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‘Undoubtedly Love Letters’? Olive Schreiner’s Letters to Karl Pearson¹

Introduction

“The first thing one learns from the letters is that no clear distinction can be made between personal letters and business letters, and consequently between the personal lives of these women and their lives in the movement.”²

The South African writer and social theorist Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) is best-known for her published writings, and in an international context chiefly for her novel *The Story Of An African Farm* (1883) and feminist treatise *Woman and Labour* (1911).³ Schreiner was also a prolific letter-writer whose correspondents included prominent individuals in British and South African political, cultural and intellectual life including W.T. Stead, Karl Pearson, Havelock Ellis, Eleanor Marx, Mary Gladstone Drew, Jan Smuts, Frederick and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, Alfred Milner, T. Fisher Unwin, and Edward Carpenter, amongst many others. Scholars have generally made scant use of Schreiner’s letters and where they have done so they have drawn mainly on problematic edited collections of her letters.⁴ However, Schreiner’s original, mainly unpublished letters provide valuable insight into her life, writings, political interventions and developing social theory, and in themselves constitute one of her major written outputs. Transcriptions of around 5000 of her extant letters have now been published in full at Olive Schreiner Letters Online, and this affords an opportunity to examine afresh both her life and writing, and the interpretations that have been made of both.⁵ The focus here however is chiefly on the letters themselves, how a particular reading has been made of one subset of them, and how they might be re-read and re-interpreted. In doing so I argue that Schreiner’s letters should not be treated as a (private) adjunct to her ‘proper’ (public) writings, but form an important part of her overall written oeuvre.

What follows offers a re-reading of Schreiner’s letters to the statistician and founder of the Men and Women’s Club, Karl Pearson, letters which unlike many others of Schreiner’s, have received considerable scholarly attention. The dominant reading

that has been made of these letters to date is as unrequited love letters and this needs rethinking, for when these letters are considered in their entirety rather than through the highly selective extracts used by most researchers, when they are contextualised as part of Schreiner's wider extant manuscript letters, and when the intertwining of their public and private aspects is recognised, it becomes clear that a considerably more complex interpretation of her letters is required. Consideration will be given to how Schreiner's letters to Pearson have been read to date, what differences arise from re-reading the letters 'in whole' and in context, and what the implications of this are for reading letters more generally.⁶

While letters have sometimes been assumed to be a mainly personal form of life writing,⁷ "prized for their intimacy, immediacy, and privacy"⁸, and certainly many of Olive Schreiner's letters have been read in this way – that is, as reflections of her inner emotional life – her letters in fact trouble any simple binary notions of public and private. As the opening comment from Bosch suggests regarding suffrage movement letters, the personal and the public are interwoven in many letters (as well as in 'lived life'), with important implications for readings which assume the essentially personal or private nature of letters. More recently, in their analysis of a collection of nineteenth-century women missionaries' letters, Haggis and Holmes emphasise that these "straddle the boundary of the personal and impersonal, private and public in a number of ways."⁹ They point out that many of these women's letters display a degree of "interiority" but are also in effect "job application[s]".¹⁰ This provides one useful way of re-thinking Schreiner's letters to Pearson, which though to date principally interpreted for their supposed emotional content and intensity, can also be read as a kind of 'job application', a display of her intellectual credentials in a bid for entry to a world of public, political and intellectual concerns. Regarding Schreiner's letters more generally, as argued elsewhere, she frequently deployed these as powerful tools for political influence, and so they cannot be categorised as merely private.¹¹ Indeed, recent scholarship on epistolarity has emphasised letter-writing as "a mediated act of self-projection", as Simon-Martin has argued in her examination of "performative identity-formation" in the travel letters of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon.¹² Acknowledging the performative

dimensions of letter-writing and accepting the "artful and literary qualities"¹³ of letters allows for alternative readings of epistolary outputs which do not assume that letters are necessarily or automatically a reflection of the inner emotional life of the writer, but can be cultivated and strategic. The re-reading offered here of Schreiner's letters to Pearson consequently resists the classification of these letters as simply or 'undoubtedly' love letters, and instead considers them as a site where Schreiner attempted to craft a new type of intellectual relationship and develop her thinking about a range of social and political concerns.

‘Undoubtedly Love Letters’? Readings of Schreiner’s Letters to Pearson

Olive Schreiner left South Africa for England in 1881, taking with her among other writings the manuscript of her novel, *The Story of An African Farm*, publication of which in 1883 propelled her to international fame. By the mid 1880s she had developed friendships with, amongst others, Havelock Ellis, Eleanor Marx and Edward Carpenter, and had become part of a number of radical intellectual networks. In 1885 she was recruited by Elisabeth Cobb to join the Men and Women’s Club, the small discussion group founded by the statistician and polymath intellectual, Karl Pearson. The Club’s remit “was discussion of matters ‘connected with the mutual position and relation of men and women’, from ‘the historical and scientific, as distinguished from the theological standpoint’”.¹⁴

Schreiner attended the first formal meeting of the Club on 9 July 1885, where Pearson delivered his paper ‘The Woman’s Question’. Her earliest letters to Pearson date from just before this time, with her extant letters to him concentrated in the period between mid-1885 and the end of 1886, when she left England for Europe following a rupture with the Club, the details of which are discussed later, involving Pearson, Cobb and another member of the Club, Bryan Donkin. Donkin was the Marx family doctor and also acted as one of Schreiner’s physicians at the time, as well as being importunately in love with Schreiner.¹⁵ It is this rupture (in which it appears that both Cobb and Bryan Donkin at different times decided that Schreiner was in love with Pearson and conveyed this to him, followed by Schreiner’s

subsequent denials and eventual departure for Europe) which have importantly shaped the readings made of Schreiner's letters to Pearson (his letters to her are not extant).¹⁶ Schreiner's letters to Pearson, or rather the selected secondary extracts drawn on, have been interpreted by many feminist and 'New Woman' scholars as well as others as entirely 'intimate', and specifically as private, emotional and centred on her allegedly romantic (and unrequited) love for Pearson. In some instances, this emphasis on Schreiner's 'emotionality' has also shaded into the implication that she was somehow psychologically unstable.

