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# *Poetry and the Mystique of the Self in John Stuart Mill: Sources of Libertarian Socialism*

**William D. Gairdner**

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) is typically considered a carefully argued treatise on freedom delivered in the cool language of a political philosopher. But a close reading produces a surprisingly different view of a manifesto aiming, among other things, to incorporate into the moral and political discourse of the West a Romantic ideal of the spontaneous and authentically feeling Self.<sup>1</sup> It was an ideal that Mill adopted from the theory and practice of Romantic poetry, especially that of William Wordsworth, and to which he began at once adapting his political theories concerning liberty and the individual.

It is well known that in addition to Mill's lifelong interest in liberty he had a growing commitment to ideas of "ultimate improvement" that he said "went far beyond Democracy," and would class him and Harriet Taylor, his wife, "decidedly under the general designation of Socialists."<sup>2</sup> In this respect, scholars such as Linda Raeder have made the case that what she describes as Mill's "lingering," or "apparent," or "putative" commitment to classical liberalism and individualism was, in a final assessment of

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<sup>1</sup> The word "Self" is capitalized throughout the text whenever it indicates the special meaning and significance it had for Mill as an ideal.

<sup>2</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 175.

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his work, overshadowed by his collectivist "religion of humanity."<sup>3</sup> In showing the special influence of romantic poetry on Mill's *On Liberty* the argument of this article runs parallel to, and may ultimately be compatible with, Raeder's case for Mill's special form of collectivism. It was a form inspired in part by Comte, which came very close to what Irving Babbitt called "sentimental humanitarianism," and both aspects—the poetic and the collectivist—illustrate Mill's strong attraction to the romantic sensibility. However, while Raeder emphasizes the collectivist aspect, this article draws attention to an individualist aspect that is equally important and that in this writer's view was a necessary condition for the special form of collectivism he favored. The result in Mill is a seemingly odd but historically influential hybrid that I will here call "libertarian socialism." My interest, then, is not in demonstrating whether the "true" Mill was in theory two parts libertarian and three parts socialist or the reverse. Rather, I am concerned mostly with the practical influence of his "liberty legacy," so to speak, for I believe his interest in liberty was lifelong and far more than lingering, and that his arguments defending liberty continue to do profound social damage for reasons it is the chief burden of this article to explain.

Case for  
liberty not  
grounded in  
reason.

The first objective, then, is to show that Mill's case for the absolute importance of liberty, which has almost iconic status today as indisputable rational truth, is not in fact grounded in reason but in a Romantic theory of poetry that is visible everywhere in his theory of liberty. As a corollary of this point I try to explain how the Romantic mystique of the Self onto which he fastened influenced his brand of collectivism and why it was quite different from that of continental thinkers like Rousseau (to be discussed at the end of this article). And last, I speculate that our modern democracies have found a way to live quite comfortably with a blend of Millian

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<sup>3</sup> Raeder presents convincing evidence that Mill's *On Liberty* was intended to further a "dual purpose—to eradicate the 'poisonous root' of theological belief and so prepare for the growth and establishment of the Religion of Humanity and the new moral order it embodied." *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 235. For a shorter account of Raeder's position, see her article "Mill's Religion of Humanity: Consequences and Implications," *Humanitas*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, 2001. I would only add to Raeder's wide-ranging and impressive assessment of Mill's purposes the point that the "new moral order" Mill was seeking could be moral only because it was to be grounded in the (for him) new Romantic ideal of the spontaneous Self. From this fact his complementary interest in organizing the larger society could then flow. In other words, the first order of business was to free the individual, then to organize society.

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individualism and collectivism that are only superficially irreconcilable.

As a young boy Mill suffered the most thoroughgoing and coldly rational home-schooling imaginable at the hands of his own father, whose Utilitarian philosophy—taken from friend Jeremy Bentham and resting on a quantitative ideal of “happiness” as the greatest good of the greatest number—was imbued in Mill at a very young age. Eventually, he was drawn to its simplicity so strongly that he considered it “a creed, a doctrine, a philosophy; in one among the best senses of the word, a religion.”<sup>4</sup> In retrospect, it seems that for his entire life Mill was prone to think of whatever new intellectual passion was gripping him at the time as “a religion,” by which he loosely meant a belief system that provided him with foundational intellectual axioms. At any rate, he dutifully worshipped at the utilitarian altar until, in 1826, at the age of twenty, the contradictions inherent in such an impoverished moral dogma fell upon him like a pall, with the realization that some forms of happiness are simply morally higher and more valuable than others. He famously summarized the dilemma this presented when he said that “it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they know only their own side of the question.”<sup>5</sup>

*Utilitarianism imbued in Mill at young age.*

His realization that human happiness is more about qualities than quantities, and is also more a by-product of right living than an object in itself, caused Mill to fall into a dark depression from which for almost two years there seemed to be no exit. Then, in search of solace, he happened upon Marmontel’s *Memoirs*. He was moved to tears, and suddenly “the oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me, was gone. I was no longer hopeless. I was not a stock or a stone.”<sup>6</sup> But the main source of new life for him, in the autumn of 1828, was the discovery of William Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems first published in 1798 and republished in 1815 along with a theoretical Preface defending the role of emotion in Romantic poetry as against the

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<sup>4</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, 68. It is interesting how Mill conflates religion and philosophy here, for to call a philosophy “a religion” is actually one of the worst senses of the word

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Thomas Woods, *Poetry and Philosophy: A Study in the Thought of John Stuart Mill* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1961), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 117.

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then prevalent rational standards of neo-classical poetry.<sup>7</sup> It was his newly discovered feelings in contact with poems such as *The Prelude* that affected Mill like a sudden spiritual revelation, leading to novel personal insights and deeper emotions than he had ever known. As he read: "Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child, / In a small mill-race severed from his stream, / Made one long bathing of a summer's day; / Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked again / Alternate, all a summer's day, or scoured / The sandy fields, leaping through flowery groves," he rejoiced sympathetically in the boyhood joys that Wordsworth had so deliciously experienced, even as he mourned a youth of which he clearly had been deprived, for "I was never a boy," he told a friend, and "never played at cricket," which led him to say sadly that his life until then had been artificial, and to conclude that "it is better to let Nature have her way."<sup>8</sup> And it was surely lines such as the last two of his favorite poem, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* ("To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."), that so powerfully shaped his emerging persuasion as to the superiority of poetic feeling and insight to rational argument. This privileging of feeling over reason and emotional insight over logic became a new foundation in Mill's life that may fairly be described as mystical. As Wordsworth had put it in a memorable phrase that became a banner slogan for Romantic poetry, its source was not clear dogma, not organized religion, and not reasoned argument, but "*the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility*"<sup>9</sup> (emphasis added).

