John Stuart Mill

A Biography

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Preface

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) was the most influential British philosopher of the nineteenth century, making significant contributions to all of the major areas of philosophy, including metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, social and political philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of education. The *System of Logic* (1843) achieved the status of a canonical textbook. In addition, Mill achieved fame as an economist in 1848 with the publication of the *Principles of Political Economy*, a work that went through seven editions in his own lifetime. Difficulties aside, Mill was the last major British philosopher to present an integrated view of the whole of philosophy and to relate the theoretical and normative dimensions of his thought in a direct fashion.

More than just a writer, Mill was a public figure. His technical work in philosophy and economics was always in the service of the discussion of controversial issues of public policy. In many ways, he was the quintessential Victorian intellectual, bringing his critical faculties to bear on all of the major issues of the day in a manner that was accessible to the average intelligent layperson. Early in his life, Mill conceived the role of being the conscience of his society as a function of journalism, but toward the end of his life he increasingly associated that function with the university. In the twentieth century, only Bertrand Russell has come close to achieving the kind of general public recognition accorded to Mill in the nineteenth.

Mill's active involvement with the affairs of the day, including a term as a member of Parliament, was hardly fortuitous. He was, in fact, groomed for this role by both his father, James Mill, and Jeremy Bentham, the two most prominent philosophical radicals of the early part of the nineteenth century. From them, he imbibed the methods and goals of the Enlightenment Project, the attempt to use empirical science as the model for a

social science that would serve as the foundation for social analysis, social critique, and a social technology. It was they who introduced him to the classics of British empirical philosophy and to French writers such as Condillac and Helvétius, writers who had been instrumental in formulating the intellectual and practical dimensions of the Enlightenment Project.

Mill was expected to be not only the articulate messenger but also the fullest embodiment of what the Enlightenment Project could achieve in an individual life. More remarkable than this design was Mill's revolt against it. The revolt, originally occasioned by a mental crisis between 1826 and 1830, began to take an intellectual shape as Mill searched for and was exposed to intellectual traditions different from those he had inherited. Specifically, Mill initiated friendships with Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who introduced him to the Romantic and conservative movements. Mill's crisis and revolt reflect in microcosm the massive nineteenth-century reaction against the Enlightenment.

Contemporaneous with Mill's recovery from his mental crisis was the beginning of his relationship with Harriet Taylor. Aside from his father, no one exerted a greater influence on Mill's life. Although the nature of Mill's relationship with the woman whom he was ultimately to marry is a matter of some speculation, and the true extent of her influence a matter of some dispute, there is one area where her influence was undeniable. That area was the emancipation of women, an issue of enormous importance for Mill and for our understanding of Mill. Given his role as the conscience of his culture, Mill used the role of women and the relationship between the sexes as a focus for bringing together all of the problematic issues of liberal culture. Specifically, Mill was concerned not only with issues of the franchise, representation, "gender," sex, and the way the subordinate role of women contributed to poverty, but also with how the equality of the sexes contributed to fulfillment in the personal lives of autonomous individuals in the liberal culture he so prized.

Today, it is as a social and political philosopher that J. S. Mill's reputation endures. It would be fair to say that, in retrospect, he was the most significant British political philosopher of the nineteenth century. His restatement of liberalism, including his identification of its most salient features and problems, continues to be the starting point for all subsequent discussion within the liberal tradition.

There are five reasons why an intellectual biography of Mill is especially useful. First, an intellectual biography helps to make clear all the

ways in which his various endeavors are related. Although there is a vast secondary literature on Mill, there has never been a serious attempt to work out the interconnections in his thought. Precisely because Mill encompassed so many of what now constitute different academic disciplines, his corpus is typically read in piecemeal fashion. Philosophical treatments usually focus on isolated aspects of his work. The exceptions, such as the fine book by Skorupski, do try to tie together the epistemology with the ethics and the social philosophy. However, Skorupski's book focuses on only four of Mill's works (*System of Logic, Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy, Utilitarianism*, and *On Liberty*), thereby excluding from consideration some of the political works, such as *Considerations on Representative Government*, as well as both the economic and the religious writings. Sir John Hicks regards Mill as "the most undervalued economist of the nineteenth-century."[1] It would thus be a shame to ignore this dimension of his thought. While philosophy – specifically, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics – is in a very special sense foundational to all thinking, it is not at all clear that we comprehend Mill's philosophy if we read his technical philosophical works in abstraction from his works on politics and economics. As Mill himself said in his 1865 *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, one can evaluate a writer only if one has read all of his or her work and has tried to see each idea in the context created by the corpus as a whole.

Political theorists focus on *On Liberty* and sometimes *Utilitarianism*, but they do not connect these with either the epistemological or the metaphysical doctrines. Both philosophers and political theorists almost always (C. L. Ten is the exception) read *On Liberty* in the light of *Utilitarianism*, even though the former was written before the latter. Economists seem to be the exception, taking a much broader view of Mill. In his authoritative and comprehensive discussion of Mill's economics, Samuel Hollander does look into Mill's epistemology and his conception of methodology and also examines his larger social and political philosophy with regard to issues of the role of government in the economy. But Hollander does not really discuss either the metaphysics or the evolution of Mill's thinking. Pedro Schwartz, on the other hand, discusses the evolution of Mill's economic thinking – specifically, the influence of Mill's father and of Harriet. But Schwartz does not provide the methodological dimension that Hollander does. One thing that an intellectual biography can do is to combine the virtues of Hollander and Schwartz. In short, there is a great deal of valuable

secondary literature, but it has not yet crystallized into a comprehensive vision.

The second reason why an intellectual biography is useful is because it leads to a greater appreciation of the complexity of Mill's sources. Most scholars take for granted the vast knowledge that Mill accumulated in his youth, and it is duly noted that Mill was a synthetic thinker who tried to combine the insights of different traditions. What is not always appreciated is the extent to which he incorporates and transforms his sources. There are many instances, but two stand out. One example is the incorporation of Kantian moral insights from the reading of Humboldt; only recently have scholars (e.g., Bernard Semmel, Charles Taylor, and John Skorupski) begun to take seriously exactly how *On Liberty* is structured by Humboldt and Tocqueville. The second example is Mill's relation to Comte. Comte certainly broadened Mill's understanding of the historical dynamic of social structure, and Mill's rejection of Comte's positivism is well documented. Yet Mill's transformation of what he accepted from Comte brings Mill remarkably close to Hegel.

The third reason is that the evolution of Mill's thinking is part of the very subject matter of his thought, hence the aptness of the allusion to Hegel. In explaining why he wrote his autobiography, Mill acknowledged that "in an age of transition in opinions, there may be somewhat both of interest and benefit in noting the successive phases of any mind which was always pressing forward, equally ready to learn and to unlearn either from his own thoughts or from those of others."[2] Specifically, when Mill rejected the Enlightenment Project of his father and of Bentham, he did not reject the goal of relating social understanding to social reform. Instead, he reformulated not only his theoretical and practical enterprise but also the relationship between the two. Mill came to believe that genuine social reform originated in self-reformed actors, individuals whose self-consciousness became the prototype for society as a whole. This is also why the arguments against censorship in *On Liberty* ultimately hinge on the moral transformation of individuals who reconstruct the arguments on all sides of a controversy. All lasting political reform is not accomplished directly, through partisan activity, but indirectly, through the reform of culture.

The fourth reason is, paradoxically, that the very existence of the *Autobiography* has been an obstacle to writing an intellectual biography.

In his Preface to Packe's *Life of John Stuart Mill*, F. A. Hayek comments:

> There are few other eminent figures in the intellectual life of the nineteenth century about whom some unusual facts are so widely known, and yet of whose whole character and personality we know so little, as John Stuart Mill. Perhaps in no other instance can we see how misleading an impression even the most honest of autobiographies can give. Mill's account of his own life is of course a document of such psychological interest that its very popularity was bound to discourage others from attempting to draw a fuller picture. This alone, however, does not adequately explain why, for eighty years after his death, no satisfactory biography of Mill has been available. In many ways the unique value of his own description of his intellectual development has increased rather than diminished the need for a more comprehensive account of the setting against which it ought to be seen.[3]

Mill's own *Autobiography* in many ways is the greatest obstacle to writing an intellectual biography of Mill. The *Autobiography* is in large part an intellectual autobiography and is itself a classic worth reading in its own right; it will undoubtedly outlive any secondary source. But by the beginning of the twenty-first century we have been taught by literary critics and others not to take any author at face value. I do not wish to contend that Mill suppressed or distorted significant features of his life. What I want to call attention to is the "spin" he gives to his life and intellectual development in the *Autobiography*. As Collini has stressed, Mill wrote in order to achieve certain effects. Justifying his relationship with Harriet Taylor Mill to Victorian society, memorializing her to a largely incredulous audience, and explaining how much she meant to him are just a few of the various items on his agenda. These items have to be taken into account if we are to be aware of the impression he tries to create in the *Autobiography*. In short, Mill's interests, stated and unstated, in writing the *Autobiography* are not necessarily the interests of a reader or biographer who is trying to see Mill against the backdrop of nineteenth-century social, moral, economic, religious, economic, cultural, and philosophical intellectual developments. On the other hand, Mill's *Autobiography* is what the Germans call a *bildungsroman*, a deliberate attempt to re-create oneself through one's ongoing self-understanding. This conception of autobiography is not a misleading self-editing, but rather a view of the human person that reflects important currents of nineteenth-century thought.

The fifth and final reason for an intellectual biography is one that Mill himself would have appreciated. As he said in an 1846 article, "What shapes

the character is not what is purposely taught, so much as the unintentional teaching of institutions and social relations." Mill was very much a figure of his time, both shaped by it and helping to shape it. He was, in the best sense, the quintessential Victorian liberal. Recent scholarship has begun to make a more balanced assessment of Victorian Britain, both its influence upon and its continuing relevance to our own world. An intellectual biography of Mill constitutes a contribution to that larger enterprise and benefits from that larger contextualization.

I have taken seriously Mill's claims about Harriet and attempted to see what light they throw on Mill's life and thought. I have concluded not only that Harriet exerted a great influence but also that her influence was by and large a positive one. Clarifying their relationship does a great deal to explain the evolution of Mill's thought. It also exhibits in important respects the larger cultural background of his thought, sometimes in unexpected ways. To the extent that there is a fundamental concept in Mill's life and thought, it is the concept of personal autonomy, and it was Harriet who helped to make that concept pivotal in Mill's writings.