One example here is that of Ruth Brandon, who in her study of the 'new thinkers', intellectuals and social reformers in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, suggests that Schreiner's unrequited love for Pearson drove her literally "out of her mind", and that as a result, "in place of the detached intellectual pleasures of the 'man to man' friendship he [Pearson] had specified, he now found himself at the centre of an emotional storm".¹⁷ And, in a second example, Judith Walkowitz suggests that Schreiner's main motive for joining the Men and Women's Club was that she "had her eye on Karl Pearson, for whom she developed an intense and unrequited passion", and she repeats as fact the comments made by Elisabeth Cobb, that Schreiner was "a most unreliable club member, 'too emotional' to treat the discussion of sex 'dispassionately'".¹⁸ In this connection it is worth noting that Schreiner had caught out Elisabeth Cobb in malicious gossiping about Havelock Ellis and herself, and names Cobb as a key agent in her own anger and distress about this bad behaviour, information which puts a different complexion on matters.¹⁹

A third example is that Pearson's most recent biographer, Theodore Porter, also writes of Schreiner's "emotionality" and claims she "fell in love" with Pearson, and does so in spite of himself commenting on her strong disavowals of sexual feeling for Pearson and her indignation at Pearson and others misunderstanding her on this point.²⁰ Indeed, even recent and sympathetic accounts of Schreiner's relationship with Pearson refuse to take seriously Schreiner's denial of what she referred to as 'sex-love' or 'sex feeling' for Pearson. Thus, while acknowledging the importance of not downplaying Schreiner's "*intellectual* passion" for Pearson, a fourth example is

that Carolyn Burdett suggests that “it seems difficult to take Schreiner at her word when she strenuously denies any sexual feeling for Pearson”, and states that her letters to him are “undoubtedly love letters”.²¹

Tellingly, Porter bases his reading of Schreiner and her relationship with Pearson on just two sets of letters – those to Havelock Ellis, for which he has utilised Draznin’s edited collection of 1992, and those to Pearson, for which he has relied on transcriptions in the Hacker Papers (in the University College London manuscript collections). The latter was used because Porter regards Schreiner’s writing as in “a very difficult hand”, even though he reads other letters located in the same archive as Schreiner’s in *their* original manuscript form.²² Walkowitz too makes use of transcripts in the Hacker papers rather than reading Schreiner’s original letters, while Brandon relies on Richard Rive’s (1987) problematic edited collection of Schreiner’s letters.²³ Even Burdett’s more nuanced, sophisticated interpretation draws on Rive’s edited letters rather than the originals.

Reading Schreiner’s letters to Pearson as expressions of passionate, emotional love in these accounts seems to primarily stem from four inter-related methodological problems. Firstly and most consequentially, there has been a focus on her letters to Pearson more or less to the exclusion of all the other extant letters that Schreiner wrote (with the possible exception of her letters to Havelock Ellis). The interpretations which result tend therefore to view these letters in isolation, rather than as part of Schreiner’s wider epistolary practices and engagements. Secondly, attention has been given to only a very small number of the total letters which Schreiner wrote to Pearson, mostly drawn from a very short time period, the summer of 1886, and they have been read in a vacuum rather than as part of a wider context, and in the light of other letters from Schreiner’s circle and other letters of Schreiner herself. Thirdly, there has been a reliance on the versions in edited collections which are selected and represent only a few of the many letters, and which tend to reproduce only the ‘interesting’, ‘exciting’ letters and omit the quotidian, ‘ordinary’ letters or parts thereof, resulting in a skewed and rather one-dimensional perception of what kind of letters Schreiner wrote to Pearson.²⁴ And fourthly, relying on letters in the edited collections is problematic in another way,

because these edited versions remove uncertainty and ambivalence by editorially smoothing out the originals, by removing their uncertainties, crossings out, insertions, mistakes and qualifications.

In addition to these methodological problems, the interpretation of Schreiner's letters to Pearson as mainly or 'only' unrequited love letters is perhaps also a product of attempts to make sense of a few of the letters having sometimes complicated and difficult to interpret content. Schreiner's 134 extant manuscript letters to Pearson are overall complex, wide-ranging, highly cerebral and challenging, full of intellectual excitement and fervour.²⁵ A few of them have troubled or upset content and are written in an ambiguous and rather convoluted way. The result is that as a set they are difficult to categorise as just one kind or type of letter. It is perhaps from this that the rather reductionist tendency to label them as the letters of unrequited love by an emotionally unbalanced person has arisen, because that seems to make sense of the parts of the sub-set of these letters in edited form that have been focused on, with the rest excluded.