*Fusion of rationalism and Romanticism accounts for On Liberty's special appeal.*

Much of the story I want to tell, then, is about the striking way in which Mill began changing his life in the name of his new-found interest in Romantic poetry and theory and especially how the Romantic conception of the Self became fused with his political thought as expressed in *On Liberty*. Moreover, it is likely the fusion of underlying Romantic thought with Mill's ostensibly rational argumentation that has made this book so appealing to an age

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<sup>7</sup> William Blake had summed up the animus against tradition and classical thought when he wrote in a marginal note, "To Generalize, is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit."

<sup>8</sup> Woods, *Poetry and Philosophy*, 52. The friend was Caroline Fox.

<sup>9</sup> See William Wordsworth, Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, in David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1967). These famous lines are on p. 328.

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longing for more personal and democratic freedom. At any rate, *On Liberty* quickly became a kind of freedom bible, a touchstone for the anti-statist “classical liberal” movement of the century. As that movement betrayed its origins, however, slowly transforming into our modern form of liberalism promoting enormous managerial welfare states (for which, ironically, Mill was also in part responsible), his book was adopted anew by conservatives and libertarians eager to continue the campaign against encroaching state power that their liberal brethren had abandoned. Indeed, as historian Gertrude Himmelfarb put it, Mill’s little book soon became “the classic text of radicalism . . . carrying out . . . the goal of true liberation. It is, in short, something of an icon of modernity, giving intellectual authority and legitimacy to ideas and attitudes that dominate our society.”<sup>10</sup> Even more, *On Liberty* soon took on a peculiar life of its own, and although it “was radical enough in its own time . . . it is, in a sense, more radical in ours, because it seems to validate contemporary ideas about liberty which go well beyond what Mill intended.”<sup>11</sup> One reason so many readers of that book continue to go beyond what Mill intended is that they eagerly embrace the dogmatic first part promoting personal liberty and the privatization of morality, but as resolutely ignore or simply do not bother to read the conflicted and contradictory latter parts in which Mill presents a host of strict limitations on his own first principles and proposes quite a bit of socialist legislation and various other forms of government control. This makes it rather ironic that the existing and self-contradictory condition of public political philosophy in most of the Western democracies—the “libertarian socialism” of which I speak—may be seen as a reflection of the same conflicting strands in Mill himself, for in many respects, at least in English-speaking countries, he has been the default enunciator of both trends.<sup>12</sup>

*Libertarian  
socialism  
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conflicting  
strands  
in Mill’s  
thought.*

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<sup>10</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Liberty: ‘One Very Simple Principle’?” in *On Looking Into The Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 75.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>12</sup> This heady combination of irreconcilables should not surprise, however, for notwithstanding the breadth, significance, and earnestness of Mill’s prodigious intellectual legacy, his contradictory positions have always attracted comment. In an amusing image, the historian of ideas Professor Basil Willey wrote that “It is the misfortune of Mill that he is continually being hit by the boomerang of his own ideas,” and Karl Marx complained that “Mill never says anything without immediately saying its opposite.” Both comments are cited, unreferenced, in Woods, *Poetry*

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Mill's philosophical legacy concerning freedom, however, departed even from the liberal traditions of his own time. Then, ordinary liberal thinkers rightly warned against state coercion, interference, and undue regulation because they wanted individuals to be free to form themselves spontaneously into strong self-governing civil associations as a bulwark against state power. But in *On Liberty* Mill was not arguing merely for the freedom of individuals from undue government power and bad law, but freedom from "compulsion and control, *whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties or the moral coercion of public opinion.*"<sup>13</sup> That a philosopher would call the effect of any moral standard "coercion" is itself unphilosophical. But it is clear that he wanted freedom both from certain laws (coercive powers of government) and from certain societal and moral restraints (non-coercive forms of social opinion) of which he happened personally to disapprove. With strategic intent he continued to conflate the two, and in so doing he pushed the ideal of freedom too far.

### **Moral Bubbles**

Community  
moral  
standards  
subordinated  
to will of  
imperious  
individuals.

Long before Mill, the ideal of a common good freely formed in civil society was rooted in the understanding that human communities thrive, metaphorically speaking, under a common moral bubble where shared standards of behavior are sustained through a combination of conviction and debate. But Mill proposed something shockingly new and radical: that we ought to subordinate the common moral bubble to the primacy of our private individual moral bubbles, and this has largely become our modern view. It was a temptation that easily flattered the emerging modern ego and eventually led to the confusing political notion of individual (as distinct from communal) democratic rights. For this writer at least, Mill stands as the principal intellectual responsible for promoting the historically bizarre idea of subordinating community moral standards to the will of imperious individuals.

For we tend to forget, until reminded, that Mill's definition of radical liberty defied all precedent. None of his famous liberal predecessors had ever imagined the sort of extreme privatization of freedom and morality that *On Liberty* has by now made a cen-

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*and Philosophy*, 45, and 68, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), 68 (emphasis added).

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terpiece of Western civilization and of democratic regimes. For example, Spinoza advocated liberty of speech but “not out of anger, hatred, or a desire to introduce any change in the state on his own authority”; Locke called for liberty but “not for opinions contrary to human society, or to those moral rules which are necessary to the preservation of civil society”; Montesquieu spoke for a limited liberty to do “what we ought to will”; and Kant called for liberty of speech, but not of action. And the two key American liberals, Jefferson and Paine, pushed for liberty of the individual against government, certainly, but not against “public opinion” or “society,” while the great Tocqueville famously called for liberty, but “not without morality, nor morality without faith.”<sup>14</sup>

*Extreme privatization of freedom and morality defied all precedent.*

If these political and moral philosophers wanted democracy at all, it was always what might be called a democracy of the whole people, for they certainly never imagined a separation between thoughtful democratic opinion and common moral opinion. So what was Mill up to? He was resuscitating and legitimizing a very old antinomian urge—a gnostic urge that I will argue is resident in Romantic theory—to repudiate social expectations and the moral law outside us in favor of self-knowledge and a personally constructed moral law within. It is not an original observation to point out that most civilizations, even if briefly tempted, have considered this an impoverished idea simply because it is obvious that no man is an island and that most of our actions inevitably affect others and therefore the quality and ends of society, whether we wish them to do so or not. In his wide-ranging book *Freedom*, Orlando Patterson shows how for many traditional civilizations, ancient and modern, our current ideal of *freedom as autonomy* would have been viewed as a kind of ostracism, or “social death,” and that what people in every previous society in history have yearned for is something quite the opposite. They wanted freedom as inclusion in a moral community with full and active participation in its common rights, strictures, and obligations. That is why the worst punishment for the ancients was not imprisonment—a very modern idea—but ostracism or banishment. Personal freedom as radical autonomy had no place in such societies because what most humans crave is social acceptance and approval, “the condition of the complete insider.” The mere idea of being refused, or of repudiating all normal social and moral obligation, “far from

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<sup>14</sup> Himmelfarb, “Liberty,” 81.

