a yearning for an intuitive access to otherness quite contrary to anything she has expressed before:

I like to feel that strange life beating up against me. I like to realize forms of life utterly unlike mine. . . . I feel it run through me—that life belongs to me; it makes my little life larger; it breaks down the narrow walls that shut me in. (214-15)

This desire to escape from the confines of the knowing self is in utter contrast to the pronounced solipsism that undergirds most of Lyndall's thinking up to this point—compare, for instance, the priggish maxim she hands down to Waldo just a few weeks and a few pages earlier: "We shall find nothing new in human nature after we have once carefully dissected and analysed the one being we ever shall truly know—ourselves" (198). The solecism, "ourselves," awkwardly conflating the one and the many, Lyndall and humanity, should alone alert us to the factitiousness of the claim. But now, here on the wagon looking up at the stars with Waldo, Lyndall seems to have made a discovery which has come too late, and which is frightening: "They—the stars!" she said softly. "Do you not see? . . . They are laughing at us, Waldo" (218). The Hottentot woman's Rabelaisian laughter finally becomes cosmic ridicule, and its target is Lyndall. (Is it also Schreiner's?)

This laughter directed at Lyndall eventually punctuates a series of increasingly harrowing confrontations with herself in a mirror, encounters which, moreover, plot the disintegration of Lyndall's Cartesian solipsism. On the night preceding her flight from the farm to the Transvaal—"That is out of the world" (239)

she calls it in another phrase rich with resonance, not least in its unconscious betrayal of her desire for a paradigm shift—we find her looking into a mirror, declaring “We are all alone, you and I,” and gazing intently into her own eyes (242-43). One can hardly miss the Cartesian symbolism of this confrontation with self, nor perhaps its Jungian overtones: Lyndall’s antithetical sides, identified in her earlier image of herself as the dichotomous moon, here face each other. Furthermore, the image encapsulates the thematic and narrative antitheses and contrasts which we have encountered all along, here all centred in the ironic and tragic unlikelihood that Lyndall will be able to break out of her monadic selfhood into that radical otherness, the presence of which all around her has been so persistently indicated, yet as persistently missed, throughout the story.

When we next meet Lyndall meeting herself in a mirror, she is already dying—in fact, it is the day before she dies, and the last night in the boarding house where she has given birth to and lost her child. It is a harrowing scene and most readers find it difficult to see beyond the Victorian sentimentality, but there are some extraordinary features here. Lyndall insists on being dressed in white, then that Gregory Rose should hold the curtain so that she may see herself in the mirror. What she sees is a kind of premature Miss Havisham, “a queenly little figure in its pink and white . . . a transparent little face, refined by suffering into an almost angel-like beauty. The face looked at her, she looked back, laughing softly” (281). The disintegration of Lyndall’s solipsistic self is nearly complete—“‘I am nearly there,’ she said.” The solidarity between self and image invoked earlier is gone. The “queenly” figure is a parody of the imperial, authoritative self invoked by the admirer of Napoleon, while the “angel-like beauty” and “transparent little face” take us back to the naked, numinous child baptized by the moon in the first chapter, but here reduced to an infantilized version of a grown woman. Her child has died, but in a sense it is also Lyndall’s other side, the repressed, shadowy side of the moon she referred to earlier, that died in its infancy, and left her only with a cold albeit passionate positivism. Most startlingly, “laughing softly” Lyndall involuntarily mimes the ridicule of the Rabelaisian Hottentot woman, and the laugh-

ter of the indifferent stars. Turning away from the mirror, she "looked back," and sees perhaps that other, intuitive, subjective, Waldo-like self withdrawing from her.

Another term that catches one's attention here is "transparent"—"a transparent little face." The notion that the self can be "transparent," a self-evident entity is, of course, fundamental to the Cartesian *cogito*, but is just as fundamentally denied in any constructivist epistemology which conceives of the self as always provisional, occluded, and decentred. Schreiner was no post-modernist, but the scene has strikingly Lacanian overtones in its suggestion of a Lyndall forever trapped in the mirror phase of a preverbal but disfigured childhood, doing some kind of penance for having presumed a monadic autonomous self, centred on the rational Cartesian *cogito*, confidently reaching out to illusory self-realization and authenticity. Such a self is simply not there, and disappears from Lyndall's mirror.