I have been fortunate in having available to me the biographies of Bain and Packe, both of which will long continue to be prime sources of information for Mill scholars. The limitations of Bain's approach are reflected in his dismissal of the importance of Harriet, his failure to recognize the Romantic influence on Mill (Coleridge, for example, is never mentioned), and Bain's own philosophical agenda, which was not identical to Mill's. Packe's book is a gold mine of information, but the stress is more on the life than on the thought. Although Packe recognizes the influence of Harriet, that influence is not cast in a systematic or wholly positive light.

An enormous amount of scholarship has been produced since Packe's biography, and while very few new or significant details about Mill's life have been uncovered, the interpretation of those facts is very different when seen in the light of that scholarship. I have had the good fortune to be given a chronology of Mill's life prepared by John Robson, and this has helped to clarify the sometimes puzzling chronology that appears in Packe. The collected works of Mill edited by Robson is a scholar's dream, but the challenge of mastering it has been somewhat daunting. In any case, the splendid scholarly work done on Mill since the publication of Packe's biography certainly calls for a fresh look at Mill's life, his work, and their relationship. I would reiterate that it is not so much the presence

of new information as the sheer weight of information that should, and will, inspire fresh looks at Mill's life and thought.

The real problem is the sheer volume of material that has been available for some time. The claim that I put forward is that no one has yet wrestled with the whole of Mill and put it into a coherent form. This "volume problem" is present in two dimensions. The first dimension is that Mill wrote in so many fields that few commentators either know or care about the areas with which they are not familiar. Textbook caricatures of Mill as a "utilitarian" or a "socialist" abound, with little awareness of what those terms meant to Mill or in his historical context.

In contrast with the first, the second dimension does bear directly on the biography. Enormous amounts of material have been available for some time but are ignored. For example, Mill was greatly influenced by the Romantic movement in an enormous number of ways (Austin spent time in Germany and came back with many of those ideas; Sarah Austin taught Mill to read German, etc.). You would never know about this from Bain's biography; Packe dwells on the influence of Carlyle but scarcely understands the depth of Coleridge's influence on Mill. The word "Romanticism" does not appear in Packe's index, and Humboldt is mentioned only once. Packe, in general, provides a wealth of detail, but there is no real principle of relative importance at work. His knowledge of philosophy and intellectual history, especially of the nineteenth century, is sketchy at best. All this limits the extent to which his biography can illuminate Mill's intellectual dimension and development. Here and there one finds serious scholars who recognize the Romantic influence, but they do not apply it specifically to Mill's intellectual development.

Aside from seeing the relationship between Mill and Harriet from a new and positive perspective, the other important emphasis in this intellectual biography is the recognition of the influence of Romanticism on Mill's thought. Rarely acknowledged, it has certainly never been considered at length. I argue that it is crucial. A number of commentators have mentioned the extent to which Mill tries to combine ideas or systems of thought that do not seem to fit comfortably with each other. I shall explain this as the consequence not of fuzzy thinking but of trying to maintain loyalty to his father's practical program of liberal reform and, at the same time, to defend and explicate that program by appeal to nineteenth-century Romantic philosophical ideas that his father did not really understand (and probably would have rejected if he had). Can these systems be coherently

combined? I think they can, but it would initially require an extraordinary effort for readers to read the texts in this fashion, an effort they are not likely to make if they are ignorant of Mill's personal struggles and of the alternative Romantic system and its influence upon Mill. Would it have been better for the readers, at any rate, if Mill had not attempted such a compromise and had simply abandoned the philosophical framework he inherited from his father? Undoubtedly this would make reading the published works easier and their integrity more visible. But it would not have resolved Mill's internal psychological struggle, and that underscores why an intellectual biography can be useful.

My aim is to try to provide the big picture – a coherent vision of Mill – and an explication of how his thought evolved. Where I think I am breaking new ground is in presenting an in-depth discussion of how Mill was in fact a Romantic; moreover, during the period from 1830 to 1840, Mill sought to preserve the radical program he had inherited from his father but within a Romantic and conservative framework. By a "conservative" I do not mean a Tory or a defender of the status quo, but one who appreciates the historical and evolving nature of institutions and how they shape us (Coleridge, e.g., but also Macaulay). It would be quite impossible to read the *Logic* without understanding this; perhaps this is why philosophers simply ignore the discussion of the relation between science and art in Book VI.

Another obstacle to understanding Mill is the clarity of his style. Mill's writings seem so accessible that his strengths and weaknesses seem to float clearly on the surface. We are lulled into looking no further. But the ease of expression masks both the enormous capacity for intellectual synthesis – he makes it look so easy – and the painful psychological drama going on in the background. Finally, tracking the evolution of his thinking shows its greater continuity and integrity. In this respect, an intellectual biography, more than anything else, helps us to see the architectonic and wholeness of an author's work.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is trying to see Mill the person, as opposed to focusing on Mill the author and intellectual icon. Mill is such an imposing figure that discovering he even had a private life is analogous to a schoolchild discovering a teacher shopping in a supermarket. Mill was himself quite reticent about such things. However, this reticence is itself an important feature of his life that sheds light on his thought. Most important, Mill's private life was itself in large part a reflection of, and an

instantiation of, the ideas and values that appear in his published works. This integration of life and thought was not only what he espoused but also a reflection of the world in which he found himself, as he understood it. In short, he constructed a life that strove to be a Romantic work of art.

1

Childhood and Early Education: The Great Experiment (1806–1820)

THE TWO most important facts about the life of John Stuart Mill were that he was the son of James Mill and that he fell in love with Harriet Hardy Taylor. We shall begin our story with John Stuart Mill's (hereinafter referred to as "Mill") relation to his father (hereinafter referred to as "James Mill").

James Mill was the leader of a group of thinkers, known as the Philosophic Radicals,[1] who were intent upon a vast campaign of social reform. The other key figures included Jeremy Bentham and David Ricardo. What prompted their interest in social reform? During the last half of the eighteenth century, Britain had experienced the extraordinary economic transformation of the Industrial Revolution. The revolution succeeded not only in spurring economic growth but also in creating or uncovering an unprecedented number of political, economic, social, moral, and religious problems. The human and moral center of gravity had shifted. Just about every fundamental belief had to be rethought, and most institutions reformed.[2] The story of Mill's life is intimately tied to that reform and to the rethinking of liberal culture.

James Mill had been born in Scotland on April 6, 1773.[3] His father had been a shoemaker. His mother had changed the original family name of Milne. His mother had great ambitions for him, and from the very first James was made to feel that he was superior and the center of attention. His intellectual prowess was recognized at an early age, and as a result he acquired as patrons Sir John and Lady Jane Stuart. They arranged for him to attend the University of Edinburgh so that he could prepare for the Scottish Presbyterian ministry, and they also arranged for him to tutor their daughter.

James Mill was seventeen at the time he served as the tutor of Wilhelmina Stuart. A special friendship developed with the daughter of

his patron, Sir John Stuart, a relationship that could never be consummated, given the social structure of the time. From this point on, James Mill was the implacable enemy of the class system in Britain. James Mill wrote of her that "besides being a beautiful woman, [she] was in point of intellect and disposition one of the most perfect human beings I have ever known." Even Sir Walter Scott had fallen in love with her. James would later name one of his daughters Wilhelmina. This throws a great deal of light both on why Mill would later cherish his relationship with Harriet and on why he wrote of her with such lavish praise, in a manner not unlike his father's. It also tells us something more about James Mill.[4]

Among James Mill's university friendships could be counted Jeffrey Thomson, later editor of the Whig *Edinburgh Review*, and Henry Brougham, a brilliant political leader who would be allied with James Mill in the Great Reform Bill of 1832. James Mill was influenced by the lectures of Dugald Stewart, the reigning philosopher of the Scottish school of common sense, but he also read, in addition to theology, Plato, Rousseau, David Hume, Voltaire, and the works of Condillac and Hartley on the functioning of the mind. These were among the authors who formed James Mill's mind, and they would do likewise for Mill.

James Mill was licensed by the Presbytery to preach. The parishioners considered his sermons to be a bit too learned. Unfortunately, the scripts of the sermons were eventually destroyed when the Mill family moved to Kensington. However, James Mill could not accept the doctrines of any church and abandoned his career in the ministry. In the early years of his marriage he continued to attend church and had all of his children baptized. By 1810, under the influence of Bentham and another friend, the Spanish general Miranda, he had given up all religious attachments. The other members of his family, including his son John, continued to attend. The young son was even heard to say to his aunt that "the two most important books in the world were Homer and the Bible."

After briefly considering the possibility of a career in law, James Mill moved to London to pursue a career as a journalist. While in London, he met and married Harriet Burrow (on June 5, 1805) when she was twenty-three and he almost thirty-two. Harriet's mother had taken over the management and ownership of a residence for "lunatics" from her late husband; she was an attractive woman whose daughter had inherited her beauty; there was a dowry of £400, and the couple was given a house by Harriet's mother – 12 Rodney Terrace, Pentonville. During 1810 the

family lived briefly in the poet John Milton's former house. Until his appointment at India House, James Mill was under constant financial pressure, not the least of which was the pressure of paying his own father's debts. These debts had resulted from the bankruptcy of his father's shoe repair business following the loss of James Mill's mother and brother to consumption and his father's subsequent paralysis.

Despite fathering nine children with her – four boys and five girls – at regular two-year intervals over a twenty-year period,[5] James Mill became contemptuous of his wife's lack of intellect and her weakness of character.

> The one really disagreeable trait in [James] Mill's character, and the thing that has left the most painful memories, was the [contemptuous] way that he allowed himself to speak and behave to his wife and children before visitors. When we read his letters to friends, we see him acting the family man with the utmost propriety, putting his wife and children into their due place; but he seemed unable to observe this part in daily intercourse.[6]

In commenting on James Mill's book *The Analysis of the Human Mind*, Bain noted that "the section on the Family affections is replete with the ideal of perfect domestic happiness: and, if the author did not act up to it, as he did to his ideal of public virtue, the explanation is to be sought in human weakness and inconsistency."[7]

It was there at Rodney Terrace that Mill was born on May 20, 1806, and christened John Stuart in honor of James Mill's former patron. Although James Mill might have been bitter about the class barrier that had prevented him from courting Wilhelmina, he was ever mindful of the importance of patronage for social mobility. An expanding family – they ultimately had nine children – and general economic difficulties plagued the Mills until the success of James Mill's *History of British India* in 1818. Despite burdens and obstacles that would have crushed a lesser man, including his unorthodox political views, James Mill achieved both financial security and a significant place in the employment of India House in 1819. Along with Edward Strachey[8] and Thomas Love Peacock, James Mill was one of three outsiders brought in to deal with the escalating demands of the correspondence between the directors in the home office and Indian officials.