I argue that the 'love letters' reading problematically excludes and glosses over the complexities of Schreiner's letters to Pearson, while my overall re-reading of them suggests she was attempting, not always successfully, to forge a new type of 'man to man' friendship or comradeship, in which public, political and intellectual concerns were paramount, but from which the personal and the emotional could not always be excluded. That is, I am not arguing that Schreiner's letters to Pearson categorically were or were not unrequited love letters, for how could this be determined by anyone now, but that re-reading the Pearson letters as wholly or mainly as personal and emotional stifles other important features of them, and also removes from analytic sight their structural similarities with other Schreiner letters, including their public aspects and their characteristics as letters of intellectual and political engagement. And by focusing less on their emotional or private qualities, it is evident that letter-writing provided Schreiner with a forum in which to trial what later become public writings, but that the letters themselves are also an important written - and now public - output.

Re-reading the Schreiner-Pearson Letters

What follows provides a re-reading of Schreiner's letters to Pearson, firstly by situating these in relation to Schreiner's other extant letters with which they share similar features, including intellectual preening and display, as well as discussions and debates about books, ideas, politics and work. Secondly, I explore some of the consequences of reliance on the edited collections of Schreiner's letters and how this has shaped the dominant view of her letters to Pearson. And thirdly, I consider what Schreiner's letters to Pearson – that is, all 134 of them, and all of these in their entirety – might be in a categorical sense, if not letters of unrequited love.

When Schreiner's letters to Pearson are situated within the overall corpus of her extant letters and re-read in this context, it becomes evident that they are predominantly letters of intellectual and political engagement, and are to some extent paraenetic. That is, in common with numbers of her letters to other correspondents, they entail, although in a complex way, "Schreiner corresponding with people for whom she had some liking and respect but where major political and/or ethical disagreements existed and - key to such letter-writing - she also wanted to persuade or dissuade the people concerned regarding their views and activities".²⁶ This is evident, for instance, in one of Schreiner's earliest extant letters to Pearson, in which she critiques his 'Woman's Question' paper, commenting, "The omission [in your paper] was 'Man.' Your whole paper reads as though the object of the club were to dis-cuss woman, her objects, her needs, her mental & physical nature, & man only in as far as he throws light upon her question. This is entirely wrong".²⁷

As with her other letters of engagement, Schreiner uses many of her letters to Pearson to display her intellectual abilities, and to influence and persuade him on a range of political and intellectual topics. *Contra* the secondary literature commenting on the Pearson letters, they are actually predominantly concerned with analysis and development of topics then under discussion by the Men and Woman's Club and more generally at the time – that is, with matters concerning the external, public world. In this regard the letters discuss in detail a range of intellectual, literary, political and other concerns, from freethinking to aesthetics,

from the nature of life to books to read, as well as a set of contemporary political concerns connected to 'the woman question', including prostitution, the age of sexual consent, and the Contagious Diseases Acts, as discussed in further detail below.

In several respects Schreiner's letters to Pearson share features with those she wrote to the Cape politician John X. Merriman and the English evangelical newspaper editor W.T. Stead. In these she is 'doing' feminist politics and feminist theory, as well as arguing South African politics, and in them she shows off her knowledge and learning, discussing books, reading and ideas. In her letters to Stead, Schreiner attempted to dissuade him from his support for Cecil Rhodes; in those to Merriman, she put forward her political views, particularly regarding the 'native question', and attempted to awaken what she regarded as his political duty as a white liberal. These examples, and others, suggest that Schreiner's "analytical letter-writing was designed to impress, or perhaps rather to shine in the eyes of, the addressee in question", with this related to the highly performative nature of these letters, and their efforts to instigate political or intellectual changes.²⁸ For example, in her letters to Pearson, Schreiner frequently comments on books which have influenced her intellectually, and suggests books to Pearson which she thinks may benefit and perhaps alter his thinking:

"^Please really read Whitman. You will like him so much.^"²⁹

"I send you my old copy of Emerson. Don't read it of course if you're not inclined. It doesn't teach one any thing; it doesn't give one any new ideas. The day I read the essay on "Selfreliance", was ^a^ very great day to me unreadable. I always thought I was alone till then. I hope you'll like him."³⁰

"There is a book I want you very much to read if you have not already done so. Robertson Smith's "Kinship & Marriage in Early Arabia." I wish you would read it before you go on with your work."³¹

In other letters Schreiner also details her responses to books Pearson had sent or recommended to her, for instance commenting on her seemingly visceral enjoyment of Robert Hamerling's 1882 novel *Aspasia*, which had much influenced Pearson: "I am reading *Aspasia*. I like it. It is a book to read slowly & enjoy as one

does poetry, sucking it in it. May I keep it a little longer?"³² In this respect Schreiner's letters exemplify Hannan's contention regarding women in an earlier period for whom letter-writing was central to their engagement with the "life of the mind", and a crucial part of their contribution to "cultures of knowledge".³³

Schreiner's letters to Pearson also respond to and critique in a frank way his ideas and work, and debate as an equal their shared intellectual and political concerns. In this, they are much like the letters she wrote to J.T. Lloyd, W.T. Stead, Havelock Ellis and others, and Schreiner uses the metaphor of 'the study' (that is, her intellect and her letters) to urge the recipients to take practical action, action in its companion term 'on the streets' (literally so regarding support for Stead's campaign regarding the age of consent). Schreiner herself always straddled and sought to bridge the study/street division, and her comment in a letter to Havelock Ellis, that "You of all people I ever met (infinitely more than Karl) are a man of the study & nothing else"³⁴ suggests that she saw Pearson's potential for putting his intellectual work to practical political purpose. She also commented to Pearson about his writing:

"I have been much interested in the paper. Of course I agree with very little of it, but the first muddle about the A.B.C. is very good. The last little bit doesn't to me seem worthy of you. I have a feeling that you are trying to prove a foregone conclusion for some purpose or other. Do you understand what I mean? Generally you reason right out, without caring where your reasoning takes you; so it be true. I don't ^feel it^ in this case. It may be my blindness."³⁵

"The Ethic of Freethought I like best of all your writings that I have seen. Ellis tells me it is out of print; have you perhaps another copy that you might spare me? I want to send it to some one at the Cape. I return the Martin Luther paper. I do not like it very much. I sympathize strongly with the main idea. But you sometimes make assertions in it which it does not seem to me you yourself would ^quite^ be prepared to defend. You seem to wish more to prove your point than to get at the truth, & that is a quality I don't see in anything else of yours."³⁶

"Shortly – I think the first part seems not to be your own work. It is a series of assertions where only possibilities, probabilities & high probabilities are allowable. This is not your fashion but very much that of many German thinkers of a certain school, who see a probability, work it into a connected theory & stare at it till they think it is proved forever. Didst thou stand at the elbow of the Almighty & watch man developing from the brute that thou knowest all these steps?"³⁷

In such comments, while she makes some admiring and perhaps flattering observations about Pearson's work, Schreiner also repeatedly criticises his tendency to draw 'foregone conclusions' and make assertions he cannot defend, and queries his use of 'proof' and evidence in building arguments. Far from 'catering or deferring' to Pearson, as Walkowitz implies³⁸, Schreiner engages critically with Pearson's ideas and argues strongly with those she finds unconvincing or poorly evidenced in a way that few others at the time or subsequently had the courage or ability to do.

Many of Schreiner's letters, as shown in the examples which follow, sought to provoke Pearson into mental action. They exhort and cajole him to intellectual activity, much as Schreiner sought through epistolary means to provoke South African politicians Jan Smuts or F.S. Malan into political action.³⁹ Many of Schreiner's comments are focused on Pearson's future as a 'great mind', and urge him to cultivate his abilities, fulfil his intellectual promise, and protect himself from the 'excessive demands' of public life which might intrude on his ability to develop and work:

"You will do some great work some day (perhaps not everything you think of now) but you will grow silently for some years first. I've never done any of my real work yet, but I think I begin to see what it is. I don't despise the work you have done, but it doesn't in any way represent you."⁴⁰

"Why did you never tell me about these lectures before? Have they been printed? I knew that you had dreamed of writing a history of German literature & civilization, but I thought it was only a dream; *unreadable* I did not know that a vast amount of labour had already been expended on it. You must & will carry it out. Why don't you save as much as you can for the next four years, & then go & live very economically some where in Germany for nine or ten, & work. It can never be done in London in the snatches of time between your lectures & other duties."⁴¹

"//I think you ought to write that book on woman. You will find that your thoughts get clearer as you go on I think; & when you get to the end of the book you can write the first part, if you find things have become clearer to you."⁴²

"Are you striving to shut yourself off from excessive demands. You cannot have solitude & separation from London life. In it, are you realizing that your first duty is rest; are you pressing out your juice when it has hardly had time to form? Is that terrible on, on, on, eating you? Have you realized that an hour's joyful work of a brain leaping up spontaneously from its rest, surpasses in value the anxious *unreadable* work of years? If I had stayed in London for two years more I should have broken down forever under intense pressure, with out any disease, & done no

more work. Are you guarding yourself from a like fate? Are you putting your hand over yourself & saying 'Rest, that is your highest duty ^to the world just^ now'? Have ^you^ infinite faith in yourself &, if the next year passes without any work, ^will you^ know that your ideas & your work are ripening? Work on slowly, steadily, do not seek to expand, ripen.'"43

These letters are written in a way that suggests that Schreiner regarded Pearson's work as crucially important, and that she regarded it as his 'duty' to preserve his health and intellectual capacities in order that the full potential of his work and ideas might be realised. In addition, they indicate that while Schreiner found many of Pearson's ideas stimulating, she also disagreed with much of his analysis of 'the woman question', especially his view of women's sexuality as driven solely by a maternal impulse. Schreiner's letters took on and argued with these ideas, and attempted to persuade Pearson to rethink his analyses by challenging his hypotheses, pushing him to revise, develop and refine his ideas, as in her comments above about 'growing steadily', 'working steadily' and 'ripening'.

As with Schreiner's other letters of engagement, which came to abrupt end at the point at which she gave up on the person concerned ever changing (her letters to Merriman, for example, ceased after he failed to vote against the 1913 Natives Land Act), so her correspondence with Pearson effectively ended when Schreiner left Europe for South Africa in late 1889 and consciously turned away from the inter-personal and towards the external, public world of politics and action.⁴⁴ Only a small handful of letters to Pearson were written in the period from then to the last extant letter of July 1895. In this regard too, the Pearson letters share features with other Schreiner letters similarly structured and positioned. When the structural features of Schreiner's letters to Pearson are attended to, and when they are situated in the totality of the corpus of Schreiner's extant letters, a very different reading of them emerges, one in which the private recedes from view, and the public comes to the fore.

