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978-0-521-29917-6 - Mill on Bentham and Coleridge

F. R. Leavis

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

JOHN STUART MILL's essays on Bentham and Coleridge, may, I suppose, properly be described as classical. Yet are they, for the literary student at any rate, in real and active recognition classical? I, personally, never heard of them when I was reading for the English Tripos at Cambridge, and I don't remember ever to have come across any direction to them in any of the 'authorities' that offer to guide the literary student through the nineteenth century. Yet it is more important that he should have read them than that he should have read, say, *Sartor Resartus* or *Unto this Last*. But if it should, by some chance, have occurred to him to read them he wouldn't, unless he had luck, have found them very accessible. There they are, in Volume I of the old Victorian *Dissertations and Discussions*, and no doubt it is as well that he should turn over the set of volumes in some library, and see what other topics Mill disserts upon and discusses.<sup>1</sup> But if anywhere—and it certainly should often be so—any number of students should be wanting to read those two key essays at the same time (for purposes of discussion, for instance, or concerted written work), there would be a good deal of frustration. For the reprint of *Dissertations and Discussions* brought out in Routledge's 'Universal Library' is unobtainable (unless *d'occasion*), and students cannot go to the bookshop and buy their copies of the required texts in any form—texts that should be widely possessed and generally accessible.

<sup>1</sup> E.g. the essay 'Civilization' in Volume I should be read.

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This present volume represents an ambition to make Mill's *Bentham* and *Coleridge* current classics for the literary student. But there was more to the actual operative purpose that moved me than this suggests, and 'for the literary student' doesn't, without some explaining, really convey my intention. And in the explaining I have to avow that, essentially, I have been concerned to take a propagandist opportunity. I have been concerned to do something more by way of promoting that particular approach to the problem of liberal education which I outlined in *Education and the University*. I contend there that while, on the one hand, if the study of literature is to play its central part it must be informed and governed by a more athletic conception of criticism as a discipline of intelligence than it commonly is, on the other a serious study of literature inevitably leads outwards into other studies and disciplines, into fields not primarily literary, and that the problem of liberal education at the university level, particular discipline being duly provided for, is to exploit this outward-leading to the best advantage. A liberal education cannot confine itself to the critical study of literature, and the profit of a real literary training will show itself very largely in other-than-literary fields. It is with the means of cultivating and relating these fields that a serious attempt to grapple with the problem must be very largely preoccupied.

This insistence on extra-literary studies may seem superfluous, the need being recognized in time-honoured and universal academic practice. My point is that my preoccupation with vindicating the study of literature as—what it so rarely is—a real discipline (and one without which there can be no real liberal education) carries with it, in the nature of things,

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a more exacting preoccupation with extra-literary studies than academic practice anywhere bears witness to. In the English Tripos, for instance, with which my own work has been associated, the 'period' papers which the candidate has to take are headed *Literature, Life and Thought*. But no one should suppose from this that candidates for the English Tripos will have been guided through courses of work planned in the interests of an extended and unified understanding of any period or any part of it—or anything at all. It means merely that, if an odd candidate, in picking, after a study of back papers, the minimum safe number of topics on which to acquire so much knowledge as will show to advantage in a half-hour's to an hour's unloading, decides in favour of one coming under 'Life and Thought', he can count, if he is judicious and moderately lucky, on finding his opportunity. It will be a very unusual and fortunate student who has the grasp, the energy and the character to make it anything else. Most will not even glimpse what else it might and should be.

And if we ask how anything better is to be arrived at, the answer is that nothing substantially better can, under a system that for guidance leaves the student, for the most part, to lectures, and reckons to test his quality by an end-of-course stand-and-deliver against the clock. Study under such a system inevitably tends to be an acquiring and arranging of cliché-material. The academic authorities believing in such a system will tend to take as their first-class man a type that may be described as the complete walking cliché—the man (it's often a woman) who unloads with such confident and accomplished ease in the examination-room because he has never really grappled with anything,

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and is uninhibited by any inkling of the difference between the retailing of his amassed externalities and the effort to think something out into a grasped and unified order that he has made his own. Those who like this type will recruit themselves from it, and will inevitably tend to dislike, and to undervalue as a student, the man who makes them uncomfortable by implicitly challenging their standards, their competence and their self-esteem: the system is disastrous and self-perpetuating. So the 'academic mind' comes to deserve its depressing reputation.