James Mill had started writing an essay on India in 1806 in order to prove a specific point, namely, that the East India Company had mishandled and monopolized foreign trade. He did not realize at the time

that the essay would take twelve years to complete and become a work of ten volumes.[9] The East India Company ("John" Company, in common parlance) was a quasi-autonomous commercial enterprise that would rule India in conjunction with the crown until 1857. In 1818, the possibility arose of gaining the chair of Greek at Glasgow University, but being unwilling to sign the confession of faith, James Mill could not pursue an academic career. At the same time, James Mill established a personal relationship with several members of the board of governors of India House in the hope of obtaining employment. It was his friends Joseph Hume and David Ricardo who called to the attention of George Canning, then president of the India Board, the publication of the history. This was enough to offset the opposition of the Tory members of the board. James Mill's expertise on India, his organizational skills, and his industriousness would eventually permit him to rise to the position of chief examiner in 1830.

In addition to his career at India House, James Mill became one of the leaders of the reform movement known as Philosophic Radicalism, and among his political friends were Bentham, Ricardo, Grote, and Francis Place. Grote described James Mill at their first meeting as follows:

> He is a very profound thinking man, and seems well disposed to communicate, as well as clear and intelligible in his manner. His mind has, in deed, all that cynicism and asperity which belong to the Benthamian school, and what I chiefly dislike in him is the readiness and seeming preference with which he dwells on the *faults and defects* of others – even of the greatest men! But it is so very rarely that a man of any depth comes across my path, that I shall most assuredly cultivate his acquaintance a good deal farther.[10]

One of the most remarkable aspects of the final published version of Mill's *Autobiography* is that he talks about his mother only indirectly. One might suggest that this is not surprising, as the *Autobiography* is primarily about Mill's intellectual and moral development. Even if this is so, it points to the fact that his mother played no major role in his intellectual and moral development. From what little evidence we have, it appears as if she conformed to the eighteenth-century notion of women as genteel and useless. Mill's indirect comment about his mother is his pointing out what a mistake it was for his father to have married early and had a large family before being capable of supporting them. Mill attempted to draw a moral lesson from this, noting that such behavior on his father's part was later to be criticized by James Mill himself, not only as imprudent but also

as inconsistent with the kind of advice that the Philosophic Radicals were to give members of the working class.

Although Mill never directly mentions his mother in his published *Autobiography*, he does give us an account of her in an unpublished draft, an unflattering reference that Harriet Taylor Mill had him remove for the published version.

> That rarity in England, a really warm-hearted mother would in the first place have made my father a totally different being and in the second would have made the children grow up loving and being loved. But my mother with the very best intentions only knew how to pass her life in drudging for them. Whatever she could do for them she did, & they liked her, because she was kind to them, but to make herself loved, looked up to, or even obeyed, required qualities which she unfortunately did not possess. . . . I thus grew up in the absence of love and in the presence of fear: and many and indelible are the effects of this bringing up in the stunting of my moral growth.[11]

This sounds very much like a plea for a mother of character who would have stood up for him against his father's harshness and at the same time would have introduced an element of affection based upon strength. For the rest of his life, and despite the fact that his mother always doted on him, Mill would remain as contemptuous of his mother as his father had been.[12]

What we do know about his mother, Harriet Barrow Mill, is that when she married James Mill at the age of twenty-three she was very pretty, and that Mill inherited her acquiline appearance. She was described by one of her husband's professional associates as "good-natured and good-tempered, two capital qualities in a woman," but also as "not a little vain of her person, and would be thought to be still a girl."[13] One of Mill's sisters, also named Harriet, describes her mother as follows:

> Here was an instance of two persons, as husband and wife, living as far apart, under the same roof, as the north pole from the south; from no 'fault' of my poor mother most certainly; but how was a woman with a growing family and very small means (as in the early years of the marriage) to be anything but a German Hausfrau? How could she 'intellectually' become a companion for such a mind as my father?[14]

A later acquaintance, Mrs. Grote, described the relationship as follows: "He [James Mill] married a stupid woman, 'a housemaid of a woman', and left off caring for her and treated her as his squah but was always faithful

to her."[15] Another visitor described her as "a tall, handsome lady, sweet-tempered, with pleasant manners, fond of her children: but I think not much interested in what the elder ones and their father talked about."[16]

Mill offered the following reflection on his father's relationship with his mother:

> Personally I believe my father to have had much greater capacities of feeling than were ever developed in him. He resembled almost all Englishmen in being ashamed of the signs of feeling, and by the absence of demonstration, starving the feelings themselves. In an atmosphere of tenderness and affection he would have been tender and affectionate; but his ill-assorted marriage and his asperities of temper disabled him from making such an atmosphere. It was one of the most unfavourable of the moral agencies which acted on me in my boyhood, that mine was not an education of love but of fear.[17]

The importance of affection and the inability of James Mill to express affection is a repeated theme in Mill's' *Autobiography*:

> The element which was chiefly deficient in his moral relation to his children was that of tenderness. . . . If we consider further that he was in the trying position of sole teacher, and add to this that his temper was constitutionally irritable, it is impossible not to feel true pity for a father who did, and strove to do, so much for his children, who would have valued their affection, yet who must have been constantly feeling that fear of him was drying it up at its source. This was no longer the case later in life, and with his younger children. They loved him tenderly: and if I cannot say so much of myself, I was always loyally devoted to him.[18]

Early Education

James Mill spent a considerable period of time almost every day in educating his own children. As an example of his father's commitment to education, the largest part of the first chapter of Mill's *Autobiography* focuses on what has become the most famous early childhood reading list of all time. Mill was taught Greek at the age of three. At the age of five, Mill accompanied George Bentham on a visit to Lady Spencer, the wife of the head of the admiralty, whereupon Mill discoursed on "the comparative merits of Marlborough and Wellington."[19] Mill read Plato in Greek by the age of seven; he read the histories by Robertson, Hume, and Gibbon at the same time; at the age of eight, he studied Latin; Newton's *Principia Mathematica* was mastered by the age of eleven, the classics of

logic by twelve, and the rigors of higher mathematics, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, and David Ricardo's *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* by fourteen. At the age of fifteen, Mill was introduced to the writings of Jeremy Bentham, and this was soon followed, at age sixteen, by the philosophical works of Locke, Berkeley, Helvétius, and Condillac. Among the many authors Mill cites are Plutarch, Virgil, Ovid, Lucretius, Cicero, Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Thucydides, Tacitus, Juvenal, Polybius, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Milton, Spencer, and Dryden.

Some indication of the extent and rigor of this regimen can be gathered from the following summary. In 1814, at the age of eight, Mill was reading Thucydides, Sophocles' *Electra*, Euripides' *Phoenisae*, Aristophanes' *Plutus* and the *Clouds*, and the *Philippics* of Demosthenes in Greek; in Latin, he was reading the *Oration for Archias* of Cicero, as well as the *Anti-Verres*. In mathematics, he was studying Euclid and Euler's *Algebra*, as well as Bonnycastle's *Algebra* and West's *Geometry*. In 1814, he also began reading Ferguson's *Roman History*, Mitford's *Grecian History*, and Livy (in English). At the same age of eight he was himself writing a history of the united provinces from the revolt from Spain, in the reign of Phillip II, to the accession of the *Stadtholder*, William III, to the throne of England. He also wrote a history of Roman government to the Licinian Laws. The latter were significant in Roman history for promoting democratic reforms, such as mandating that at least one consul had to be a plebeian.

The 1815 reading list included (in Greek) the *Odyssey*, Theocritis, two orations of Aeschines, and Demosthenes' *On the Crown*. The Latin reading list included the first six books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the first six books of Livy's *Bucolics*, the first six books of the *Aeneid*, and Cicero's *Orations*. To the works in mathematics were added Simpson's *Conic Sections*, West's *Conic Sections* and *Spherics*, Kersey's *Algebra*, and Newton's *Universal Arithmetic*. In 1816, he was reading (in Greek), Xenophon's *Hellenica*, Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, Euripedes' *Medea*, and Aristophanes' *Frogs*; in Latin, he read Horace's *Epodes* and Polybius. In mathematics, he studied Stewart's *Propositions Geometricae*, Playfair's *Trigonometry*, and Simpson's *Algebra*. By 1817, Mill was reading Thucydides in Greek for the second time, Demosthenes' *Orations*, and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (for which he made a synoptic table). In Latin, he read Lucretius, Cicero's *Letter to Atticus, Topica*, and *De Partitone Oratoria*. In mathematics, he began an article on conic sections in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Euler's *Analysis of Infinities*, Simpson's *Fluxions*, Keill's *Astronomy*, and Robinson's

Mechanical Philosophy. At an age when most adolescents today are just beginning to think about higher education, Mill had already completed what would today be considered the most rigorous honors program in existence.

What is curious about this extensive reading list are the omissions. Much of the Scottish Enlightenment is omitted, except for Robertson's history and Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (doubtless misread). There is no work by David Hume other than the *History*. There is almost no moral philosophy; even the works of Cicero chosen avoid his moral pieces. There is no theology.

Mill did have a number of good things to say about his early education. Among the important analytical skills he acquired from his father was the ability to dissect arguments in order to discover their strengths and, especially, their weaknesses. In later life, Mill was to become a formidable advocate and polemicist. The practice of the Socratic method – not only upon others but also, by internalization, upon himself – enabled him to critique his own position before submitting it to others. This capacity for self-criticism and self-analysis could have a destructive impact upon the practitioner, but it could also have a liberating and ennobling effect. Many years later, in the essay *On Liberty*, Mill would emphasize the morally transforming effect on character of the willingness to examine every side of every argument. Perhaps the most positive lesson of Mill's early education was his coming to learn, in true Socratic fashion, the importance of discovering the truth for oneself. As he put it in the *Autobiography*, "a pupil from whom nothing is ever demanded which he cannot do, never does all he can."