The 'unrequited love' reading of the letters to Pearson has relied on edited collections of Schreiner's letters, as noted, and one result of this is a temporal problem. That is, it has produced the exclusive focus on one period of Schreiner's correspondence with Pearson – the summer of 1886 – from which the bulk of the

letters to Pearson appearing in Rive's edited collection are drawn. On either side of this period, both the many intellectual, as well as the equally many mundane, everyday letters or components of letters, have been ignored, with the focus on only the small number read as 'proving' Schreiner's unrequited love for Pearson. Letters dealing with ordinary Club business, making social arrangements for lunch parties or to go boating⁴⁵, landlady woes and the weather⁴⁶ have largely not been selected for inclusion in the edited versions of Schreiner's letters, and thus have not been 'seen' by those researchers who depend only on edited collections, anymore than Schreiner's magnificent discourses on prostitution⁴⁷, on Montaigne's essay on friendship⁴⁸, on phases of the mind⁴⁹, aesthetics⁵⁰ or on her planned 'sex book'⁵¹ have been seen either.

In addition, within whole letters, the parts of these dealing with everyday, quotidian matters have either been deliberately excluded or have not been 'seen'. The focus has been on those parts of Schreiner's letters deemed salacious, provocative, potentially controversial, or charged with supposedly hidden meaning. Thus in several cases Rive has removed the 'mundane' parts of letters dealing with, for example, Men and Women's Club business⁵², confusion about arrangements for a social meeting⁵³, or Schreiner's explanation for why she has sent Pearson her copy of Thoreau's *Walden*.⁵⁴ Taken in isolation these examples may not seem significant, but the cumulative effect of stripping out nearly all references to the everyday is to give Schreiner's letters to Pearson an intensity they do not necessarily possess when read in their original form. Moreover, Rive has made more consequential omissions which are likely to have shaped subsequent readings of these letters. One example here concerns his omission of several of Schreiner's criticisms of Pearson's work, including in her 18 June 1886 letter, in which she explains what she refers to her as her "nasty & carping" criticisms of a paper Pearson had written.⁵⁵ Another striking example is his editing of her important letter of 3 July 1886 (which Rive misdates 2 July 1886) concerning aesthetics and the senses.⁵⁶ Rive includes the very start of the letter and then omits Schreiner's long meditation on the senses of touch, taste and smell, instead jumping ahead several pages to the latter part of the letter dealing with what Schreiner refers to as the 'sexual sensations'.⁵⁷

In addition to removing those parts of the letter he presumably judged unimportant, Rive has also removed the deletions, insertions and other amendments Schreiner made, implying a certainty and 'cut and dried-ness' that the letter with its unpolished, emergent aspects did not necessarily intend.⁵⁸ The result is a curiously one-dimensional, distorted view of these letters as literally and completely 'out of the ordinary'. And finally, while the examples given above of Rive's editorial excisions are indicated by his use of ellipses, these are in fact frequently not indicated by ellipses but appear unmarked, implying erroneously that such letters are complete.⁵⁹

There are many letters and parts of letters from Schreiner to Pearson concerned with the ordinary and the quotidian, including around making arrangements to meet and discussions of Club administrative business. Reading these interspersed amongst the 'big' letters to Pearson puts a different complexion on the whole, and certainly suggests a very different interpretation of their relationship. This is that, for Schreiner at least, it was mainly concerned with the external world and intellectual exchange, and not the personal one of romantic love, as her comment to him on 30 January 1887 makes clear:

"The life of a woman like myself is a very solitary one. You have had a succession of friendships that have answered to the successive stages of your mental. When I came to England a few years ago, I had once, only, spoken to a person who knew the names of such books as I loved. Intellectual friendship was a thing I had only dreamed of. Our brief intellectual relations & our few conversations have been common-place enough to you, to me they have been absolutely unique. I have known nothing like it in my life. You will be generous & consider this when you remember how I have tortured you with half-fledged ideas, & plans of books that could never be written."⁶⁰

Indeed, this comment on her general intellectual isolation resonates with those she made elsewhere, for example in her response to Edward Carpenter's attack on the intellect: "What you, who have been over taught, are striking at, is that wretched choking of the intellect that goes on in schools & colleges, but we, people who have never been over fed like myself, we who have never been to school who have never been taught anything, we cannot feel as you do. You have been over fed. We are

dying of hunger”.⁶¹ This chimes with Schreiner’s remarks to Pearson and helps to contextualise the great importance she attached to intellectual friendship.

In the readings of Schreiner’s letters to Pearson referred to, it is not that her denials that she had fallen in love with Pearson have not been read, but that they have not been believed. I have proposed that the ‘unrequited love letters’ interpretation stems in part from the methodological problems already discussed. But it seems to also be an outcome of trying to make sense of those of Schreiner’s letters to Pearson which do not fall into any clear or obvious category and which contain ambiguities, especially regarding their at times concurrent inscriptions of the abstractly intellectual and the directly detailed and personal.