I have suggested in *Education and the University* what, in an 'English School' that is really designed to promote the development of mature, energetic and creative minds, will replace the reliance on lectures and examinations. I am not proposing to recapitulate here my account of the methods of study-group, organized discussion and 'pieces of work' that seem to me, in their general lines, necessary conditions of any promising attack on the problem. But—and that is why I refer to my account of them—assumed by me as the right or ideal conditions, they are there as an implicit context in the suggestions I make below. Not that I think that except where these ideal conditions obtain nothing is worth attempting. Opportunities far from ideal are worth making the most of, and it is out of experience of such that my suggestions come. Whenever, for instance (it is a good one for demonstrative purposes), one is faced with directing, as part of a much wider 'English' course, a study of the Victorian age, one can profitably ask oneself how such a study can be best approached and best organized. What are the likeliest lines for promoting, not the usual ready and confident superficiality of the 'good student', but that

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conscious and intelligent incompleteness which carries with it the principle of growth; not the canny amassing of inert material for the examination-room, but the organization that represents a measure of real understanding, and seeks of its very nature to extend and complete itself?

The opportunity I was endeavouring to make the most of when I thought of these two essays of Mill's, and of the reasons for making them more accessible, was a paper on George Eliot and her setting instituted for Part II of the English Tripos. A paper for Part II, the student being relatively mature, with a good deal of reading behind him, and some measure of real study in the given field being presumably expected by the examiners, affords a better opportunity than any 'Life and Thought' licence in Part I—opportunity for experiment that may nevertheless have bearings on work in less favourable conditions. 'Setting', presumably, meant something more than the immediate intellectual and cultural environment as given in the books on George Eliot; an environment that, if it is to be worth serious study, must be related to a much wider context: in fact, we seemed committed to a pretty general study of the Victorian background and (to change the metaphor) to attempting some sort of charting of the main currents.

In helping students to tackle such an enterprise one looks for the approach that promises to educe most readily the lines of significant organization—the main lines on which most things in the whole complex field can be most significantly related. Such help is peculiarly necessary where the Victorian age is concerned. The student is very unlikely to have brought any very useful notions of how to proceed from his earlier

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literary studies. A man who has taken Part I of the English Tripos will know something of Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Newman, Macaulay and other representative figures, but (and this seems to me a damning comment on the system) unless he is very exceptional he will not know how to push further in pursuit of an ordered understanding without a prohibitive waste of time and energy. And—as, in my experience, the keenest and most competent searchers have verified—you may go through (say) Oliver Elton's *Survey of English Literature 1830–1880* without acquiring any better notion of how to deepen, extend and organize into real knowledge and understanding your smatterings and adumbrations.

It isn't, then, very helpful to suggest to your students that they should for a start, with the help of Elton's *Survey* and Trevelyan's *British History in the Nineteenth Century*, sketch a rough chart of the field, marking the main features and outlining the main currents. They need more specific suggestions if they are to get their bearings in the age and establish their axes of reference. And surely the first obvious suggestion is that, of all the Victorian figures they are already acquainted with, Matthew Arnold, because of the peculiar quality of his intelligence and the peculiar nature of his relation to his time, will repay special study in a way no others will; a suggestion to which the extremely useful book on him by Mr. Lionel Trilling,<sup>1</sup> lying to hand, gives the greater force. But something further is needed, a complementary focal line, and here it is that Mill presents himself as meeting the case ideally.

In the first place, of course, it is his 'Bentham' and

<sup>1</sup> *Matthew Arnold*, by Lionel Trilling (Allen & Unwin).

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his 'Coleridge' that propose themselves: once they are thought of, their due status as key documents is indisputable. To begin with, the two subjects are the key figures that Mill so convincingly exhibits them as being. The essays are devoted to justifying the attribution of significance that he makes in the earlier of them, that on Bentham (1838):

'There are two men, recently deceased, to whom their country is indebted not only for the greater part of the important ideas which have been thrown into circulation among its thinking men in their time, but for a revolution in its general modes of thought and investigation . . . The writers of whom we speak have never been read by the multitude; except for the more slight of their works, their readers have been few: but they have been the teachers of the teachers; there is hardly to be found in England an individual of any importance in the world of mind, who (whatever opinions he may have afterwards adopted) did not first learn to think from one of these two; and though their influences have but begun to diffuse themselves through these intermediate channels over society at large, there is already scarcely a publication of any consequence addressed to the educated classes, which, if these persons had not existed, would not have been different from what it is. These men are, Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—the two great seminal minds of England in their age.'