The process is completed a day later, late at night, in the wagon on which she is heading for the Transvaal, which "is out of this world." Again she is looking into a mirror. We are told that "the old clear intellect awoke from its long torpor" (283), but only in order to allow her to recognize and bid farewell to that other self: "They had looked at each other often so before." We are reminded, too, that it "had been a child's face once. . . . it had been a woman's face." Now it is evidently neither, as she closes her eyes in death. It is hard not to recognize in this infantilized Lyndall a grim nemesis, a primordial revenge on her embrace of Napoleonic mastery, but it is even harder to decide whether Schreiner intended such a cruel castigation of her character. Roberta Mazzanti, invoking Ann Pratt's feminist notion of "growing up grotesque," suggests entirely external explanations for Schreiner's use of these bodily symptoms of stunted emotional growth. Both critics argue that Lyndall "grows up deformed and immature instead of developing into an adult being" (Mazzanti 126) as a result of the cultural, social, physical, intellectual, and sexual curbs placed on her. There are clearly strong indicators of such external curbs in the novel, but Schreiner also seems to be engaged in a much less reductionist yet intriguing epistemological enquiry.

To put it bluntly, Lyndall is for most of her life locked into the wrong discourse, yet it is a discourse which Schreiner herself seems ambivalent about. She seems to want to exploit it polemically even as she also signals her discomfort with it. Laurence Lerner once suggested, somewhat provocatively, that in some respects *The Story of an African Farm* reads like an anti-feminist novel. I disagree, but the stern revenge that Schreiner seems to take on her heroine suggests that the only conception of feminism available to Schreiner at the time, that is, one itself based on a straight inversion of patriarchal power structures, at some level registered with her as inadequate or flawed. While the overt text of the novel puts forward all the politically correct arguments—arguments which were Schreiner's own—for the emancipation of women, the subtext seems to be riddled with doubt and denial, exposing the novel's explicit feminism as one that does not seek to displace a Cartesian, monadic, positivist, and patriarchal epistemology with radically different ways of being and knowing, but merely attempts to participate in or even usurp the dominant though corrupt paradigms of male power. "Trust the tale not the teller," D. H. Lawrence famously remarked, and I maintain that in *The Story of an African Farm*, inasmuch as Schreiner is herself not fully conscious of the polyphony of her novel, the text offers substantial evidence that at a subtextual level the novel's positivist, rationalist discourse of feminism is subverted even as it is expounded. Early in the narrative, Lyndall, reflecting on Napoleon's death in isolation and exile, an anticipation of her own, utters one of several metafictional observations in the novel: "It is a terrible, hateful ending . . . and the worst is, it is true. I have noticed . . . that it is only the made-up stories that end nicely; the true ones all end so" (48). Like Waldo's later riddle ("Could a story be told in opposite ways and both ways be true?" [67]), and like Schreiner's own musings in her Preface, Lyndall's words attest to the presence of a significant metafictional interest in the narrative even as they problematize the story's thematic direction. We are necessarily left with much irresolution. Schreiner's overt concern with the possibilities of fiction suggests that on one level she is determinedly breaking new ground in the representation of the entrapped and alienated feminine/

colonial consciousness, yet that on another level the enterprise was for her fraught with self-doubt and an uncertainty of purpose. To a significant extent, then, the novel's richly suggestive indeterminacy may remain fortuitous, the function of the intensity of Olive Schreiner's vision "of the life we all lead" rather than of any congruent aesthetic structuring of a kind which she distrusted as "stage method." Paradoxically, this is a "weakness" which we can now recognize as both a source of the novel's strength and an affirmation of its proleptic status in the history of modernist fiction.

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