

NOTES AND SHORT ESSAYS

Olive Schreiner's *Trooper Halket*: An Altered Awareness.

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Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland (1897)¹ is the only fictional work by Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) to concern itself with the treatment of the black Africans by the European settlers of southern Africa. ("Mashonaland," later Rhodesia, is now Zimbabwe.) Trooper Halket, the protagonist, is an Englishman who gets lost in the veld and spends the night out. He is barely twenty, simple and naive. The powerful indictment of British imperialism begins immediately but casually: Peter, though alone in the dark, is not afraid of the "natives" for "their kraals had been destroyed and their granaries burnt for thirty miles round" (p. 27). He remembers the nights of military comradeship around the camp fire "talking of the niggers they had shot or the kraals they had destroyed" (pp. 28-29). His thoughts go to the unavailing struggles of his mother back in England and thence to dreams of quick, if not legitimate wealth. It is a gentle irony that is aimed at this young man, his aspirations corrupted by the cupidity and cruelty of colonialism. Near midnight, weariness sets in and the images in Peter's mind are confused. The blaze he had lit himself seems to be the fire the soldiers and he had made to burn the natives' grain; he sees an old Mashona, head blown off and hands still moving; he hears the loud cries of the African women and children as the maxim guns are turned on them. He thinks too of a black woman he and another soldier had raped. "Well, they didn't shoot her!—and a black woman wasn't white!" (pp. 36-37). Both the sexual snigger and the underlying unease are well caught.

Suddenly Peter hears the slow, even tread of bare feet ascending, and a tall figure, dressed in a loose linen garment joins Peter. The reader quickly realizes the identity of this omniscient figure but Peter does not, and hence the dramatic irony as he talks to a Christ suffering because of what man does to man, in the casual and bravado fashion in which he talks with his fellow soldiers. After a while, the Christ-figure takes over the conversation and asks Peter simple questions such as "Who gave you your land?"; "What right had the people of England to give land in Africa to the Chartered Company?" Towards early dawn, the stranger leaves, having told Peter to lead the true Christian life and not that of the settlers who are Christians only in their protestations. Sometime after Peter finds his way back to his unit, a native is discovered, wounded and hiding; the Captain wants to shoot him but Peter intervenes and speaks of justice, compassion, and love. The result is that Peter is ordered to shoot the man. During the night, Peter sets the African free but in the confusion following the raising of the alarm, Peter is deliberately shot by the Captain. The soldiers strike camp and ride away as the morning light falls on the stone marking Peter's grave.

¹ Olive Schreiner, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (Johannesburg: A. D. Donker, 1974). Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

The white people of South Africa, Olive Schreiner wrote², are three hundred years behind the times, and Peter's plea on behalf of the natives is received with amusement and oaths. The soldiers believe that a man who spends the night alone on the veld either goes mad or religious; they equate and dismiss both the insane and the religiously moral. So, with characteristic honesty, Olive Schreiner questions the value of her allegory and that of liberalism within the fictional framework itself. "There is no God in Mashonaland" (p. 121). White South Africa has long been indifferent to the influence that thoughts and words may have.³ "Olive Schreiner might be called the Cassandra of South Africa. She denounced and she prophesied like one inspired . . . Denunciations and exhortations do not stay the hand of history . . . time has conclusively, ruthlessly proved the bankruptcy of liberalism to stem the tide of political events."⁴

Olive Schreiner has been described as an enigma. What she wrote is so powerful that critics feel she should have produced more and still better work. However, as a writer of fiction, the subject which preoccupied her was the position of women in society. It is because she was a female that Olive Schreiner both as a child and as a young woman suffered, and like that other Victorian (Dickens) whose early experiences left in him an abiding sympathy for the suffering children are subjected to and endure, Olive Schreiner was most sensitively conscious of the suffering of the female sex. "To me there is nothing else in the world that touches me in the same way" (*L.* p. 265). This passionate preoccupation can be explained on more than the premise of autobiography. Olive Schreiner read extensively and, in the absence of a South-African intellectual tradition, personal experience was reinforced by the thought and social currents of nineteenth-century England. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* had been published in 1792, and William Thompson's *Appeal of one Half of the Human Race* (a work which stated, among other things, that female oppression is determined by birth, even as skin color determines that of the nonwhite) in 1825. Mill's classic on *The Subjection of Women* was published when Olive Schreiner was fourteen: altogether, the movement for female emancipation and equality had gathered momentum and force.