Schreiner was it seems trying out a new kind of friendship in her letters to Pearson, a ‘from man to man’ comradeship wherein the impersonal discussion of public matters dominated. She commented directly on this on a number of epistolary occasions, in the extracts following urging him to consider her as a friend, and therefore in contemporary terms as a man:

“//Have you ever read Montaigne’s essay on friendship? I sometimes feel that he is my favourite writer, & that ^that is^ my favourite of his essays. Yes, friendship between men & women is a possibility, & our only escape from the suffering *unreadable* which sexual relationships now inflict.”⁶²

“but I’m not a woman, I’m a man, & you are to regard me as such.”⁶³

At about this time Schreiner wrote similarly to Edward Carpenter, “I wish I was a man that I might be friends with all of you, but you know my sex must always divide. I only feel like a man, but to you all I seem a woman!”⁶⁴, and she later commented wryly, “I won’t be a woman in a couple of years. I began to be one when I was only ten so I dare say I will leave off being one in about two or perhaps three more, & then you’ll think I am a man, all of you, won’t you? Karl Pearson & every one, & will be comrades with me!”.⁶⁵ It seems then that, far from providing a romantic love element to her friendship with Pearson, Schreiner viewed being of the opposite sex as an impediment to the friendship, one which she conceived of as centred on intellectual and political comradeship.

At the same time, however, and of course aware of Pearson's interest in 'the woman question' and women's perceptions and experiences, Schreiner also seemed to offer herself up as an object of study, commenting, for example, "I seldom write to you about myself personally, as a woman, because I don't know what would be scientifically interesting to you."⁶⁶ In some respects it is difficult to square this with her emphasis elsewhere on egalitarian comradeship. And in spite of her attempts to focus exclusively on the impersonal, the scientific and public matters, her letters slip and slide into other things, such as expressing concern for Pearson's physical health, and becoming embroiled in the exchange of gossip about who has said what about whom. A push and pull is evident in Schreiner's post-1886 letters to Pearson, where she vacillated between exhorting him not to write to her and vowing that she had no further need of him, and then continuing to write to him and asking him to send her his work. This suggests that she herself was not always able to separate the public and private in any easy way, and for those commentators who have looked at these later letters, this has doubtless contributed to the idea that Schreiner's letters to Pearson are predominantly concerned with her unrequited love for him, and have also perhaps resulted in the perception of Schreiner as unstable in some undefined sense.⁶⁷

But whatever the complications, it is clear that once 'the before', 'the after' and 'the rest' of Schreiner's letters to Pearson are taken into account, these cannot plausibly be reduced to being merely concerned with Schreiner's inner, emotional life.

Relatedly, there is a complex relationship between the public and the private in her letters to Pearson; they are certainly not 'just' love letters, but nor are they exclusively impersonal letters concerned with public affairs, and nor are they entirely letters of comradeship. My re-reading of Schreiner's letters to Pearson sees all of these being involved, but positions them in particular as letters of intellectual and political conversation and engagement. In this, Schreiner was striving for a new kind of friendship or comradeship between men and women, one concerned primarily with the external world of ideas, science and social change, with individuals, personalities and emotions present, but secondary to "the touch of brain on brain"⁶⁸ which was so central to Schreiner's epistolary relationship with

Pearson. Love was important to this, but reading the entirety of these letters convinces me that this was both more and considerably less than the romantic kind which other commentators have fixated on.

Re-Reading the Public and Private

Taken as a whole, Schreiner's letters confound assumptions about public and private as epistolary 'types' – the private and public are intertwined throughout. While Schreiner's letters to Pearson may be intellectually and interpersonally intimate, this does not always and necessarily translate into emotional intimacy, but instead more often to an attempted distancing from the personal. Letters assumed to be the most private – here those of 1886 to Pearson – are in fact strongly marked by a concern with the external world and impersonal intellectual matters. In this sense the letters also challenge the distinction made between public, published writing and private letters, for in Schreiner's case, her letters rehearsed many of the ideas that later found expression in her published work. Simon-Martin's argument that "Reading letter-writing as a performative autobiographical act" allows us to identify "letter-exchange as a source of female agency, where an apparently anodyne and trivial custom turned out to be a disruptive practice"⁶⁹ is apposite to this re-reading of Schreiner's letters to Pearson and indeed pertains to her letters more widely.

Overall, the implications of this discussion for reading letters in general and the Schreiner corpus in particular, and making use of them as a historical and social science resource, seem fairly clear. Stanley's notion of the epistolarium, with its insistence on structure as well as content, the shape of the totality, and the relationship of the text of letters to the contexts of their production, all have to be taken seriously.⁷⁰ Once this is achieved, it produces a different reading and analysis of letters to those readings focused on the minutiae of content and the ostensibly 'private' nature of letters, because it highlights not only complexities, but also shifts and differences both over time and as written to different correspondents. I have re-read Schreiner's letters to Pearson and situated these letters in the wider Schreiner corpus specifically as letters of political and intellectual engagement albeit containing many other features as well. However, the arguments I have made

are not confined to these letters, but also have reverberations across the entire Schreiner letters and for re-readings of other epistolary collections too. One implication here concerns the importance of reading letters in their full and original form, and relatedly, to read them as part of their wider epistolary context.

Schreiner's letters to Pearson also shed light on the inter-relationship between Schreiner's 'on the page' and 'off the page' activities concerning the 'woman question', for example, and they could also be used to think about what a letter is, for many of Schreiner's letters to Pearson shade into other forms of writing, including polemic, intellectual essay and political treatise. They were a crucial forum for working out her ideas, including, for example, for what was eventually published in 1926 as *From Man to Man* after her death.⁷¹ Pamela Slate-Liggett has commented, "That personal letters exchanged between scholars and professional authors for many purposes can perform transformations is a power worth examining"⁷², and certainly Schreiner's letters to Pearson could transform readings of her ideas and published works. However, what I have focused on here is the more basic question - an ontological question - of what kind or genre of letters these to Pearson are overall. Other readings have insisted or assumed they are one particular known genre, the unrequited love letter, a reading which seems to make sense of their content of 'a woman writing to a man with ambiguous passion'. That this is their defining content is something I have challenged and rejected on factual grounds: re-reading the whole letters, and all the letters, provides something very different, more complicated, and which is in effect genre-defying. That is, the totality of Schreiner's letters to Pearson show her remaking – with troubles and triumphs, hesitations and backslidings, enjoyment and pain – the relationship possibilities between a woman and a man around their pursuit of intellectual, and political and social concerns.