But Bentham and Coleridge are not only, in actual history, the key and complementary powers by reference to which we can organize into significance so much of the field to be charted; even if they had had no great influence they would still have been the classical examples they are of two great opposing types of mind:

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‘It is hardly possible to speak of Coleridge, and his position among his contemporaries, without reverting to Bentham: they are connected by two of the closest bonds of association—resemblance and contrast. It would be difficult to find two persons of philosophic eminence more exactly the contrary of one another. Compare their modes of treatment of any subject, and you might fancy them inhabitants of different worlds. They seem to have scarcely a principle or a premise in common. Each of them sees scarcely anything but what the other does not see. Bentham would have regarded Coleridge with a peculiar measure of the good-humoured contempt with which he was accustomed to regard all modes of philosophizing different from his own. Coleridge would probably have made Bentham one of the exceptions to the enlarged and liberal appreciation which (to the credit of *his* mode of philosophizing) he extended to most thinkers of any eminence, from whom he differed.’

And as we follow Mill’s analysis, exposition and evaluation of this pair of opposites we are at the same time, we realize, forming a close acquaintance with a mind different from either—the mind that appreciates both and sees them as both necessary, generalizing the necessity in these terms:

‘For among the truths long recognized by Continental philosophers, but which very few Englishmen have yet arrived at, one is, the importance, in the present imperfect state of mental and social science, of antagonistic modes of thought: which, it will one day be felt, are as necessary to one another in speculation, as mutually checking powers are in a political constitution. A clear insight, indeed, into this necessity is the only rational or enduring basis of philosophical tolerance; the only condition under which liberality in matters of opinion



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can be anything better than a polite synonym for indifference between one opinion and another.'

Mill's is itself, as these essays sufficiently evidence, a very distinguished mind. To read them with close attention is an educative experience. This is true as it is not true, for example, of *Biographia Literaria*, that academic classic which is habitually prescribed for study as an initiating and enlightening document. Mill's essays deserve to be called classical for their intrinsic quality; they are models of method and manner. Coleridge was a genius, but his writings cannot be said to be products of a disciplined mind. Mill's pre-eminently are, and they have an intellectual distinction that is at the same time a distinction of character. And the rigorous training that issues in such apparently easy mastery doesn't mean narrowness or dryness. The desiccating rigours and narrownesses of Mill's own education are, of course, notorious; he describes them himself in the *Autobiography*. But, as the describing shows, he derived from them a kind of profit that had not entered into the intention behind them, so that when he defines Bentham's limitations his phrases represent something more than the 'vague generalities' of vaguely general recognition:

'Nobody's synthesis can be more complete than his analysis. If in his survey of human nature and life he has left any element out, then, wheresoever that element exerts any influence, his conclusions will fail, more or less, in their application.'

'He had a phrase, expressive of the view he took of all moral speculations to which his method had not been applied, or (which he considered the same thing) not founded on a recognition of utility as the moral standard;

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this phrase was “vague generalities.” Whatever presented itself to him in such a shape he dismissed as unworthy of notice, or dwelt upon only to denounce as absurd. He did not heed, or rather the nature of his mind prevented it from occurring to him, that these generalities contained the whole unanalysed experience of the human race.’

‘In many of the most natural and strongest feelings of human nature he had no sympathy; from many of its graver experiences he was altogether cut off; and the faculty by which one mind understands a mind different from itself, and throws itself into the feelings of that other mind, was denied him by his deficiency of Imagination.’

‘How much of human nature slumbered in him he knew not, neither can we know. He had never been made alive to the unseen influences which were acting on himself, nor consequently on his fellow-creatures . . . Knowing so little of human feelings, he knew still less of the influences by which those feelings are formed: all the more subtle workings, both of the mind upon itself, and of external things upon the mind, escaped him; and no one, probably, who, in a highly instructed age, ever attempted to give a rule to all human conduct, set out with a more limited conception either of the agencies by which human conduct *is*, or of those by which it *should* be, influenced.’

Mill, then, for all the restrictive rigours of his father’s educational experiment shows that he has a sensitive intelligence, informed by introspective subtlety, wide perceptions and a lively historical sense. The pupil of James Mill, and the self-styled Utilitarian, can write the classical appreciation of Coleridge and of the kind