

it is the embodiment of those ideas of the sublime, majestic, and beautiful, without which there can be no large philosophy. Sometimes he acknowledges the being of God, sometimes he invests an unknown principle or quality with the attributes of perfection. And this deduction of his reason, or creation of his fancy, he makes the occasion of such excellent thoughts, and the starting-point of so varied and systematic a teaching, that he even seems like a disciple of Christianity itself. From the very accuracy and steadiness of his logical powers, he is able to see what sentiments are consistent in those who hold any religious doctrine at all, and he appears to others to feel and to hold a whole circle of theological truths, which exist in his mind no otherwise than as a number of deductions.

1852, 1873

## JOHN STUART MILL

1806–1873

In many American colleges the writings of J. S. Mill are studied in courses in government or in philosophy, and it may therefore be asked why they should also have a place in the study of literature. It may seem that Mill is less literary than other Victorian prose writers. His analytic mind is preoccupied with abstractions rather than with the concrete details that are the concern of the more typical writer; his self-effacing manner and his relatively transparent style are the marks of an author whose value lies in generalizations from personal experience rather than in the rendering of particular experiences for their own sake. Yet a knowledge of Mill's writings is essential to our understanding of Victorian literature. He is one of the leading figures in the intellectual history of his century, a thinker whose honest grappling with the political and religious problems of his age was to have a profound influence on writers as diverse as Matthew Arnold, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Thomas Hardy.

Mill was educated at home in London under the direction of his father, James Mill, a leader of the Utilitarians. James Mill believed that ordinary schooling fails to develop our intellectual capacities early enough, and he demonstrated his point by the extraordinary results he achieved in training his son. As a child John Stuart Mill read Greek and Latin; and as a boy he could carry on intelligent discussions of problems in mathematics, philosophy, and economics. By the time he was fourteen, as he reports in his *Autobiography* (1873) his intensive education enabled him to start his career "with an advantage of a quarter of a century" over his contemporaries.

Mill worked in the office of the East India Company for many years and also served a term in Parliament in the 1860s; but his principal energies were devoted to his writings on such subjects as logic and philosophy, political principles, and economics. His *System of Logic* (1843) earned him the position of the most respected philosopher in mid-Victorian England. He began as a disciple of the Utilitarian theories of his father and of Jeremy Bentham but became gradually dissatisfied with the narrowness of their conception of human motives. Working in the empiricist tradition, Utilitarians attempted to show that most traditional views of politics, ethics, and psychology were based on nothing more than long-standing superstition and habit, and that supersti-

tion and habit generally stood in the way of progress. Most famously, they challenged the idea that human beings functioned according to God-given intuitions and drives, arguing that the mind worked on the physical process of the association of feelings. According to the Utilitarians, then, individuals were ultimately motivated not by an innate sense of right and wrong but by the simple desire to find pleasure and avoid pain. Politically, the Utilitarians thus lobbied for whatever would bring the greatest pleasure (or happiness) to the greatest number. Though Mill was raised in this non-sense, reforming tradition, his honesty and open-mindedness enabled him to appreciate the values of such anti-Utilitarians as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle and, whenever possible, to incorporate some of these values into the Utilitarian system. In part this sympathy was gained by the lesson he learned through experiencing a nervous breakdown during his early twenties. This painful event, described in a chapter of his *Autobiography*, taught him that the lack of concern for people's affections and emotions characteristic of the Utilitarian system of thought (and typified by his own education) was a fatal flaw in that system. His tribute to the therapeutic value of art (because of its effect on human emotions), both in his *Autobiography* and in his early essay "What Is Poetry?" (1833) would have astonished Mill's master, Bentham, who had equated poetry with pushpin, an idle pastime.