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being a desired state, was equated with one of the saddest conditions known to human beings—that of being deprived of one’s parents.” Personal freedom and autonomy of the sort we have been vaunting has heretofore always been seen as a frightening social emptiness and loneliness, even “a despised value.”<sup>15</sup>

Mill’s “harm principle” is possible only “when society is at an end.”

Mill’s radicalism was famously summed up in what he called his “very simple principle,” which is that the only grounds for interfering with another’s liberty of action is self-protection, and that “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”<sup>16</sup> This is called his “harm principle,” and although it was well-known at the time due to the revolutionary French *Declaration* of 1789, it was the first time in England it had received such an extensive philosophical defense, though not without criticism.<sup>17</sup> James Stephen, a contemporary critic, aptly skewered Mill’s harm principle as sloppy thinking when he mocked it as the principle of “let every man please himself without hurting his neighbour.”<sup>18</sup> He correctly observed that, in practice, such a principle would destroy all systems of religion and morals, the whole point of which is precisely to interfere with and restrain liberty for the good of individuals as well as of the community. For freedom, Stephen argued, is neither good nor bad. It is an instrument. Like fire, its value depends on its use. Fire can heat your supper or burn down your house. Humans, he wrote, are “like a pack of hounds all coupled together and wanting to go different ways,” and it is only the restraint of morality that keeps them running in the same path. But “Mr. Mill would like each to take his own way.” He observed wisely that the complete moral tolerance Mill was urging “is possible only when men have become completely indifferent to each other—that is to say, when society is at an end.”<sup>19</sup>

At any rate, Mill’s very personal and yet absolutist formula for

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<sup>15</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Freedom* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 34ff.

<sup>16</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 68. By the word “others” Mill seems to mean other individuals, not society as a whole.

<sup>17</sup> It is very likely that Mill lifted it from Article 4 of the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of 1789, which states that “liberty consists in being able to do anything that does not injure another.”

<sup>18</sup> James Fitzjames Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1993; first published 1874), 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.



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individual liberty set both modern liberalism and democracy on a new course by promoting the dissolution of the common moral bubble—that unchosen primordial bond of felt moral duty and obligation between individuals and the greater good of society—and left in its place a myriad of jostling self-chosen individual bubbles. This is a widespread and deepening process still worming its way through all Western democracies, where his harm principle is taught as a foundational democratic principle in schools, by media, and even through Supreme Court judgments in countries like Canada, where it has replaced the ancient notion of “community standards” as a test of moral behavior in that nation’s highest law.<sup>20</sup> This is despite the obvious fact that in order to have functioning societies at all the only possible and workable line dividing private from public behavior must be drawn by the moral communities in which we live, and not by mere individuals. The idea that each individual creates a community’s moral code is as absurd as the idea that individuals privately create or control the rules of grammar for human languages. But because Mill saw so much of public

*Canada’s  
Supreme Court  
replaces  
“community  
standards”  
with Mill’s  
“harm  
principle.”*

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<sup>20</sup> No sharper indication of Mill’s libertarian influence in high places could be had than the decision of Canada’s Supreme Court on December 21, 2005, in “*Swingers Clubs*” *R. v. Labaye*. This was a case in which neighbors complained that a swingers’ and group-sex club on their street offended community standards of moral decency. The court ruled in favor of the club owner, and held that the ancient “community standards” test would henceforth be replaced by Mill’s principle of “harm.” The relevant section of the case cites the authority of Mill’s harm principle, at Section 105: “The philosophical underpinnings of the majority’s harm-based approach are found in the liberal theories of J. S. Mill. This philosopher argued that the only purpose for which state power can be rightfully exercised over a member of the community is to prevent harm to others: see J. S. Mill, *On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government*, at p. 8.”

And here is a relevant section of the dissenting opinion:

*Per Bastarache and LeBel JJ. (dissenting):* “The application of the appropriate test leads to the conclusion that the impugned acts were indecent and that the accused’s establishment was a common bawdy-house within the meaning of s.210(1) of the *Criminal Code*. [76] The new approach to indecency proposed by the majority is neither desirable nor workable. Not only does it constitute an unwarranted break with the most important principles of our past decisions regarding indecency, *but it also replaces the community standard of tolerance with a harm-based test*. Whether or not serious social harm is sustained has never been the determinative test for indecency . . . . This new harm-based approach also strips of all relevance the social values that the Canadian community as a whole believes should be protected. The existence of harm is not a prerequisite for exercising the state’s power to criminalize certain conduct: the existence of fundamental social and ethical considerations is sufficient” (emphasis added).

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opinion as “a social tyranny” and as “enslaving the soul itself”<sup>21</sup> (such phrases allude to the Gnostic theme mentioned above), he was desperate to disarm the power of public opinion or lose his case for the spontaneous Self as a starting point for the social progress of which he dreamed. For Mill did not want knee-jerk moral automatons to populate his libertarian-socialist dreamland; he wanted freely choosing individuals engaged in “human development in its richest diversity” (a phrase from one of his intellectual mentors, Wilhelm von Humboldt, that he printed on the flyleaf of *On Liberty*). This remained his goal, even though he continued to entertain increasingly coercive ideas for pushing people in this direction through “education” and various social and economic incentives and policies. Mill wanted them free to flourish, and he and his kind would direct the flourishing, though he credits his wife for softening this coercive bent in his character, adding that but for her influence “I might easily have fallen into a tendency toward over-government, both social and political.”<sup>22</sup>

### *Romantic Poetry and the Mystique of the Self*

After Mill discovered Romantic poetry he decided to abandon the “mere reasoning machine” that was his old self—the Benthamite, “void of feeling,” that he had become<sup>23</sup>—and he emerged from this period a changed man. He happily attributed these “new tendencies” to his growing love of emotion and feeling, and described this change as “the only actual revolution” ever to take place in his thinking.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence he risked a great deal of unpopularity in the intellectual community, to the extent that his friend John Morley recalled, many years afterward, that “Mill’s radical friends used to get very angry with him for loving Wordsworth.” Another commented sarcastically that Mill had made great progress in becoming a German metaphysical mystic, and Sir John Bowring, the arch-priest of Benthamism, spoke of Mill to their mutual friend Caroline Fox “with evident contempt, as a renegade from philosophy.” Fox wrote in her diary that Mill “was emphatically a philosopher, and then he read Wordsworth, and that muddled him, and he has been in a strange confusion ever since, endeavouring to unite

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<sup>21</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 63.