There was one cardinal point in this training, of which I have already given some indication, and which, more than anything else, was the cause of whatever good it effected. Most boys or youths who have had much knowledge drilled into them, have their mental capacities not strengthened, but overlaid by it. They are crammed with mere facts, and with the opinions or phrases of other people, and these are accepted as a substitute for the power to form opinions of their own: and thus the sons of eminent fathers, who have spared no pains in their education, so often grow up mere parroters of what they have learnt, incapable of using their minds except in the furrows traced for them. Mine, however, was not an education of cram. My father never permitted anything which I learnt to degenerate into a mere exercise in memory. He strove to make the understanding not only go along with every step of the teaching, but, if possible, preceded it. Anything which could

be found out by thinking I never was told, until I had exhausted my efforts to find it out for myself.[20]

Given the content and rigor of Mill's education, no reader could possibly confuse this with those contemporary critiques of memorization that suggest a strict dichotomy between the acquisition of content and the development of critical skills. Mill is here advocating not an either/or but a both/and. Some indication of this can be gathered from a later (1835) critique of the "system of cram." Mill specifically attacks the French mathematician Joseph Jacotot for a method that "surpasses all former specimens of the cram method in this, that former cram-doctors crammed an unfortunate child's memory with abstract propositions [without] meaning; but Jacotot . . . actually makes the unfortunate creature get by rote not only the propositions, but the reasons too."[21] In opposition to this, Mill suggests instead a method of "cultivating mental power." Throughout his life, and most significantly in *On Liberty*, Mill advocated the liberating effects and the moral transformation that accompanies the self-critical examination of all ideas.

In addition to his required reading, Mill was required to render a *compte rendu*, a daily written summary of what he had discussed that day with his father. Later, he helped his father correct the proofs of the *History of British India*, thereby gaining additional valuable editorial and writing skills. It was in the editorial process that Mill thought that his father almost treated him as an equal. Despite all this, Mill insisted that his father never allowed him to become conceited.

In the midst of this pedagogical regimen, Mill found the time and had the interest to read other things on his own, such as history. He referred to this as his "private reading." This private reading was also accompanied by "private" writing, that is, writing without "the chilling sensation of being under a critical eye."[22] The ominous nature of this remark is borne out by the critical comments that Mill later makes about his father's educational program.

His education was for the most part academic and cerebral. Mill faulted his father for being too abstract and not giving enough concrete examples of the principles he espoused. Mill had little contact with his peers in play situations and remained deficient all his life in things requiring manual dexterity. But beyond this is revealed the harshness and impatience of a too-demanding parent. James Mill, as his son tells us, "was often, and much

beyond reason, provoked by my failures in cases where success could not have been expected." "I was constantly meriting reproof by inattention, inobservance, and general slackness of mind in matters of daily life."[23] This impression is borne out by another witness, who described James Mill's teaching method as "by far the best I have ever witnessed, and is infinitely precise; but he is excessively severe. No fault, however trivial, escapes his notice; none goes without reprehension or punishment of some sort."[24] The same witness goes on to describe a particular situation.

> Lessons have not been well said this morning by Willie and Clara [Mill's younger sisters]; there they are now, three o'clock, plodding over their books, their dinner, which they knew went up at one, brought down again; and John, who dines with them, has his books also, for having permitted them to pass when they could not say, and no dinner will any of them get until six o'clock. This has happened once before since I came. The fault today is a mistake in one word.[25]

James Mill, according to Bain, did make one attempt to give his son something more than an academic upbringing.

> Having been in his youth, a full-trained volunteer, he had a due appreciation of army discipline, in giving bodily carriage. He, accordingly, engaged a sergeant from the adjoining barracks, to put them [his male children] through a course of marching drill; while John was practiced in sword exercise. Very little came of this, as far as John in particular was concerned; he was, to the end, backward in all that regarded bodily accomplishments, saving the one point of persistence as a walker. The fact, no doubt, was, that his nervous energy was so completely absorbed in his unremitted intellectual application, as to be unavailable for establishing the co-ordinations of muscular dexterity.[26]

One of the more interesting criticisms Mill makes of his father's system is that Mill was forced to teach his younger siblings, a responsibility that lasted into his early thirties. Among other things, Mill was forced to turn down social invitations, such as one to accompany the Grotes on a vacation, because, as his father said, John was needed to teach the younger children. Mill notes here, somewhat cryptically, that the "relation between teacher and taught is not a good moral discipline to either."[27] We are left wondering what he meant by that. Mill "often acted the part of mediator between his father and his elder sister."[28] The household, in addition to the parents and Mill, himself consisted of Mill's five sisters – Wilhelmina Forbes, Clara, Harriet, Jane, and Mary – as well as his three brothers – Henry, James Bentham Mill, and George. Despite this demanding role, Mill always had

the capacity to make his siblings laugh by mimicking adults. "John Mill, from pride and assumption was freer than most, yet the deference paid him by his brothers and sisters was profound. When unable to determine any matter for themselves the suggestion came from one or other of them as a matter of course, 'Ask John: he knows.' "[29]

Keeping in mind that Mill was drafting his *Autobiography* in the 1850s, we can reasonably speculate that the relation between the teacher and the pupil is analogous, at least at this point in his life, to the relationship between the master and the slave, the superior and the inferior. The master-slave metaphor is one that will appear in Mill's later writings in discussing the relationship between husbands and wives in Victorian England. Such a relationship is to the obvious detriment of the inferior, because it tends to perpetuate a sense of inferiority reinforced by deference. It is also detrimental to the superior, who comes to find his identity tied up in the subordination of others. The autonomy of the inferior is postponed indefinitely, and the autonomy of the superior is undermined. The intended benevolence is not enough to counterbalance the pathologically incestuous nature of the relationship. Mill experienced the benevolence, but he also experienced the demeaning and stultifying dimensions of a relationship with an extraordinary father. Mill would not achieve his full autonomy until the death of his father.

What is the self-image that Mill acquired from his extraordinary early education? One of the evils most liable to attend on any sort of early proficiency, and which often fatally blights its promise, my father most anxiously guarded against. This was self-conceit. He kept me, with extreme vigilance out of the way of hearing myself praised, or of being led to make self-flattering comparisons between myself and others. From his own intercourse with me I could derive none but a very humble opinion of myself; and the standard of comparison he always held up to me, was not what other people did, but what a man could and ought to do. He completely succeeded in preserving me from the sort of influences he so much dreaded. I was not at all aware that my attainments were anything unusual at my age. . . . My state of mind was not humility, but neither was it arrogance. . . . I did not estimate myself at all. If I thought anything about myself, it was that I was rather backward in my studies, since I always found myself so in comparison with what my father expected from me. . . . I was always too much in awe of him to be otherwise than extremely subdued and quiet in his presence. Yet with all this I had no notion of any superiority in myself; and well was it for me that I had not.[30]

Even after he achieved fame as the author of the *System of Logic* and the *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill could look back on his life and make the following, seemingly incredible claim:

> . . . [h]ad [I] been by nature extremely quick of apprehension, or had possessed a very accurate and retentive memory, or were of a remarkably active and energetic character . . . in all these natural gifts I am rather below than above par; what I could do, could assuredly be done by any boy or girl of average capacity and healthy physical constitution: and if I have accomplished anything, I owe it, among other fortunate circumstances, to the fact that through the early training bestowed on me by my father, I started, I may fairly say, with an advantage of a quarter of a century over my contemporaries.[31]

This is a tricky point. Even before he wrote his *Autobiography*, Mill had no doubt that he was a superior person. "I had always a humble opinion of my own powers as an original thinker, except in abstract science (logic, metaphysics, and the theoretic principles of political economy and politics), but thought myself much superior to most of my contemporaries in willingness and ability to learn from everybody."[32] However, he attributed this superiority not to native endowment but to two other sources: his father's rigorous educational program and a particular moral virtue, his openness to learning from others. It has been pointed out that Mill was perhaps overly optimistic about the extent to which education could affect the mind, but there is no doubt that education is both a crucial and an underutilized resource.

Among the things Mill did not know was that when he was twelve years old (1818) some Oxford and Cambridge notables had already expressed to James Mill their interest in the younger Mill. James Mill's former patron, Sir John Stuart, gave him a gift of £500 intended to make it possible for John to attend Cambridge. As late as 1823, another Cambridge don, Professor Townsend, urged James Mill to allow his son to become better acquainted with his "Patrician contemporaries" by attending Cambridge. "Whatever you may wish his eventual destiny to be, his prosperity in life cannot be retarded, but must, on the contrary, be increased by making an acquaintance at an English University with his Patrician contemporaries."[33]

As we shall see, Mill did not attend the universities of his day.[34] He was always educated at home and not in any school. From one point of view there was hardly any reason for him to attend school, given what he had

mastered intellectually. There were other reasons. The major universities were still in James Mill's time controlled by the Anglican Church; they insisted upon doctrinal orthodoxy and largely focused on preparing students for the ministry. This had been James Mill's own experience. Bentham, who had attended the university, always regretted his lapse of integrity in agreeing to the religious oath required of students. Other forms of preprofessional training were still done through apprenticeship. Nor had the sciences yet achieved a dominant position in higher education.[35] All of this was to change during the last half of Mill's life, and the reform of the universities would in part be influenced by his mature views. During his own lifetime, two of Mill's works, the *Logic* and the *Principles of Political Economy*, would become standard university textbooks.

An Initiation in Retrospect

Mill's account of his childhood and early education up to the age of twelve is a retrospective glance at the formative influences of his life. There are three important points that he stressed about this early phase. First, he tells us that "from about the age of twelve, I entered into another and more advanced stage in my course of instruction; in which the main object was no longer the aids and appliances of thought [i.e., information and the thoughts of others], but the thoughts themselves."[36] That is, Mill thought that at the age of twelve he was able to engage in the self-conscious critique of ideas, and not merely in their acquisition. He couples this with the fact that it was at this age that he was allowed to participate with his father in the editing of James Mill's *History of British India*. This editorial exercise also allowed Mill to acquire knowledge of India that would qualify him for a future post as his father's successor in India House. In this sense, Mill is being true to one of his stated purposes in writing his *Autobiography* – that is, to chart his own intellectual development.