Mill's emotional life was also broadened by his love for Harriet Taylor, a married woman who shared his intellectual interests and eventually became his wife, in 1851, after the death of her husband. Little that Taylor wrote was published under her own name during her life, but her contribution to Mill's work should not be underestimated; Mill later described her as "the inspirer, and in part the author, of all that is best in my writings." They shared a commitment to the cause of female emancipation, one of several unpopular movements to which Mill was dedicated. Throughout human history, as he saw it, the role of a husband has always been legally that of a tyrant, and the object of his farsseeing essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869) was to change law and public opinion so that half the human race might be liberated from slavery and regarded as equals. The subjection of women was, however, only one aspect of the tyranny against which he fought. His fundamental concern was to prevent the subjection of individuals in a democracy. His classic treatise *On Liberty* (1859) is not a traditional liberal attack against tyrannical kings or dictators; it is an attack against tyrannical majorities. Mill foresaw that in democracies such as the United States the pressure toward conformity might crush all individualists (intellectual individualists in particular) to the level of what he called a "collective mediocrity." Throughout all of his writings, even in his discussions of the advantages of socialism, Mill is concerned with demonstrating that the individual is more important than institutions such as church or state. In *On Liberty* we find a characteristic example of the process of his reasoning; but here, where the theme of individualism is central, his logic is charged with eloquence.

A similar eloquence is evident in a passage from his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), a prophetic comment on the fate of the individual in an overpopulated world:

There is room in the world, no doubt, and even in old countries, for a great increase of population, supposing the arts of life go on improving, and capital to increase. But even if innocuous, I confess I see very little reason for desiring it. . . . It is not good for a man to be kept perforce at all times in the presence of his species. A world from which solitude is extirpated, is a very poor ideal. Solitude, in the sense of being often alone, is essential to any depth of meditation or of character: and solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur, is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do without. Nor is there much satisfaction in contemplating the world with nothing left to the spontaneous activity of nature; with every rood of land brought into cultivation, which is capable of growing food for human beings; every flowery waste or natural pasture ploughed up, all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man's use

exterminated as his rivals for food, every hedgerow or superfluous tree rooted out, and scarcely a place left where a wild shrub or flower could grow without being eradicated as a weed in the name of improved agriculture. If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger, but not a better or happier population, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it.

### What Is Poetry?

It has often been asked, What Is Poetry? And many and various are the answers which have been returned. The vulgarest of all—one with which no person possessed of the faculties to which poetry addresses itself can ever have been satisfied—is that which confounds poetry with metrical composition; yet to this wretched mockery of a definition many have been led back by the failure of all their attempts to find any other that would distinguish what they have been accustomed to call poetry from much which they have known only under other names.

That, however, the word “poetry” imports something quite peculiar in its nature; something which may exist in what is called prose as well as in verse; something which does not even require the instrument of words, but can speak through the other audible symbols called musical sounds, and even through the visible ones which are the language of sculpture, painting, and architecture—all this, we believe, is and must be felt, though perhaps indistinctly, by all upon whom poetry in any of its shapes produces any impression beyond that of tickling the ear. The distinction between poetry and what is not poetry, whether explained or not, is felt to be fundamental; and, where every one feels a difference, a difference there must be. All other appearances may be fallacious; but the appearance of a difference is a real difference. Appearances too, like other things, must have a cause; and that which can cause anything, even an illusion, must be a reality. And hence, while a half-philosophy disdains the classifications and distinctions indicated by popular language, philosophy carried to its highest point frames new ones, but rarely sets aside the old, content with correcting and regularizing them. It cuts fresh channels for thought, but does not fill up such as it finds ready-made: it traces, on the contrary, more deeply, broadly, and distinctly, those into which the current has spontaneously flowed.

Let us then attempt, in the way of modest inquiry, not to coerce and confine Nature within the bounds of an arbitrary definition, but rather to find the boundaries which she herself has set, and erect a barrier round them; not calling mankind to account for having misapplied the word “poetry,” but attempting to clear up the conception which they already attach to it, and to bring forward as a distinct principle that which, as a vague feeling, has really guided them in their employment of the term.

The object of poetry is confessedly to act upon the emotions; and therein is poetry sufficiently distinguished from what Wordsworth affirms to be its logical opposite;<sup>1</sup> namely, not prose but matter of fact, or science. The one

1. In his “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800).