<sup>22</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 189.

<sup>23</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 123.

<sup>24</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 149.

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poetry and philosophy.”<sup>25</sup> (This, I maintain, was what he later attempted to do in *On Liberty*.)

At any rate, after 1828 Mill took a telling step and “disengaged himself from [his utilitarian] associates,” who like him were contributors to the *Westminster* journal, and entered a new circle of writers associated with the *Monthly Repository*, a journal owned by James Fox, Caroline’s husband.<sup>26</sup> It was during visits to the Fox home between 1830 and 1833 that he made many new friends with serious literary interests, including Harriet Taylor, with whom he developed far more than an ordinary friendship and who, after her husband died, became his wife in 1851. It was to her he said was due all credit for his expansive love of poetry, painting, and sculpture, and he wrote in a first draft of his *Autobiography* that during his relationship with her his faculties “became more and more attuned to the beautiful & elevated, in all kinds, & especially in human feeling & character and *more capable of vibrating in unison with it*.”<sup>27</sup> It was not long before Mill began to think of ordinary logic and reasoning as a clumsy way to explore the deepest truths of existence, and he yearned “to make those who are not poets understand that poetry is higher than logic, and that the union of the two is philosophy.”<sup>28</sup> As this inner process deepened he began to feel alienated from English thinkers because most of them, like his friend Roebuck, regarded the sort of feeling that Mill was now cherishing as but “a necessary evil” that gets in the way of the truth. Without much success, he tried to urge on Roebuck the specifically Wordsworthian idea that imaginative emotion, excited by an idea, “is not an illusion but a fact, as real as any of the other qualities of objects.”<sup>29</sup> It was this belief that emotion is like a substance that characterized him as a mystic in the eyes of many.<sup>30</sup>

For Mill,  
“poetry is  
higher than  
logic, and  
... the union  
of the two is  
philosophy.”

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<sup>25</sup> Woods, *Poetry and Philosophy*, 49. All the criticisms of Mill cited in this paragraph are found here.

<sup>26</sup> F. Parvin Sharpless, ed., *Essays on Poetry by John Stuart Mill* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Sharpless, *Essays*, 4 (emphasis added).

<sup>28</sup> From a letter to Thomas Carlyle, cited in Woods, *Poetry and Philosophy*, 65.

<sup>29</sup> See Mill, *Autobiography*, 123, for this remark, and also the preceding comment about the evil of feelings.

<sup>30</sup> Mill’s emphasis on emotion as a real substance in the mind came from the latter part of Wordsworth’s famous “emotion recollected in tranquility” theme (note 9, above), where Wordsworth explains the mechanics of how “the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of re-action, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is

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In the end, Harriet was the only one he counted on to understand his new way of being, and he was so deeply struck by her many qualities and sympathies (by his account she seems to have been entirely faultless) and so profoundly influenced by her views of poetry and radical politics that a close collaboration began during which the two worked out the ideas for *On Liberty*. When it was finished he declared that “the *Liberty* was more directly and literally our joint production than anything else which bears my name,” that “the whole mode of thinking of which the book was the expression is emphatically hers,” and that “the *Liberty* is likely to survive longer than anything else that I have written.”<sup>31</sup> The case to be made now is that it was Mill the vibrating Romantic mystic, more than Mill the rationalist, who was so radically to influence the libertarian strand of political philosophy in Western civilization, and then to suggest how this nourished the concept of libertarian socialism under which we now live.

In modern literary criticism we often encounter two recurring and useful metaphors taken from a famous book entitled *The Mirror and the Lamp*, which deals with the vast cultural shift in Western civilization from the Classical period (the mirror) to the Romantic period (the lamp).<sup>32</sup> This was a cultural and aesthetic shift that was morally and politically tumultuous during the period from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, the profound effects of which linger still. In this couplet, the mirror signifies that reality, the truth, lies outside us, to be discovered through soul-work and insight, and then *reflected* in life and art. The lamp implies the opposite, the conviction that, although the material world is obviously where our sense impressions begin, it is we who then create a personal “reality” with the burning lamp of imagination. Mill became so fascinated by this Romantic conception of truth as something sourced in the free and feeling Self (and not in public opinion or in religion) that he made it the new creed for his evolving moral and political theory, and this conception was to radically affect the modern concept of freedom and democracy.

Prior to Mill, the English post-Reformation understanding

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gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind” (emphasis added).

<sup>31</sup> Mill, *Autobiography*, 188-89.

<sup>32</sup> Myer Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1958).

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of freedom (and of democracy) had in a sense already successfully relocated sovereignty and moral authority from the sovereign Monarch (or from the sovereign State) above, to society below. But Mill's redefinition went further by pushing the locus of sovereignty, so to speak, and therefore of freedom and moral authority, from society above to the individual below. It was at this very point in our history that freedom began its modern life as yet another form of absolutism, for Mill declared that his new "very simple principle" of freedom should "govern absolutely" the affairs of men, and that freedom, as he defined it "is, of right, absolute."<sup>33</sup>

*Freedom now  
another form  
of absolutism.*

It was in 1833, fully twenty-six years prior to the appearance of *On Liberty*, that Mill published two theoretical essays on poetry that are little known today, entitled "What is Poetry?" and "The Two Kinds of Poetry."<sup>34</sup> A strong support for the contention that he continued for the rest of his life to believe in the Romantic mystique of the Self explored here, and even stronger evidence for the proximity of his poetic and political theory, is the fact that both essays were republished in 1859, the very same year as *On Liberty* appeared. As the editor of the republished version points out, "Mill's willingness to reprint these essays at a time when his name was much more widely known testifies to the importance Mill attributed to them, and the absence of major revisions suggests a consistency in his views on these matters."<sup>35</sup> As critiques of poetry the essays are unoriginal and blemished by enthusiastic overstatement. But they were only ostensibly about poetry. Their deeper purpose was to lay a new moral foundation for the libertarian ideals he was now justifying with Romantic theory. He was now speaking as a confirmed bearer of the lamp and a convinced mystic of the Self, and this is exactly what Carlyle had acidly called him when these essays first appeared.<sup>36</sup> Confirmation of this turn came also from Mill's friend and biographer Alexander Bain, who wrote with some astonishment that after Mill surrendered his religion of Utilitarianism, he now "seemed to look on Poetry as a Religion, or rather as

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<sup>33</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 68-69.