Mill also couples his new stage of thought with his study in 1819, at the age of thirteen, of David Ricardo's *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817). David Ricardo, whose parents were Sephardic Jews, married a Quaker but later became a Unitarian. He represents the important social community formed by the interaction of Unitarians with utilitarians. Ricardo was a highly successful investor in the stock market as well as a "loved and intimate friend" of James Mill. It had been James Mill who prevailed upon Ricardo to write and publish an abstract treatise on

political economy and subsequently to enter Parliament, where his friend could be a voice both for his own and James Mill's "opinions both on political economy and on other subjects."[37]

This is connected with the second important element in Mill's life, an initiation into a leadership role in the economic, political, social, and moral transformation of Great Britain as it moved from feudalism to industrialism. It is not merely that Mill read Ricardo but also that it was "one of my father's main objects to make me apply to [Adam] Smith's more superficial view of political economy, the superior lights of Ricardo, and detect what was fallacious in Smith's arguments, or erroneous in any of his conclusions."[38]

In what way was Smith's analysis perceived to be deficient? According to Smith, there were three factors crucial to the production of wealth: natural resources (land), capital, and labor. Corresponding to these three factors there were three kinds of income: rent, interest, and wages. A consequence of these three sources of income was three social classes: landlords, capitalists, and laborers. Wealth is maximized to the extent that all parties in the process engage in postponed gratification: Landlords should charge minimal rents, capitalists reinvest their profits, and laborers accept subsistence wages and only modest increases. Anything beyond subsistence wages leads to a decrease in the amount of capital and a subsequent decrease in the amount of potential wealth. Ultimately, equilibrium will be attained among a stationary population, wages, and profits. This equilibrium is the idea of a *stationary economic state*. On the whole, Smith had presented a harmonious growth model.

What Ricardo added to this analysis was an antagonistic distribution model – specifically, a critique of landlords. For Ricardo, the landlords were always identified with Tory aristocratic landowners who had acquired their land not through labor but originally through conquest and later through inheritance. The landlords tended to think in feudal terms, rather than in industrial terms, and seemed more interested in maintaining their position of social preeminence and political control than in increasing national or international wealth. Landlords tended to favor mercantilist policies, including monopolistic privileges and tariffs. Tariffs on the importation of grain (corn) lead to a corresponding increase in the cost of subsistence. This in turn leads to an increase in wages. The increase in wages leads to a decrease in profits. This will be followed by less incentive to save and form capital, and so growth will come to an end more quickly. The weak link in

this chain is the rapacious and profligate landlords bent on conspicuous consumption.

Henceforth, Mill was to understand himself as a leader in the class warfare between those who favored industrial and commercial growth and those who favored the retention of feudal privilege. To this end, his father prepared a simple introduction to Ricardo's thesis for students by lecturing to Mill and having him prepare written summaries of the lectures, which where repeatedly edited and revised. The result was James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*, and although he does not claim it, Mill participated in a major way in its being written. For the rest of his life, Mill would remain an enemy of Tory rentiers, but his views on growth would undergo an evolution.

The third important element in Mill's initiation was his career in India House. Both James Mill and later Mill himself thought of themselves as leaders of the emerging elite who possessed the intellectual and moral gifts necessary to lead Britain out of feudalism and into the modern liberal world. The natural place in Victorian Britain for the exercise of such leadership was in Parliament. Members of Parliament were unpaid, and this, along with other reasons, left a career in Parliament available primarily to members of the aristocracy and the wealthy few. At the time of the Industrial Revolution, the aristocracy controlled most of the wealth (land), most of the political power, and most of the leadership positions in the society as a whole, including the Anglican Church. But economic considerations do not tell the whole story. Men no more wealthy than James Mill did serve in Parliament, through the favor of patrons. Before 1832, in many cases a patron would simply appoint a protégé to a seat he controlled. Bentham could have bought a seat for James Mill had he chosen to do so – it was easy enough to do this even after 1832, and very easy before then. While it is true that aristocracy and wealth controlled most of the seats in the unreformed House of Commons, there were always a few districts with almost universal male suffrage, which is why there were always a few radicals in the House, even before 1832. It is most likely that religious reasons stood in the way of a Parliamentary career for James Mill. He would have had to be willing to swear an oath or affirm "on the true faith of a Christian." James Mill chose not to serve in Parliament. His leadership had to be exercised indirectly, through his writings, through acquaintances, through his career as a quasi–civil servant in India House, and through the shaping of his son's career.

In words that were prophetic of his own subsequent career in India House, Mill described his father's career as follows:

He was appointed one of the Assistants of the Examiner of India Correspondence; officers whose duty it was to prepare drafts of despatches to India, for consideration by the Directors, in the principal departments of administration. In this office, and in that of Examiner, which he subsequently attained, the influence which his talents, his reputation, and his decision of character gave him, with superiors who really desired the good government of India, enabled him to a great extent to throw into his drafts of despatches, and to carry through the ordeal of the Court of Directors and Board of Control, without having their force much weakened, his real opinions on Indian subjects. In his History he had set forth, for the first time, many of the true principles of Indian administration: and his despatches, following his History, did more than had ever been done before to promote the improvement of India, and teach Indian officials to understand their business. If a selection of them were published, they would, I am convinced, place his character as a practical statesman fully on a level with his eminence as a speculative writer.[39]

Mill would spend the rest of life reconciling his intellectual role with the political role that he also relished but was unable to realize until his retirement from India House. As he put it in the *Autobiography*, "I was not indifferent to exclusion from Parliament, and public life."[40] This, as we shall see, had an enormous impact on both the substance and the style of his writing.

There was something lacking in Mill's early education, and it was a lack that would eventually undermine his initiation into Philosophic Radicalism. Years later, in writing his *Autobiography*, and with the advantage of perspective and hindsight, Mill was able to offer a cooler assessment of his relationship with his father and the significance of distancing himself from his father's shortcomings. Among the significant items, he identified James Mill's inability to hear the voice of poetry. Although his father required him to write in English verse, the reasons given reflected James Mill's views: "[S]ome things could be expressed better and more forcibly in verse than in prose: this, he said was the real advantage. The other was that people in general attached more value to verse than it deserved. . . . Shakespeare my father had put into my hands, chiefly for the sake of the historical plays. . . . My father never was a great admirer of Shakespeare, the English idolatry of whom he used to attack with some severity. He cared little for any English poetry except Milton (for whom he

had the highest admiration). . . . The poetry of the present [nineteenth] century he saw scarcely any merit in. . . . "[41]

The Shaping of a Prodigy

The other formative influence in Mill's life was James Mill's friendship with Jeremy Bentham. The elder Mill had met Bentham (1748–1832), already the eccentric and famous philosopher and noted social reformer, in 1808, and together they formed a lasting personal friendship and professional partnership. It was at Bentham's house in 1811 that James Mill met and befriended David Ricardo. Mill was introduced to Bentham at the age of three (1809). In July of 1809, Bentham rented Barrow Green House in Surrey. Thereafter, the Mills visited every summer from 1809 to 1813.

Until meeting Bentham, James Mill had carefully suppressed his resentment toward the system of aristocratic patronage that allowed lesser men than he to achieve eminence, even though he himself had been a recipient of patronage. By 1809, James Mill was writing to Bentham and describing himself as "your zealous pupil" and later as "your affectionate pupil." These acknowledgments of a kind of discipleship would be repeated in Mill's own later relationships with Carlyle and Comte, but with a very different outcome. I mention this issue of "discipleship" because some readers have inferred from Mill's correspondence that he always needed to be directed by someone else. No one would ever think that about James Mill, and since James Mill could call himself someone's disciple, it is clear that this was an expression of respect and deference, not of submission.

In 1794, Bentham had submitted to Parliament a plan for a model prison called the Panopticon, so named because its architectural structure permitted all of the prisoners to be seen at once. When this project was finally rejected in 1811, Bentham turned to political reform. In this he was guided by his new friendship with James Mill. In 1814, the British government paid Bentham £23,000 for the abandoned project of the Panopticon. This payment was successfully invested in the social reformer Robert Owen's venture at New Lanark, and Bentham achieved financial independence. He made the then-impecunious Mills his neighbors at 1 Queens Square, in Westminster. The Mills were to live at Queen's Square until 1830.

As a result of his new riches, Bentham was able to rent Ford Abbey, near the town of Chard in Somerset. The abbey was palatial, with an eclectic mixture of Gothic, Tudor, and Inigo Jones architecture. The interior was adorned with tapestries of Raphael cartoons. It had several lakes and a deer park. The Mill family spent almost six months a year with Bentham in the country at Ford Abbey until 1818. It was there that Mill was introduced to a lifestyle far beyond the confines of the middle class, one that could almost be called aristocratic.

This sojourn was, I think, an important circumstance in my education. Nothing contributes more to nourish the elevation of sentiments in a people, than the large and free character of their habitations. The middle-age architecture, the baronial hall, and the spacious and lofty rooms, of this fine old place, so unlike the mean and cramped externals of English middle class life, gave the sentiment of a large and freer existence, and were to me a sort of poetic cultivation, aided also by the character of the grounds in which the abbey stood; which were riant and secluded, umbrageous, and full of the sound of falling waters.[42]

Bentham played the organ, and often he would play privately for Mill. Later in life, Mill would play the piano only privately for Harriet. It was also at Ford Abbey that Bentham gave Mill a copy of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Later, Mill was to have the full run of Bentham's library. Although Mill could not have so understood it at such an early age, Defoe's work was not merely the great epic of Protestant individualism that we all know; it was also a nostalgic look at the loss of Christian unity and paved the way for thinking about a new form of philosophical unity for Western culture. This is prophetic of Mill's later life.

Daily life at Ford Abbey also gives us a glimpse of the world in which Mill was raised.