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² M. Bosch, (ed., with A. Kloosterman) *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902-1942* (Columbus, 1990), p. 23.

³ O. Schreiner, *The Story of An African Farm* (London, 1883) and *Woman and Labour* (London, 1911). Schreiner's other published works include *Dream Life and Real Life* (London, 1893); *The Political Situation* (London, 1896); *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (London, 1897); *An English South African's View of the Situation* (London, 1899); *Closer Union* (London, 1909), and *From Man to Man* (London, 1926).

⁴ Edited collections of Schreiner's letters include: S. Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Letters of Olive Schreiner* (London, 1924); R. Rive, (ed.) *Olive Schreiner Letters: Volume I, 1871-1899* (Oxford, 1987); Y.C. Draznin, *My Other Self: The Letters of Olive Schreiner and Havelock Ellis 1884-1920* (New York, 1992). For a full discussion of the problems concerning Cronwright-Schreiner's editing practices see: L. Stanley and A. Salter, "'Her letters cut are generally nothing of interest': The heterotopic persona of Olive Schreiner and the alterity-persona of Cronwright-Schreiner", *English in Africa*, 36:2 (2009), 7-30. Draznin's edition is focused exclusively on Schreiner's letters to Havelock Ellis and is therefore not representative of her letter-writing as a whole; the letters in Rive's edition have not always been accurately transcribed, and some have been cut without acknowledgement.

⁵ See: <https://www.oliveschreiner.org/>. All transcriptions provided replicate Schreiner's originals as closely as possible and include her mistakes, emphases, omissions, additions and deletions.

⁶ This approach draws on Stanley's notion of the 'epistolarium' which argues for the importance of considering someone's full output of letters in their entirety, including with their mistakes and amendments, and doing so in the context of the epistolary culture of their time. See L. Stanley, 'The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences', *Auto/biography* 12:3 (2004), 201-235.

⁷ See for example W.M. Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill and London, 1998); J. Maybin, 'Death Row Penfriends: Some Effects of Letter Writing on Identity and Relationships', in D. Barton and N. Hall (eds.), *Letter Writing As a Social Practice* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2000), pp. 151-178. E. Rappaport, "'The Bombay Debt": Letter Writing, Domestic Economies and Family Conflict in Colonial India', *Gender and History*, 16:2 (2000), 233-260. Decker makes a distinction between public and private letters, with the former including letters to newspapers and journals, and which are "adept at mimicking the confidential tone of the private exchange" (Decker 1998: 24). Some commentators however reject a binary distinction between public and private letters, and instead focused on the blurring of these categories. See for example Bosch, *Politics and Friendship*; L.M. Gring-Pemble, 'Writing themselves into consciousness: creating a rhetorical bridge between the public and private spheres', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 84 (1998), 41-61.

⁸ P. Summerfield, *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (Abingdon, 2019), p. 24.

⁹ J. Haggis and M. Holmes, 'Epistles to Emails: Letters, Relationship Building and the Virtual Age', *Life Writing* 8:2 (2011), p. 179.

¹⁰ Haggis and Holmes, 'Epistles to Emails', p. 179.

¹¹ H. Dampier, "'Going on with our little movement in the hum drum-way which alone is possible in a land like this': Olive Schreiner and Suffrage Networks in Britain and South Africa, 1905-1913", *Women's History Review*, 25:4 (2016), 536-550; L. Stanley and H. Dampier, "'I just express my views & leave them to work': Olive Schreiner as a feminist protagonist in a masculine political landscape with figures", *Gender and History*, 24:3 (2012), 677-700.

¹² M. Simon-Martin, 'Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's Travel Letters: performative identity-formation in epistolary narratives', *Women's History Review* 22:2 (2013), p. 226.

¹³ M. Jolly and L. Stanley, 'Letters as / not a genre', *Life Writing* 1:2 (2005), p. 94.

¹⁴ C. Burdett, *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism: Evolution, Gender, Empire* (London, 2001), p.50. See also L. Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality* (London, 1995) and J.R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London, 1992).

¹⁵ In a letter of 12 December 1885 Schreiner reported to Havelock Ellis that Donkin had "proposed to me again tonight." (Olive Schreiner to Havelock Ellis, 12 December 1885, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription). The following year she wrote to Pearson that she was "very miserable" about Donkin, adding, "He knows I will never marry him, but as long as I am in England & above all in London I cannot help causing him misery." (Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 11 October 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription).

¹⁶ Pearson evidently requested Schreiner's permission to keep her letters to him, while she destroyed most of those she had received from him. In a letter to Pearson of 11 November 1890, written after she had returned to South Africa, Schreiner commented, "With all my heart keep the letters if they are of the smallest interest to you. The reason I asked for them was that before I went to Switzerland the first time when I thought I was dying, I got a friend to burn all the letters I had received during my London life." (Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 11 November 1890, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription). She added that a "bundle" of Pearson's letters to her had been overlooked, but that there was "little personal" in these.