<sup>34</sup> See Sharpless, *Essays*. This small book contains the two theoretical essays mentioned above and also essays on Browning, Tennyson, and Alfred de Vigny.

<sup>35</sup> Sharpless, *Essays*, xix.

<sup>36</sup> On the publication of a few letters on the spirit of the age in the *Examiner* in 1831, Mill was greeted by Thomas Carlyle with: "Here is a new mystic!" This was intended as a flippant criticism, but it was very close to the truth.

Religion and Philosophy in One.”<sup>37</sup> At this point, his theories about the origin of true poetry were falling into conjunction with his new mystical notions about the creative authenticity of the autonomous Self, leading him to protest tirelessly that “whatever crushes individuality is despotism.”<sup>38</sup> Slowly, he was coming to value eccentricity and individuality for their own sakes, and the more so if he could justify these attributes as a social good, as a precondition for social “improvement”—which he came to believe was most often the case.

Let us consider now just a few of the specific ideas about Romantic poetry that so influenced Mill’s concept of the Self, and therefore the political beliefs we have inherited from him. Soon after his conversion to Romanticism he began professing new qualitative concerns for everything cultured, beautiful, and “elevated,” and with such things he soon began, as mentioned, to feel himself “vibrating in unison.” It was a capacity for vibration that lasted the rest of his life, for after Harriet’s premature death, when he retired to their cottage in Avignon, his stepdaughter Helen had a “vibratory” built especially for Mill, an enclosed walk where, he wrote to a friend, “I can vibrate in cold or rainy weather.”<sup>39</sup> At any rate, poetry was Mill’s new touchstone, and he felt no shyness in defining it vaguely as “the expression or uttering forth of feeling”<sup>40</sup> or, even more tellingly, as “the delineation of the deeper and *more secret workings* of the human heart,” finally affirming bluntly—and without the embarrassment we might expect over such a strange announcement from a philosopher—that “poetry . . . is truth.” Here we sense the pincers action of his mind as he lays the groundwork to persuade us (contrary to all traditional religious and moral teaching) that truth is not eternal and external to ourselves, but rather something

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<sup>37</sup> Abrams, *Mirror*, 335.

<sup>38</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 128.

<sup>39</sup> This charming fact is described in the famous Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, under the entry for “Mill, John Stuart,” vol. 18, p. 459.

<sup>40</sup> I have not wanted to irritate readers with a plethora of footnote numbers in the text, and so, unless otherwise noted, all Mill’s words and phrases in quotes describing his theory of poetry are from his two brief theoretical essays on poetry republished in Sharpless, *Essays*, note 27, above, and I have added emphasis in italics where necessary. Note to readers: I have grouped these comments by Mill from both essays according to common themes and the connections I wish to make between them and his political theory, and not in order of appearance in either essay or by date of publication.

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as mysterious and deep as poetry that springs spontaneously from within. The true poet learns by observing . . . *himself*—as a “refined specimen of human nature on which *the laws of human emotion* are written in large characters,” and are understandable “without much study.”<sup>41</sup> But such a poet (he discounts classical poets<sup>42</sup>) is not content merely to feel deeply. He must be “possessed” by, and be “given up” to, deep feelings that he ceases to control, which then “overflow.” This is but Mill’s secular formula for a mystical absorption of the Self, not in any idea, or thing, or in an external God, but in itself. For him, the poet seeks “to stir up the soul by mere sympathy with itself” in feelings “which possess the whole being.” It would be hard to imagine a more acute and specific formula for mystical self-unity. For in the popular Romantic theory he was mouthing, poetry is said to spring almost by compulsion from the creative imagination which, “like God the creator, has its internal source of motion.”<sup>43</sup> What Mill is flirting with here is the old gnostic belief in the indwelling spirit, the persuasion that our relationship with the Divine is direct, personal, private, and above all *unmediated*. Its natural extension is the idea that all enlightened and free human beings, and these only, have a spark of divinity within, or as one critic put it, “each man has his own personal quiddity or essence which awaits discovery.”<sup>44</sup>

All of this suggests that in following the lamp Mill was busy creating new moral and philosophical ideals to justify the eventual political institutions he thought would be necessary to enable *entire societies* to create their own essence. Accordingly, he began promoting *creation* over *imitation*, the realization of an internal *idea* rather than an external *model*, and Romantic feeling over classical rules and form. For him, true poetry is stamped indelibly by individual-

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<sup>41</sup> Of note is that Mill was not talking about innate natural moral law, as would have Aquinas, or Kant, as an *a priori* compass for human behavior, but only about emotions, or feelings.

<sup>42</sup> As Sharpless points out, *Essays*, 13: “It is French Neo-Classicism to which Mill apparently objects; poetry in which form dominates feeling, which is imitative, conventional, ornamental, and therefore, in Mill’s view, insincere.” I add to this that at the time there was also plenty of Neo-classical English poetry around to annoy Mill.

<sup>43</sup> Abrams, *Mirror*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> J. Gray and G. W. Smith, *John Stuart Mill’s “On Liberty”* in *Focus* (London: Routledge, 1991), 206, cited in Cosmas Ekwutosi, *Freedom to do Evil in the Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (Rome: Thesis for the Doctorate of the Pontificio Ateneo Della Santa Croce, 1998), 2.