[James] Mill is up between five and six. He and John compare his proofs. Willie and Clara [Mill's younger sisters] are in the saloon before seven, and as soon as the proofs are done with, John goes to the farther end of the room to teach his sisters. Then he turns to geometry till breakfast, at nine. Mr. Bentham rises soon after seven and gets to work about eight. After breakfast, [James] Mill hears Willie and Clara and John at their lessons, under a broad balcony. All the lessons and reading are performed aloud, and occupy full three hours, say till one o'clock. From nine to twelve Mr. Bentham continues working: from twelve to one he performs upon an organ in the saloon. At one we all three [Francis Place, Bentham, and James Mill] walk in the lanes and fields for an hour. At two all go to work again until dinner at

six, when Mrs. Mill, [James] Mill, Bentham, I [Francis Place] and Colls [assistant to Bentham] dine together. We have soup or fish, or both, meat, pudding, generally fruit, viz: melons, strawberries, gooseberries, currants, grapes; no wine. The first day I came, wine was put upon the table; but as I took none, none has since made its appearance. After dinner . . . Mrs. Mill marches in great style round the green in front of the house . . . with all the children, till their bedtime. . . . [James] Mill and I take a sharp walk for two hours, say, till a quarter past eight, then one of us alternately walks with Mr. Bentham for an hour; then comes tea, at which we read the periodical publications, and eleven o'clock comes but too soon and we all go to bed.[43]

Bentham had been a child prodigy. He had mastered Latin and Greek by the age of six. His father had been a Francophile, so the Bentham family spent a great deal of time in France. If these facts sound vaguely familiar, it is because they will be echoed in the life of Mill. It was Bentham who was among the first to advocate the educational importance of controlling the psychological environment of the pupil – a view known as associationism – and who later prompted James Mill to formulate the younger Mill's rigorous educational program.

In 1811, James Mill suffered a severe attack of gout, and having intimations of mortality, began to worry about the future of his son. It was at this time that James Mill asked Bentham to become John's guardian in case of mishap. Bentham responded with enthusiasm.

If you will appoint me guardian to Mr. Mill, I will, in the event of his father's being disposed of elsewhere, take him to Q.S.P. [Queens Square Place] and there or elsewhere, by whipping or otherwise, do whatsoever may seem most necessary and proper, for teaching him to make all proper distinctions, such as between the Devil and the Holy Ghost, and how to make Codes and Encyclopedias, and whatsoever else may be proper to be made, so long as I remain an inhabitant of this vale of tears.[44]

James Mill's response reflects both a humorous dimension and a deeply earnest commitment to make Mill the spokesperson for their joint efforts at social and political reform:

I am not going to die, notwithstanding your zeal to come in for a legacy. However, if I were to die any time before this poor boy is a man, one of the things that would pinch me most sorely, would be the being obliged to leave his mind unmade to the degree of excellence, of which I hope to make it. But another thing is, that the only prospect which would lessen that pain, would be the leaving him in your hands.

I therefore take your offer quite seriously, and stipulate, merely, that it shall be made as good as possible; and then we may perhaps leave him a successor worthy of both of us.[45]

Bentham became Mill's guardian, taking a keen interest in the youngster's education. In 1813, Mill accompanied his father and Bentham on a summer trip to Oxford, Bath, Bristol, and Portsmouth and soon developed a love for natural scenery. So Mill was tied at an early age to Britain's most famous late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century philosopher, and before the end of his life Mill was to become the godfather of one of Britain's most famous twentieth-century philosophers, Bertrand Russell. Mill would also spend a year in France with the family of Jeremy's brother, Samuel, and out of this grew Mill's fascination with French life and politics.

As previously noted, James Mill had had a difficult time supporting his family. By 1814, James Mill was earning about £150 per year but could not keep out of debt. James Mill also referred disparagingly in a letter about his "incumbrances, mastery of a wife, and five brats, and a maid." The radical tailor and sometime leader of the workers Francis Place paid some of the debts. James Mill did later repay that debt. When, in 1814, the Mill family moved to Queens Square, in part to be closer to Bentham, Jeremy Bentham paid half the cost of the rent, about £50. The close proximity of two independent minds such as those of Bentham and James Mill, as well as James Mill's dependency on Bentham's generosity, occasionally led to disagreements between them. However, on May 12, 1819, something like financial independence became possible when James Mill was appointed second assistant to the examiner at India House and given an annual salary of £800. All of this helps to explain the preoccupation with financial security reflected in some of the future decisions that James Mill would make on behalf of his son.

Mention should be made here of Francis Place and the importance of his presence beyond that of generosity. Place was a member of the working class, a self-educated and successful tailor with a thriving shop at Charing Cross. He became a leader and spokesperson for laborers and provided a free library at the rear of his shop for all those interested in reform. Place also organized worker's cooperatives, a key policy that Mill was to advocate in his economic writings. James Mill's friendship with Place and the belief that through education workers could rise to the status of autonomous

and responsible citizens became a model for Mill's own later relationship with leaders of the working class.

James Mill had a highly developed theory of education. He published his views in 1818 in the supplement to the fifth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. His theory of education is based upon the epistemology he had acquired from his reading of Locke and Hartley. The mind at birth is a blank tablet upon which experience writes. All ideas thus originate from external stimuli. Knowledge consists of ideas and the sequence of ideas. The sequence of ideas is the result of the association of ideas (Hartley's view). Once the teacher knows the sequence, he can use this information to condition the pupil in such a way that beneficial sequences occur. A sequence is beneficial if it contributes, first, to the happiness of the individual, and then to the happiness of society. The ultimate goal of education is to render "the human mind to the greatest possible degree the cause of human happiness."[46] What this meant to James Mill was that the "keystone of the arch" of the system was political education, that is, education for social reform.[47] This is all the more reason why James Mill thought it important that the educator protect the pupil from "the influence of a vicious and ignorant society."[48] He believed that this process should commence as early as possible and that it should be reinforced constantly through the vigilance of the educator. Finally, he advocated that education became more economical to the extent that students taught each other. James Mill tried to institutionalize some of these ideas in various educational projects undertaken along with Bentham, Francis Place, and Joseph Lancaster.[49] One such project was a secular for-profit system of elementary education. None of these ambitions flourished, and all were soon abandoned.

One element in James Mill's views on education deserves special mention – the view that control of the student's environment is crucial for avoiding the corruption of the world. This is not a reflection of Hartlean associationism but shows instead two other influences, one classic and one modern. The classic influence goes back to James Mill's reading of the great Romans, some of whom, such as Cato, had educated their own sons. The modern influence was Rousseau's *Emile*, a work with which James Mill was familiar. To this end, James Mill carefully controlled Mill's environment in order to avoid contamination. He was not permitted to have playmates of his own age, or to have playmates at all from outside his family. He worked always in the same room under the watchful eye of his father.

All of these views were put into practice in Mill's case, including requiring John to educate his younger siblings. What deserves special mention about this process is the title of the third section of James Mill's article: "Happiness, the End to which Education is devoted. – Wherein it consists, not yet determined."[50] These were to prove to be prophetic words in the education of Mill.

Mill's precociousness aside, there are a number of remarkable features about his education. First, although James Mill had become an agnostic, he never abandoned his puritan conscience. Mill was certainly inculcated with the gospel of work and self-reliance. Deprived of much acquaintance with religious practice or with religion in any sense except as a set of intellectual positions, Mill inherited from his father a contempt for natural theology, an abhorrence of the Calvinist notion of an avenging God, and the belief that traditional religion's reliance upon such a God perverted morals. Mill presented an elaborate summary of his father's religious beliefs, worth noting because they are also part of Mill's beliefs as well as the basis for his religious speculation at the end of his life. James Mill, following the rigorous empiricism of the French Enlightenment, denied the intelligibility both of miracles and of revelation and concluded that nothing could be known "concerning the origin of things."[51] Hence, natural theology was as useless as revelation. But precisely because nothing could be known intelligibly concerning origins, dogmatic atheism was as unjustified as theism. More interestingly, the Calvinistic notion of an avenging God to whom obeisance was due was considered to be inconsistent with true virtue and the fundamental dignity of a moral agent, an example of the incoherence at the heart of Christianity. A further incoherence, for James Mill, was the existence of evil on the part of an allegedly omnipotent God. The irony of these apparent inconsistencies is that they did not seem to have much effect on morality. Christianity remained a set of irrelevant and meaningless doctrines and practices with no ennobling effect on moral life. The only religious position to which James Mill gave any credence was Manicheanism, in which good and evil are "struggling against each other for the government of the universe."[52]

Mill described James Mill's character as stoical, but it could just as easily be described as Calvinist without theology.

> My father's moral convictions, wholly dissevered from religion, were very much of the character of the Greek philosophers. . . . he had . . . scarcely any belief in

> pleasure. . . . He was not insensible to pleasures; but he deemed very few of them worth the price which, at least in the present state of society, must be paid for them. The greater number of miscarriages in life, he considered to be attributable to the overvaluing of pleasures. . . . He thought human life a poor thing at best, after the freshness of youth and of unsatisfied curiosity had gone by. . . . He never varied in rating intellectual enjoyments above all others. . . . For passionate emotions of all sorts, and for everything which had been said or written in exaltation of them, he professed the greatest contempt. He regarded them as a form of madness.[53]

In addition, Mill was exposed at an early age to Bentham's work *Not Paul but Jesus*, a book in which Bentham argued that Paul had perverted the teachings of Jesus as represented in the Gospels and institutionalized them in a clerical manner at odds with the original teachings. The Kantian argument that God is a necessary presupposition of morality never received consideration or mention. Along with the absence of a religious consciousness,[54] came the absence of the notion that there were substantive truths in literature or that literature was a source of insight into the human condition. Any truth about the human condition was the domain of a social science modeled after physical science. Bentham is infamous for having asserted that "the game of pushpin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry";[55] he also maintained, somewhat in jest, that "*Prose* is where all the lines but the last go on to the margin – poetry is where some of them fall short of it."[56] All of Mill's readings among the modern authors constituted a textbook presentation of the views leading up to and expressing the Enlightenment Project of the French *philosophes*. That project assumed that physical science told us the ultimate truths about the universe, that there could be a social science modeled after physical science, that it was possible to define and explain the human predicament solely through science, and, finally, that we could achieve mastery over the human predicament through social technology. No contemporary critic of those views appears on the list. Mill's reading of Roman history and the French Revolution encouraged the conception of himself as a champion of "democracy," or at least of eliminating class differences. Finally, the classical authors were read either to enhance appreciation of the Socratic dialectic or to inculcate the Stoic notion of a duty to support the common good.