Olive Schreiner wrote that the question of the day was the condition of women and that in after years, it may be something else (*L.* p. 37). History has shown that question in southern Africa to be the condition of the black man under apartheid. Here one must separate Schreiner the novelist from the later Schreiner, the reformer. It is illuminating to examine the African as he figures in her fictional works. In *Undine* she remarks that a "Kaffir" (a term of insult for black Africans) is as averse to work as a cat to water. African laborers are described as savages with evil, monkey faces.⁵ The African is either irresponsible and deceitful, or impudent and rude.⁶ *From Man to Man*, written over a period of four decades, is interesting in that it reveals Olive Schreiner's growing consciousness of the ill-treatment of the black African. In the early part of the work, he is referred to as the nigger, and yet later when one of the children in the novel uses similar terms ("nigger-girl"), she is rebuked and her mother (Rebekah) tells a parable about a race from another planet, pure white in color, which enslaves the (pink) Europeans. The aliens ridicule

² S. C. Cronwright-Schreiner, ed., *The Letters of Olive Schreiner* (London: 1924), pp. 182-83. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *L.*

³ See Lord Goodman, "A World of Tragic Disillusion," *The Observer*, London, 18 September 1977, p. 11.

⁴ Dora Taylor, "Olive Schreiner," *Trek*, 13 March 1942, p. 13.

⁵ Olive Schreiner, *Undine*. First published, posthumously, in 1929 (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972), p. 281.

⁶ *Undine*, pp. 261, 350.

European beliefs and customs as ignorance and superstition, and the conquered people begin to despise themselves. Rebekah confesses that when she was young, she had thought all nonwhite people ugly and unintelligent. In *The Story of an African Farm* (her most famous work and a classic of South-African literature), Olive Schreiner uncritically adopts the vocabulary and attitudes of her time, except that the latter is relieved by "brief spasms of impassioned charitable idealism."⁷ The Colored maid is ungrateful and vindictive, and the "Kaffir" woman has hideous lips. The broadening of awareness and sympathy in *Trooper Halket* is remarkable.

In writing about the unjust treatment of women, Olive Schreiner evidently had women of European descent in mind. She recounts that a "Kaffir" woman once told her God could not be good because he had created women (*L.* p. 144). But if it was unfortunate to be a woman, even of European origin, it was much worse to be a "Kaffir," male or female. However, Olive Schreiner gradually realized that the "real question in South Africa is the Native Question" (*L.* p. 205). This cause, she felt, would involve a long, hard battle and call to "the bravest souls in South Africa for many years to come" (*L.* p. 283). Aware of the weight of settled opinion, she at times felt a despondency on despair: "The Native Question becomes darker and darker here, and one can do nothing" (*L.* p. 323). In *An English-South African's View of the Situation* (1899) she states with terrible historical clairvoyance that within fifty to one hundred years the bill for the wrongs done to the natives will be presented for payment, and the white man would then have to settle it. In *Closer Union* (1908), she warned that a policy of racial discrimination was short-term and dangerous, and that even self-interest dictated the just treatment of the black African.

"Indifferentism" in the Early Fiction of Max Brod: The Representation of Decadence in the Prague Circle

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Despite a growing interest in the cultural phenomenon of decadence, the notion as a specific aesthetic quality has largely remained mystified by clichés and labels since its emergence in mid-nineteenth-century France. Decadence has yet to be accepted as a representation of social discourse, each variant changing according to its sociohistorical presuppositions. The meaning of the concept has adapted to each distinct *Zeitgeist*. This in turn caused transformations of the term and its interpretation, as well as migrations across national boundaries. Therefore, the various concepts of decadence should be considered as paradigms of communicability by which specific communities identify and justify themselves and their time. In this general context I should like to introduce the example of Max

⁷ Eric Harber, "South Africa: The White English-Speaking Sensibility," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 11, No. 1 (August 1972), p. 62.