Once God Almighty said: 'I will produce a self-working automatic machine for enduring suffering, which shall be capable of the largest amount of suffering in a given space'; and he made woman. But he wasn’t satisfied that he [had] reached the highest point of perfection; so he made a man of genius . . . [not] satisfied yet . . . he combined the two – and made a woman of genius – and he was satisfied!

O.S. to Havelock Ellis, 9 November 1888

To move from Charlotte Brontë to Olive Schreiner is to enter a new atmosphere of high Victorianism. For all her dedication to ‘duty’, Brontë had one foot securely planted in a pre-Victorian, Romantic era where feats of Gothic extravagance required no justification and heroes, at least, exulted in their defiance of social codes of behaviour. Schreiner was hardly an Angel in the House, according to Coventry Patmore’s programme: passive, docile and selfless – far from it. But her characters inhabit a world where social and religious constraints are supreme and final arbiters. As much as her central characters, such as Lynndall, Waldo and Rebekah, are driven by antisocial impulses, each in the end is crushed by a society that puts duty and conformity before all else. The escape routes offered by Brontë to her heroines, Jane Eyre’s haven at Ferndean, or Lucy Snowe’s Faubourg Clotilde, have no imaginative equivalent in the novels of Olive Schreiner.

We enter, in other words, the sombre atmosphere of the Cambridge garden where George Eliot, in a famous moment in literary history, intoned her awesome sense of the
absolute call of ‘Duty’ in face of the inconceivability of the concepts of God and Immortality. Authors like Eliot, and Schreiner resembled her closely in this respect, paid a high price for their emancipation from the comfort of Christianity, which had left believers like Charlotte Brontë free to rebel in other ways.

Reading Schreiner alongside Eliot, in fact, one is struck by an identity of tone and reference in a number of respects. Both women had been schooled in the same liberal precepts: Goethe’s humanism and emphasis on self-development, Herbert Spencer’s sociology (especially his view of ‘the presence of undeviating law in the material and moral world – of that invariability of sequence which is acknowledged to be the basis of physical science’), and J.S. Mill’s ‘political economy’ and concept of individualism. Both developed a manner of free thought and close sceptical scrutiny, and threw off the religion of their parents with an apparent ease at a surprisingly early age. To the modern reader, however, they seem to have worried excessively about morality to make up for it. The agnostic conscience of the period has been much discussed, its characteristics are typified in Eliot and Schreiner. We witness an at times austere overreactive intolerance of frivolity (Schreiner, for example, disliked Shaw for his ‘smart paradox[es]’ and what she saw as an inability to make a ‘clear simple statement of fact’), an attraction to all that is ‘earnest’, and a high seriousness about ‘truth’. ‘There is no small truth’, one of Schreiner’s characters pontificates (the verb is often apt for Schreiner’s dialogue) – ‘all truth is great!’ For Charlotte Brontë, as we have seen, the word ‘truth’ was her special word for a private, subjectively derived knowledge. For Schreiner, like many agnostics, it was inextricably related to Christian morality, which was clung to firmly, in spite of discarded dogma.

Like Eliot as well, Schreiner had been an unusually precocious adolescent. By the age of seventeen she had read most of the books being hotly debated at the time by intellectuals in Britain: Herbert Spencer’s First Principles (1862), Carl Vogt’s Lectures on Man (1864) and Mill’s Politi-