We are left with the question of what sort of person Mill was at the age of thirteen. His protégé and biographer Bain, who also knew and wrote

about the father, believed that in the case of Mill's education,

> the application was excessive. . . . This health suffered, we have ample evidence. . . . his mental progress might have been as great with a smaller strain on his powers. . . . I cannot help thinking that the rapid and unbroken transitions from one study to another must have been unfavourable to a due impression on the memory. . . . What his reading of Thucydides could be at eight, we may dimly imagine; it could be nothing but an exercise in the Greek language. . . . It is apparent enough that his vast early reading was too rapid, and, as a consequence superficial.[57]

Even in later life, "There was one thing he never would allow, which was that work could be pushed to the point of being injurious to either body or mind."[58]

His claim that his natural intellectual gifts were no more than average cannot be taken literally, although Mill does not mention his gift for analysis on that list. It is clear that his father recognized his extraordinary intellectual promise and chose to lavish his attention and his dreams on him among all of the children. Place recognized that "John is truly a prodigy, a most wonderful fellow."[59] To some extent, Mill's remark may indicate a rhetorical modesty; to some extent, it reflects a commitment to the importance of early education; but it also reflects, in part, the world in which Mill was raised. Bentham had been a child prodigy. Some of Mill's near-contemporaries had also been prodigies – figures such as Macaulay, who had written an historical work before the age of eight, and Tennyson, who had written an epic poem at twelve. More than anything, it reflects being raised in an almost exclusively adult world of towering intellects.

Mill did not believe himself to have an overpowering intellect. He could not, as his father did, bully and browbeat others into accepting his views. What Mill did possess and develop was a consummate skill in presenting, dissecting, advocating, and critiquing any position. However, this ability did not lead to automatic acceptance of the positions that Mill advocated. Quite the contrary, Mill encountered the resentment of those whose positions he attacked. Mill was not a creative genius in either of the two conventionally recognized forms – namely, in the arts or in the sciences and mathematics. His technical contributions in philosophy, in logic, and in economics were noteworthy but not groundbreaking. He was not a great scholar in the sense that Grote and Austin and Macaulay were. His prodigious reading made him realize how much had been said before, and

his honesty made him acknowledge how much he had borrowed from contemporaries such as Coleridge, Carlyle, Comte, Harriet Taylor, and Tocqueville. As Mill put it, "the greatest part of mental growth consisted in the assimilation of those truths, and the most valuable part of my intellectual work was in building the bridges and clearing the paths which connected them with my general system of thought."[60] One is left wondering to what extent originality is overrated.

Mill was extraordinary in two special ways. First, he recognized as his special skill the ability to identify and restate issues and arguments with exemplary clarity, simplicity, and rhetorical force. Bain puts it this way:

> If I were to compare him in his fifteenth year with the most intellectual youth that I have ever known, or heard or read of, I should say that his attainments on the whole are not unparalleled, although, I admit, very rare. . . . Where Mill was most markedly in advance of his years, was Logic. It was not merely that he had read treatises on the Formal Logic . . . but that he was able to chop Logic with his father in regard to the foundations and demonstrations of Geometry. I have never known a similar case of precocity. . . . his father . . . could and did teach effectually . . . Logic; the others [subjects] were Political Economy, Historical Philosophy and Politics. . . . On these, John was a truly precocious youth; his innate aptitudes, which must have been great, received the utmost stimulation that it was possible to apply.[61]

Second, Mill possessed a kind of genius that had no analogue prior to the development of historical imagination in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and that therefore was only dimly recognized by himself and his contemporaries. What Mill, like Hegel and even to some extent Marx, could do was to synthesize all of the major intellectual and cultural factors of his time into a coherent narrative. The great philosophers have always achieved a comprehensive view; what the great nineteenth-century philosophers had to achieve was a comprehensive view that recognized the historical and dynamic dimensions of such a view. Mill's *Autobiography* is in large part the story of his constructing such a comprehensive view.

There are, however, issues of character that go beyond the state of one's intellect. James Mill had a strict policy on whom he would invite to be a guest in his home. He refused to invite those "whom he could not, as he said, make as comfortable as they were at home."[62] This reflected in part the limitations of James Mill's income. It also reflected his desire to

entertain those who shared his unorthodox views. Mill listened in on these conversations, and later interacted with these adults.

> [Some of these adults] as I have since found thought me greatly and disagreeably self-conceited; probably because I was disputatious, and did not scruple to give direct contradictions to things which I heard said. I suppose I acquired this bad habit from having been encouraged in an unusual degree to talk on matters beyond my age, and with grown persons, while I never had inculcated in me the usual respect for them. My father did not correct this ill-breeding and impertinence, probably from not being aware of it, for I was always too much in awe of him to be otherwise than extremely subdued and quiet in his presence.[63]

Mill may have been browbeaten into obsequiousness where his father was concerned, but this obviously did not extend to other adults.

What does emerge is the picture of a precocious adolescent and young man wholly dependent emotionally, intellectually, and morally upon his father. In one respect this was fortuitous, in the sense that James Mill was a powerful intellect, a man of prodigious energy, incorruptible character, and dedication to a great cause. Mill was clearly a beneficiary of all this. On the other hand, James Mill's view of the world seems to have been dominated by the left hemisphere of his brain, by which we mean that he seems not to have recognized the more imaginative and poetic dimensions of life. In her memoir on her husband entitled *Personal Life of Grote*, Mrs. Grote described James Mill as regarding "the cultivation of individual affections and sympathies as destructive of lofty aims, and indubitably hurtful to the mental character."[64] To be sure, he was dedicated, but he was dedicated to the point of being overbearing. "James Mill . . . is the prototype of the Utilitarian character, almost to the point of caricature: self-made, manly, independent, rationally controlled (especially in the areas of sex and work), not giving way to feelings of any kind (especially of love). . . ."[65] Even Bentham had some critical remarks about James Mill's character, describing him as someone who "expects to subdue everybody by his positiveness. His manner of speaking is oppressive and overbearing."[66]

Mill was aware of this dimension of his father's character, but he chose to put it in a positive light:

> [H]e [James Mill], in a degree once common, but now very unusual, threw his feelings into his opinions. . . . None but those who do not care about opinions will confound it with intolerance. Those, who having opinions which they hold to be

immensely important, and their contraries to be prodigiously hurtful, have any deep regard for the general good, will necessarily dislike, as a class and in the abstract, those who they think wrong what they think right, and right what they think wrong: though they need not therefore be, nor was my father, insensible to the good qualities in an opponent, nor governed in their estimation of individuals by one general presumption, instead of by the whole of their character. I grant that an earnest person, being no more infallible than other men, is liable to dislike people on account of opinions which do not merit dislike; but if he neither himself does them any ill office, nor connives at its being done by others, he is not intolerant; and the forbearance which flows from a conscientious sense of the importance to mankind of the equal freedom of all opinions, is the only tolerance which is commendable, or, to the highest moral order of minds, possible.[67]

What concerned Mill at the time he wrote this – in the 1850s, while he was planning *On Liberty* – was the lack of deep and informed moral conviction, as opposed to sentiment, and the failure to appreciate the moral as well as the intellectual need for freedom of thought and discussion. In the end, what Mill, following his father, stood for was the forthright presentation of deeply held and considered opinions. What he opposed was indoctrination, intimidation, and indifference.

Mill was subjected to constant correction on the part of his father, inculcated with the constant necessity for self-criticism. James Mill was a committed believer in the power of the environment, and, as a consequence, Mill himself attributed all of his positive achievements to that influence. As Mill sadly put it in the part of his *Autobiography* that he suppressed:

[There was] another evil I shared with many of the sons of energetic fathers. To have been through childhood, under the constant rule of a strong will, certainly is not favourable to strength of will. I was so much accustomed to expect to be told what to do, either in the form of a direct command or of rebuke for not doing it, that I acquired a habit of leaving my responsibility as a moral agent to rest on my father, my conscience never speaking to me except by his voice. The things I ought *not* to do were mostly provided for by his precepts, rigorously enforced whenever violated, but the things which I *ought* to do I hardly ever did of my own mere motion, but waited till he told me to do them; and if he forbore or forgot to tell me, they were generally left undone. I thus acquired a habit of backwardness, of waiting to follow the lead of others, an absence of moral spontaneity, an inactivity of the moral sense and even to a large extent of the intellect, unless roused by the appeal of someone else, – for which a large abatement must be made from

the benefits, either moral or intellectual, which flowed from any other part of my education.[68]

One qualification is worth noting. Recalling the extent to which his father's scheme of education was more theory than practice, we note the effort on the part of James Mill to build a strong character in Mill. "He was fond of putting into my hands books which exhibited men of energy and resource in unusual circumstances, struggling against difficulties and overcoming them. . . ."[69]

Love Affair with the Continent

Mill was originally invited in 1820 to spend six months with the family of Sir Samuel Bentham, brother of Jeremy, in their chateau near Toulouse, France. James Mill was somewhat reluctant to send him, but his responsibilities at India House made it difficult for him to spend much time on his son's education. The invitation was accepted, and the visit eventually lasted a full year. On the journey there, Mill stopped in Paris and met, through his father's introduction, the eminent French laissez-faire economist and follower of Ricardo, Jean Baptiste Say. Mill stayed for over a week with the Say family, visiting the Palais Royal, which he described in his diary as an "immense building belonging to the profligate Duc d'Orleans, who, having ruined himself with debauchery, resolved to let the arcades of his palace to various tradesmen." While in Paris, he even claims to have spotted Saint-Simon, someone who would influence, both directly and indirectly, a great deal of his later thinking. A planned visit with the eminent French mathematician and scientist Laplace did not materialize.

While with the Benthams, Mill felt like a member of the family, and he was especially impressed by Mrs. Samuel Bentham, the daughter of the eminent chemist Dr. Fordyce. Mill describes her as "a woman of strong will and decided character, much general knowledge, and great practical good sense. . . . she was the ruling spirit of the household, as she deserved, and was well qualified, to be."[70] This was a very different image of a wife and mother from the one with which he was familiar. It was an image not incompatible with Sir Samuel Bentham's personal achievements. It was this sort of image that left a lasting impression on Mill and foreshadowed the kind of woman for whom he would search, someone to be the ruling spirit of his household.