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Character  
linked to  
feeling, not  
discipline or  
restraint.

ism, just as his liberty ideal (as distinct from his socialist ideal) is stamped so often by ethical autonomy. So much was this true that he next equates “*feeling*” with “*character*,” defining the latter as “but a certain state of feeling grown habitual.” This was perhaps his most radical step, for with it he sought to remove the basis for conventional morality altogether from the definition of character. Traditionally a product of discipline, virtue, and restraint (learned in large part from external example and authority), character was now to be something restricted to, defined by, authentic feeling, which, he was certain, “escapes” from us naturally when we are least aware of it, making us all artists of our own souls, for “who-soever writes out truly any one human feeling, writes poetry.” So, he asks, what *is* poetry? And then he tells us: it is “but the thoughts and words in which *emotion spontaneously embodies itself*”—and this was but Mill’s reworked version of Wordsworth’s slogan cited above. But again, it handily converts emotion into a substance, an active principle of the Self that generates feeling-truth automatically, thus removing the need to distinguish a good from a bad person (for only the good—the free—can have these feelings). It also makes every weepy teenager a poet and removes any standard for distinguishing a good from a bad poem.

Strong  
feeling  
equated  
with  
elevated  
thought.

As if uneasy with such soft emotional adventures, however, he tried to give the theory scientific and logical support by linking spontaneous emotion and the “energy” of deep feeling to the “law of association.” At the time the psychologist Hartley’s theory of the mind—an attempt to explain thinking by the association of ideas—was still very fashionable, the more so because in 1859 Mill was re-editing a book by his own father on this very topic that had given the theory its most definitive statement thirty years prior. “Associationism” was a form of materialist thinking that presented ideas as units, or objects of the mind, governed by laws of association, just as Newton had presented particles of matter governed by laws of physics. The main “law” says that all ideas are generated by association with concepts and feelings, and hence can be traced to direct experience. The *strongest* emotions are supposed to generate the most *authentic* associations between sensuous and spiritual ideas. But he went further in saying that ideas, thoughts, and images exist *only* because of prior feelings, and this supplied him with the equation he needed *linking strong feeling to elevated thought*. His gambit now was to repudiate the existence of transcendent



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*external* natural law, in favor of an *internal* natural law of spontaneous “diversity” in each human being. This supposed internal law bolstered his political preference for moral autonomy and justified the repudiation of everything he considered mere “opinion.” At this point his theory of the Self had the intended effect of ranking all selves for authenticity and excellence by virtue of what he called their emotional “energy.” In other words, once the authentic Self is discovered, more of it is better. More feeling means more energy, which in turn means more natural goodness, not necessarily a goodness fixed by nature but gained through poetic feeling (and then via education, and then socialism, and so on, to utopia). That is why he assures us in *On Liberty* that those who have “most natural feelings are always those whose cultivated feelings may be made the strongest” (3).<sup>45</sup> Strong feeling is now the “raw material of humanity” that Mill wanted cultivated, or “made” by society (through his progressive social theories). This essentially poetic conviction saturates *On Liberty*, where, in a knowing and direct refutation of the classical and Christian metaphor of the soul as master of a slave body, he describes impulses and desires as “the raw material of human nature” (3), arguing that far from our being slaves to our own strong impulses, “there is no natural connection between strong impulses and a weak conscience” (3). Against the wisdom of almost every major thinker of the Western classical and Christian tradition, he insisted that impulses and desires are “as much a part of a *perfect human being*, as beliefs and restraints” (3) (emphasis added). The poetic selves he is musing upon in his essays on poetry are, he says euphorically, most authentic when experiencing feeling that “when excited and not voluntarily resisted, *seizes the helm of their thoughts*, the succession of ideas and images becoming *the mere utterance of an emotion*” (emphasis added). This pure, more or less automatic emotion he finds so beautiful that he protests frequently in *On Liberty* against the inculcations of “ordinary education” and the “ordinary course of life,” for these he believes are constantly at work “repressing” the expression of the authentic Self.

This creates a direct relation between Mill’s theory of poetry

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<sup>45</sup> Again, to save readers more footnotes, when quoting words or phrases from Mill, *On Liberty*, I will hereafter simply place a numeral in parentheses to indicate in which of the five standard sections of this small book the quote is located.

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*In poetry as  
in politics,  
for Mill,  
authority and  
imitation of  
standards are  
to be shunned.*

and his theory of politics in a number of respects.<sup>46</sup> First, he wholly inverts the traditional criteria for judging the verbal arts. High Tragedy and Epic are demoted as alloyed expressions because they rely on imitations of life, on artificialities of plot, and even on lecturing the reader on morality, whereas he elevates the poetry of pure feeling to the very highest rank because it alone expresses the true soul of the poet. In poetry as in politics, authority and imitation of public standards, whether aesthetic or moral, are to be shunned. Spontaneity and feeling are now the sole criteria for judging good poetry and the good man, and just as Rousseau (whose ideas were still in the air at the time) had famously given pride of place to man in an imaginary “state of nature,” Mill gives highest rank to the “poet by nature.” For although the ordinary world may serve as an initial stimulus for the senses, it has little importance in itself because poetry in its purity is all “in the state of mind” and must be true only “to the human emotion.” Here, Mill comfortably severs poetic expression from its origin in the real world by privatizing feeling, just as in politics he severs morality from the ordinary social world by privatizing freedom and choice. The feeling poet creates a private world with words and symbols, as the free political man creates a private moral world with free choices of action. Finally, Mill argues that, for the Romantic poet, the only authentic audience is himself, for poetry is but “feeling confessing itself to itself in solitude,” and “is of the nature of soliloquy.” A poem should not be written for others, any more than a choice of one’s moral actions should be decided or influenced by others.<sup>47</sup> Mill has by now fully equated spontaneity in poetry with ethical autonomy in life and politics.

In arriving at such conclusions, Mill was in a sense directed by his own primary motives, for he had no logical option but to equate authentic natural feeling with truth, simply because if we say man is to be free and also without external moral judgment then we are compelled to argue that goodness, which requires

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<sup>46</sup> For an analysis of the poetic aspects of this relation, see Abrams, *Mirror*, 23-25.

<sup>47</sup> This was the attitude Mill adopted with respect to his own behavior as well. During the twenty years of his frequent visits to Mrs. Taylor in her country home, which excited much talk of impropriety, he says they “did not consider the ordinances of society binding on a subject so entirely personal” (Mill, *Autobiography*, 174). However, the “subject” in the eyes of society was the question of possible adultery, which is hardly “entirely personal.”