¹⁷ R. Brandon, *The New Women and the Old Men: Love, Sex and the Woman Question* (London, 1990), p. 63.

¹⁸ Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 140.

¹⁹ See Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 11 December 1886 and 30 January 1887, both University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcriptions; and also Olive Schreiner to Havelock Ellis, 2 February 1887 and 13 February 1887, both Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcriptions. That Elisabeth Cobb habitually gossiped and passed on information to third parties which Schreiner relayed to her in confidence is further illustrated in a letter from Cobb's sister Maria Sharpe (who later married Pearson) to Robert

Parker, the Men and Women's Club President, in which Sharpe reveals that Cobb had told her about the content of a letter Schreiner had written to her describing potential Club member Mona Caird as "not at all sympathetic to Cobb & a little artificial." (Maria Sharpe to Robert Parker, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London).

²⁰ T. Porter, *Karl Pearson: The Scientific Life in a Statistical Age* (Princeton and Oxford, 2004), pp. 144, 142.

²¹ Burdett, *Olive Schreiner*, p. 90, original emphasis.

²² Porter, *Karl Pearson*, p. 142.

²³ On this see L. Stanley, A. Salter and H. Dampier, 'The Epistolary Pact, Letterness and the Schreiner Epistolarium', *Auto/biography* 27:2 (2012), 283-284.

²⁴ Stanley and Salter, "'Her letters cut'".

²⁵ Of Schreiner's 134 extant manuscript letters to Pearson, which are archived at University College London Special Collections, Rive has reproduced 47 letters or part-letters in his *Olive Schreiner Letters*.

²⁶ L. Stanley and H. Dampier, "'I trust that our brief acquaintance may ripen into sincere friendship': Networks across the race divide in South Africa in conceptualising Olive Schreiner's letters 1890-1920", *Working Papers on Letters, Letterness & Epistolary Networks, Number 2* Edinburgh: Olive Schreiner Letters Project (available at: <http://www.oliveschreinerletters.ed.ac.uk/WorkingPaperSeries.html>)

²⁷ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 10 July 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

²⁸ Stanley and Dampier, "'I trust that our brief acquaintance'", 43.

²⁹ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 4 November 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

³⁰ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 19 November 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

³¹ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 27 July 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

³² Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 20 October 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

³³ L. Hannan 'Women, Letter-writing and the Life of the Mind in England, ca.1640-1750', *Literature & History*, 22:2 (2013), p. 1.

³⁴ Olive Schreiner to Havelock Ellis, 25 January 1888, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

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- ³⁵ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 4 November 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ³⁶ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, September 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ³⁷ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 11 June 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ³⁸ Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 163.
- ³⁹ Stanley and Dampier, "'I trust that our brief acquaintance'".
- ⁴⁰ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 6 November 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ⁴¹ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 12 June 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ⁴² Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 3 July 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ⁴³ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 5 February 1888, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ⁴⁴ Shortly after her return to South Africa she commented in a letter to Havelock Ellis that she felt "more fit for practical work" after "these long, long years buried in abstract thought" (Olive Schreiner to Havelock Ellis, 25 April 1890, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription).
- ⁴⁵ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 6 October 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ⁴⁶ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 7 October 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ⁴⁷ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 19 July 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ⁴⁸ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 4 April 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ⁴⁹ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, Tuesday July 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.
- ⁵⁰ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 7 July 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁵¹ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 10 September 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁵² Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 19 July 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁵³ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 11 October 1885, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁵⁴ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 10 May 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁵⁵ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 18 June 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁵⁶ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 3 July 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁵⁷ Rive, *Olive Schreiner Letters*, p. 85.

⁵⁸ On the emergent properties of letters see Stanley, 'The Epistolarium', 201-235.

⁵⁹ See for example his exclusion of Schreiner's final insertions on the letters dated 23 March 1886 and 11 June 1886, with the latter misdated by Rive as 10 June 1886.

⁶⁰ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 30 January 1887, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁶¹ Olive Schreiner to Edward Carpenter, 21 January 1889, Sheffield Libraries, Archives & Information, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁶² Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 4 April 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁶³ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 29 June 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. The letter in which Schreiner makes this comment does not appear in Rive *Olive Schreiner Letters*.

⁶⁴ Olive Schreiner to Edward Carpenter, 12 April 1887, Sheffield Libraries, Archives & Information, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁶⁵ Olive Schreiner to Edward Carpenter, 16 April 1888, Sheffield Libraries, Archives & Information, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁶⁶ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 10 July 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁶⁷ A further complication is that at this time, in the mid 1880s, Schreiner had been given by Donkin and other doctors large quantities of morphine to treat her asthma and heart

problems. In the period of her 'flight' to Europe in late 1886 and early 1887, it is likely her removal was in part to break with medically-provided morphia dependence. This could have impaired the clarity and coherence of her response to the tangled events unfolding around Pearson.

⁶⁸ Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 7 July 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁶⁹ Simon-Martin, 'Barbara Leigh Smith', p. 227.

⁷⁰ Stanley, 'The Epistolarium', 201-235.

⁷¹ See for instance Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 10 July 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. In this long letter Schreiner traces the genesis of her ideas for the book, and asks that when it is published she might dedicate it to Pearson, "giving as ~~yo~~ my ground your sympathy with woman, & your scientific interest in her condition & development."

⁷² P. Slate-Liggett, 'Women's Writing and Trans-Cultural Letters/Journals', *Language & Literature*, 27 (2002), 57.