The Benthams had an older son who later became a famous botanist. The Benthams also took Mill on a tour of the Pyrennees Mountains. From that day forward, hiking in the mountains became Mill's favorite form of relaxation and amateur botany his hobby.[71] Even the choice of botany as a hobby reflects certain features of Mill's personality. It was a hobby in which one collected and classified plants, so in the end it was a sort of "working" hobby, in which Mill learned something about science, engaged in an activity that was systematic, and was allowed to exercise his analytical bent. Like many adolescents, Mill found that natural beauty awakened his dormant aesthetic sense. "This first introduction to the highest order of mountain scenery made the deepest impression on me, and gave a colour to my tastes through life."[72]

The Benthams tried their best to drag John away from his books and to make him a facile man of the world. Writing to James Mill, Lady Bentham remarks that "we trust that you will have satisfaction from that part of his education we are giving him to fit him for commerce with the world at large."[73] He was required to take lessons not only in French but also in singing, the piano, fencing, riding, and even dancing. The lessons in all but French and the piano were to no avail. For the rest of his life, Mill was fluent in French, although he spoke it with an English accent. In a journal that John kept for his father, he recorded the following on July 21, 1820:

> My time is now divided as follows – I rise at 5, to the river till 8 [swimming], French lesson till 9½, breakfast till 10, solfeges till 10½, from 10½ till 2 my French exercises, Greek Latin mathematics, logic and political economy, i.e. as many of the latter as possible, from 2 till 4 music lesson and practice at Mme. Boulet's, from 4 till 5 dinner, riding till 6, fencing till 7, dancing till 8 ½, tea till 9. . . . wrote parts of a dialogue on benefit of large estates to commerce (assigned by Lady B).

Lady Bentham also had Mill read the Code Napoleon. What is clear from this period is that Mill delighted in reading and writing above all else, that these were not simply tasks imposed upon him by his father. For the rest of his life, these were the activities that gratified him, that made him feel secure and successful, that served as a refuge from the world when he needed it. What Mill did not express in any of his letters to his father was any loneliness or any thought that he missed being home. This trip was also the occasion of Mill's first real friendship with someone his own

age (Antoine Ballard, who later became a chemist and who discovered bromine). As he later described it to Comte, "It was also there that for the first time I found a friend, that is to say a friend of my own choice, as opposed to those given me by family ties."[74]

Mill singles out two important elements of his experience: the importance of expressing feelings and the deleterious effect on morals of the habitual English coldness and reserve. In England, he said, society had a "low moral tone" for "conduct is of course always directed towards low and petty objects." There is a "general abstinence . . . from professing any high principles of action at all." The result is an English culture in which there is "the habit of not speaking to others, nor much even to themselves, about the things in which they do feel interest, [and this] causes both their feelings and their intellectual faculties to remain undeveloped, or to develop themselves only in some single and very limited direction; reducing them, considered as spiritual beings, to a kind of negative existence." Mill then contrasts the English to the French,

> among whom sentiments, which by comparison at least may be called elevated, are the current coin of human intercourse, both in books and in private life; and though often evaporating in profession, are yet kept alive in the nation at large by constant exercise, and stimulated by sympathy, so as to form a living and active part of the existence of great numbers of persons, and to be recognized and understood by all. Neither could I then appreciate the general culture of the understanding which results from the habitual exercise of the feelings. . . . I even then felt, though without stating it clearly to myself, the contrast between the frank amiability of French personal intercourse, and the English mode of existence in which everybody acts as if everybody else (with few, or no exceptions) was either an enemy or a bore.[75]

Mill does mention taking some courses at the university at Montpellier, but the intellectual growth he experienced during this period had a different source.

> But the greatest, perhaps, of the many advantages which I owed to this episode in my education, was that of having breathed for a whole year, the free and genial atmosphere of Continental life. . . . The chief fruit which I carried away from the society I saw, was a strong and permanent interest in Continental liberalism . . . keeping me free from the error always prevalent in England, and from which even my father with all his superiority to prejudice was not exempt, of judging universal questions by a merely English standard.[76]

On one level, Mill is making an oft-repeated observation about the insularity of the English. As late as the 1870s, a headline appeared in the *Times* of London informing its readers that a fog had descended on the Channel and as a result the continent was cut off!

In a more traditional vein, Mill is engaged in a practice that goes as far back as Herodotus and is famously exemplified in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and in the works of many later writers – that is, he is using his exposure to a different culture to engage in a constructive critique of his native culture. By the time he was writing his *Autobiography* in the 1850s, Mill had become the conscience of Victorian England. Mill's critique of the moral core of Victorian England is best expressed in the essays he wrote during the 1830s, which we shall discuss in a later chapter. It seems that from an early age he had adopted a Socratic pose with regard to his relationship with his own countrymen. Very much like his younger contemporary Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), Mill would call attention to the cultural impoverishment of Protestant England. Mill's later critique of the British class system is echoed in Arnold's criticisms of the aristocracy ("Barbarians" with correct manners but an obtuseness with regard to ideas), the middle class especially ("Philistines," who were religious nonconformists and hard workers), and the working class (the "Populace," who were blind to the great issues).[77]

On a more significant intellectual level, Mill is calling attention to the two main traditions of thought that had developed since the end of the eighteenth century. With some notable exceptions, the Enlightenment emphasis on science and reductive materialism had prevailed in English-speaking countries; the Romantic movement, with its humanistic emphasis, has prevailed upon the continent. In his later essays on Bentham and Coleridge, whom Mill will identify as the great seminal minds of the age, Mill will remind us that Coleridge is the English bearer of the continental tradition, and especially of German Romanticism. Mill will set for himself the task of synthesizing these two great traditions of thought, attempting to bridge an intellectual gap that many think prevails to this very day. More specifically, Mill will argue that modern liberal culture, as best exemplified in England, cannot be adequately explained and defended except with the resources of Romantic continental thought.

A more specific interest lies in the evolution of French politics. The French Revolution of 1789 had momentous symbolic significance for liberals everywhere. It became the symbol of the overthrow of feudalism

and the dawn of a new day of freedom. Liberals as well as conservatives in Britain were later horrified by the excesses of the revolution, but the destruction of feudal privilege was looked upon as a necessary prerequisite for the development of a truly free and responsible society. This was especially important in Britain, where aristocratic privilege and dominance lasted through the whole of the nineteenth century. Liberals, including Mill, continued to look at France as the great experiment in democracy. Mill himself did not permanently change his focus from France to the United States until after 1849, and in this a French thinker, Tocqueville, had already paved the way.

Mill gained a fluency in French that made him a leading British authority on French life and politics. He always felt comfortable in France and spent a good deal of vacation time there. As he would express it in a letter to Harriet in 1854, "any place in France if it be ever so far off seems so much a home to us."[78] He and Harriet had hoped to retire to France, and both of them are buried in Avignon.

Father and Son

Despite the extraordinary amount of speculation to which Mill's early life naturally gives rise, I am inclined to think that he is his own best storyteller. Mill was obviously precocious. If he appears overly modest about his quick-wittedness, memory, and energy level, this can be attributed, as he himself pointed out, to his judging himself by unrealistically high standards. That he is perhaps overoptimistic about the potential of the average student does not invalidate his claim that such students could accomplish a good deal more if more were legitimately demanded of them. Bear in mind that the first stated purpose of Mill's *Autobiography* was to make available "some record of an education which was unusual and remarkable, and which, whatever else it may have done, has proved how much more than is commonly supposed may be taught, and well taught, in those early years which, in the common modes of what is called instruction, are little better than wasted."[79]

Mill's relationship to his father must be assessed in two dimensions, intellectually and personally. The parallels between the careers and writing projects of the two are remarkable, and Mill spent a great deal of time revising his father's views. Psychoanalysis aside, the relationship between fathers and sons remained an especially important issue in the nineteenth

century. The locus of conflict can be understood in a broader cultural context. It became clear by the mid nineteenth century that within liberal culture the function of parents was to promote autonomous individuality in their children, an autonomy that encouraged the child eventually to choose his or her own career, spouse, and place of abode. In important respects, James Mill did encourage some elements of this state of mind. At the same time, James Mill's drive to control all of those around him, his somewhat old-fashioned desire to produce an heir who would be an extension of his own life, and his eighteenth-century conception of education as a form of conditioning were at odds with the cultivation of autonomy in one's children. Mill lived through this painful transition on his way to becoming the chief exponent of the autonomy and sense of personal responsibility inherent in liberal culture. Mill's *Autobiography* is a witness to the struggle between these opposed conceptions of the relationship between parents and children.

What would have been the fate of this precocious young man if he had not had the guidance of James Mill and had gone to the university? At best, he would most likely have become an outstanding scholar – perhaps of ancient Greece, like his acquaintance Grote, or perhaps of the law, like another of his teachers and friends, John Austin. But, alas, he couldn't have gone to the university and become a scholar at Oxford or Cambridge University, since he would not have taken Anglican orders. And like his father, he probably would have refused a Scottish university post. He could not have pursued a life of public service, for again he would have had to take the religious oath. What he could not have received was an introduction to the fundamental philosophical, moral, social, economic, and religious issues of his day. Most of those subjects, such as classical economics, simply did not exist as recognized academic disciplines and certainly were not taught. Nor, more importantly, was any synthesis, grand narrative, or coherent cultural narrative provided, other than that of Anglican orthodoxy. Despite the extraordinary achievements of all of the great British intellectuals of the nineteenth century, none of them, with the exception of the Philosophic Radicals, offered an alternative grand new synthesis. Neither could Mill have been initiated into the world of Philosophic Radicalism and come to the realization that the transformation of Britain from feudal agrarianism to modern industrial capitalism required a serious rethinking of all the major institutions if he had not grown up in the world of Bentham, James Mill, Place, and Ricardo. Even if, in the end, Mill realized

the deficiencies of the Philosophic Radicals' grand narrative and saw the need to create a new one using resources unavailable to them, it is highly unlikely that he could have done so if he had not been the son of James Mill and had not experienced, in the most intense and personal manner, the strengths and weaknesses of that narrative. After all, it was a cardinal point in his father's theory of education never to permit "anything which I learnt to degenerate into a mere exercise of memory."[80] Despite the serious deficiencies of James Mill's vision, deficiencies of which Mill was both aware and records for us in the most authoritative manner – and which he strove mightily, as we shall see, to overcome – it is still the case that Mill could not be seen in retrospect as arguably the greatest British mind of the nineteenth century if he had not been the son of James Mill. In the most literal sense, Mill did owe it all to his father.