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*some* motive, is natural, internal, and spontaneous. Accordingly, and again like Rousseau, Mill had to persist in the corollary belief that (speaking of poetry once again), if by chance impassioned natures do not happen to ripen properly into the most powerful intellects, “it is always from defect of culture, or something wrong in the circumstances” such as “neglect” or “bad education,” which he says is made up of “artificialities and conventionalisms” and “traditional opinions” that are part of the “hostile and dreaded censorship” of society.

By now we are no longer tainted by sin, or enslaved to our own appetites, or obliged to seek truth through difficult soul-work. Rather, the Self has been refashioned as a substance, subject not to self-enslavement, but to enslavement by the moral authority of society. The modern Self he plainly no longer sees as the *source* of deception or tyranny, but as the innocent *victim* of both. For the first time in his life Mill had taken great pains to set up a tragic struggle between Self and society. As Himmelfarb put it, he established “an adversarial relationship, with the individual assigned all the positive, honorific attributes, and society, the negative, pejorative ones.” The Self is invariably described as endowed with liberty, absolute independence, and will, in search of its own good, while society is characterized by compulsion, control, force, interference, and tyranny.<sup>48</sup>

*Enslavement to our own appetites no longer the danger but enslavement to the moral authority of society.*

This resurgence of a qualified gnostic view—that we are (potentially, according to Mill, but for certain if we follow his recipes for social “improvement”) good by nature in a bad world—led Mill straight to his theory of progress as a drive, through the massive education and reform programs he imagined, to make the bad world good.<sup>49</sup> Thus did Rousseau and Mill, each in his own different way, turn the world upside down. We are no longer to change

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<sup>48</sup> Himmelfarb, “Liberty,” 78.

<sup>49</sup> Strictly speaking, Mill’s was not a true Gnosticism, which is always characterized by a *Contemptus Mundi*—a hatred of this world. Rather, it was more a form of secular millenarianism attempting to create the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Mill’s *On Liberty* and his *Autobiography* are both shot through with fervid hope for the “improvement” of mankind through education and enlightened socialist policies. I have argued in *The Trouble With Democracy* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001) that modern democracies arrive at their libertarian socialism by creating a gnostic-millenarian ethos, a dualistic polity in which radically secularized masses, convinced that man is good but abandoned in a bad world, accept a near total manipulation by their equally secularized millenarian elites whose policy objectives (and careers) are grounded in the hope of bringing about a humanitarian Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

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ourselves to reflect the goodness of creation, but rather to change creation to reflect our own goodness (in Mill's case, our potential goodness, which becomes actual once we become the poets of our own lives, follow progressive social policy, and so on). So it is no small paradox that we find the most famous libertarian freedom fighter of the English-speaking world advocating what amounts to the total reconstitution of society. And that is how we get closer to the very heart of the modern libertarian-socialist project: Mill always called for "unchecked liberty of thought, unbounded freedom of individual action in all modes not hurtful to others," but he also wanted "convictions as to what is right and wrong, useful and pernicious," to be "deeply engraved on the feelings by early education," and by "uniformity of sentiment," and "firmly grounded in reason"<sup>50</sup> (by which he usually meant his personal idea of what is reasonable).

### *The "Choice" Mantra*

Mill's near total rejection of permanent truth, custom, and moral tradition as unifying social forces in favor of the Romantic ideal of the spontaneous Self meant that there were to be millions of truth-creating human beings. In a striking sentence he dictates the terms of such a world, in which "*the only unfailing and permanent source of improvement is liberty, since by it there are as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are individuals*"(3) (emphasis added). In this sense Mill was a type of existentialist thinker. Man's essence does not precede him; the meaning of life and of the universe is not something external to the individual to be discovered by patient searching. Rather, it is created by ourselves, for "the human faculties of perception, judgement, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice" (3). Mill concludes derisively that "he who does anything because it is custom, makes no choice . . . he who lets the world . . . choose his own plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation" (3).

The contrasting, and deeply conservative, view of freedom is that we are fortunate to learn from the wisest and best of our kind. The history of any civilization is a kind of process of filtration through which cumulative wisdom is available in the form of use-

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<sup>50</sup> Mill *Autobiography*, 133.

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ful customs, laws, traditions, and moral opinions that constrain us to act in a civilized fashion more or less by habit. What thus makes us civilized should not to be subjected to re-examination every minute. In short, the civilizing process is indelibly historical and mimetic, and only secondarily personal and spontaneous. Against this view, however, Mill peevishly complains that “the *despotism of custom* is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in *unceasing antagonism* to that disposition to aim at something better than customary, which is called, according to circumstances, the spirit of liberty, or that of *progress or improvement*” (3) (emphasis added).

### ***Absolute Freedom Means No Commitment***

Despite the many restrictions on liberty that he accepted,<sup>51</sup> Mill strained at every turn during this stage of his life to sustain the Romantic argument for *absolute* personal freedom as a pre-condition for moral action. For him, authenticity meant that personal and social bonds may be freely assumed, but as freely revoked, *or they cannot be bonds*. In other words, the chain of argument for such proponents of radical freedom is that morality requires freedom, and freedom requires revocability, and this makes all human bonds dependent on the will of the moment. Contracts must be honored as viable only so long as the parties continue to support them in feeling and spirit. But if a party to other than a financial contract loses interest or becomes disaffected, Mill says, the contract ought to be freely revocable (5). He does not say that contracts can be revoked

*All human bonds rendered subject to the will of the moment.*

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<sup>51</sup> Mill wards off objections to his liberty principle by admitting that “whenever there is a definite damage, or a definite risk of damage, either to an individual, or to the public, the case is taken out of the province of liberty, and placed in that of morality or law” (4) (emphasis added); and that “the liberty of the individual may be thus far limited; *he must not make himself a nuisance to other people*” (3). But it would seem that in permitting society to assess the risk of “damage” or of “nuisance” he destroys most of his prior argument, and indeed he does add that, “if society is of the opinion” that social or legal punishment is necessary for its protection, then it is legitimate (5). In this vein, and somewhat surprisingly given the general nature of the topic, Mill includes as offenses against others, everything which is a “violation of good manners,” such as the many “offenses against decency” on which he says “it is unnecessary to dwell” (5) because all may be rightfully prohibited. This is another example of the boomerang effect of Mill’s thinking, as the “good manners” and “offenses against decency” to which he alludes are obviously such due to the very operation of custom, tradition, and public opinion against which he so often rails.

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only provided we have grounds of honor, or if there is a breach, or an abuse, or if we are prepared to pay damages, but for what surely seems the most frivolous of reasons; namely, that “the feelings of both parties” may no longer be “in harmony” (5). Logically speaking, this was a bit odd, given that he knew well enough that it only takes one party to a contract to create disharmony. But for freedom radicals like Mill this is not a frivolous motive, for to them to be an unwilling partner in a contract means to be a slave to the will of another party and hence to have lost one’s personal freedom as a moral agent, to be something less than fully human, perhaps to be ape-like, to fall into the gnostic darkness of ignorance. That is why such radicals attack the institution of marriage so forcefully. For them, a spouse bound to a marriage, once out of “harmony,” becomes a slave of the spouse who will not release him or her from marital vows and also suffers the dreaded moral opinion of society. Radicals of this ilk simply ignore the obverse truth: that observant spouses upholding their vows become instant victims of spouses who feel out of harmony and wish to dissolve their contracts unilaterally.

Freedom radicals, then, tend to see the very *moment* of a choice as a mystical instance of true freedom which loses its purity as soon as it is encumbered by another’s will, or by public opinion. The temporal choice-point, so to speak, is a character-altering, transforming moment in time that distinguishes a free person or an entire people from mere ape-like automatons. That is, freedom *appears*—and can disappear as suddenly—like a revelation, and it is sustained most truly and intensely if all obligations and contracts remain revocable by either party. In this view, it is *continuous revocability* that makes freedom authentic and links it to the mystique of the spontaneous feeling Self.

### *The Two Democracies*

It may be objected that just as Mill was a libertarian who was in the end predominantly a socialist, Rousseau was an individualist as much as a collectivist, and, from certain of his works such as the *Second Discourse*, that would seem to be the case. However, as mentioned, I am not trying to keep score on the libertarian/collectivist proportions in either thinker as judged by the overall balance of their writings and arguments, but rather, trying to assess the legacy of their work in the development of modern democracy. I have

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mentioned here, and argued fully elsewhere,<sup>52</sup> that Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762) was the central document in the ideological run up to the French Revolution, brandished like a Bible by Robespierre and every other radical of the time, and that what Rousseau was promoting was a unitary or monistic form of Democracy that may be described as a "democracy of the One." Although Rousseau wanted free and consciously choosing individuals, that was largely because in the light of his democratic theory he imagined and urged the mystical absorption of all free individuals into *la volonté générale*, the General Will. Like Mill, but for different reasons, he was not interested in a democracy of the unfree. In his education novel *Emile* we find a very clear expression of this totalizing ambition "to transport the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole."<sup>53</sup> Of this process, Robert Nisbet wrote, "It is in Rousseau's absorption of all forms of society into the unitary mould of the state that we may observe the first unmistakable appearance of the totalitarian theory of society."<sup>54</sup> Jacob Talmon was among the first to describe this mystical unity of *all as One* as the key psychological impulse underlying this entirely new type of "totalitarian democracy" that irrupted during the French Revolution and the Terror,<sup>55</sup> and historical scholarship since the 1980s increasingly supports this analysis.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See William D. Gairdner, *The Trouble with Democracy* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001).

<sup>53</sup> J. J. Rousseau, *Emile; or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 40.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Nisbet, "Rousseau and Totalitarianism," in *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 5, No.2 (1943), 94.

<sup>55</sup> Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1952 and 1955).

<sup>56</sup> Until the 1980s the main story told about the Revolution, mainly by French historians, and much simplified here, was that it resulted from class discontents and a desire for economic equality in reaction to the oppressions of the *ancien régime*, and that this noble adventure became derailed in the shame of the Terror, which was an unfortunate "break" in that ambition. But more careful and perceptive interpretations then began to occupy center ground among historians, beginning with the work of François Furet, who argued that the Revolution was not a reaction to class or economic oppression as those preaching the Marxist *catéchisme* held, but rather was almost wholly the result of an ideological fever directly traceable to the collectivist democratic theories of Rousseau. See, in particular, François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). As had Tocqueville before him, Furet argued that the Terror was not a break in, but a natural sequel to, the Revolution, just as Napoleon, "the

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Mill's  
"democracy  
of the Many"  
a novel blend  
of freedom and  
socialism.

Those interested in the fine detail of such ideological dynamics will enjoy the American historian Keith Baker's account of and insight into that revolution's "freefall into Rousseauian democracy."<sup>57</sup>

Wordsworth, like many other English poets and intellectuals of the time, had written of the soaring aspirations of the French Revolutionary period. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive!" he cried. He saw "France standing on the top of golden hours / And human nature seeming born again." And, in what could be a capsule statement for Mill's own ambition, he wrote of how so many contemporary radicals wanted to "Build social upon personal Liberty." But the manifest failure of the theory and practice of Rousseau's collectivist democracy, combined with almost twenty years of war with France and the ever-present fear of invasion, was a continuing reminder that provoked the most sensitive minds, of which Mill's was certainly one, to retreat from all mystical concepts of democracy in search of a more workable political alternative.<sup>58</sup> Many intellectuals of the time thus turned sharply away from the bloodied ideal of a democracy of the One, in search of an ideal "democracy of the Many." What about a system in which freedom is not a quasi-mystical group phenomenon, such as Rousseau imagined, but a purely individual one, under which each of us may "pursue our own good in our own way" (3) as long as we do not impede others from the same objective? In the end, I am persuaded that, more than any other document, it was Mill's *On Liberty* that spelled out his theory for a democracy of the Many as a radical experiment in moral autonomy and individual freedom, a novel blend of poetic

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people's monarch," was its natural conclusion.

<sup>57</sup> See "Constitution," a fine brief essay on this process by Baker in Gary Kates, ed., *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 1998), and for a more extensive examination of the ideological fervor generated by Rousseau's democratic ideas and their connection to the Terror, see also Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>58</sup> Although Mill was one of those souls plainly shocked at the evil unleashed in Europe in the name of freedom, this did not stop him from musing, in what must qualify as flagrant understatement, that the atrocities of the French Revolution were "temporary aberrations," and the heinous murder of French citizens before huge baying crowds the work of a "usurping few" (*On Liberty*, 62). Such statements were so much intellectual positioning required to dissociate the democratic bloodbath of the Revolution from his personal hopes for his own form of libertarian socialism and for the "progress" of civilization on which his theory depended. So much for how the heart leads the head.



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feeling and philosophy, of freedom and socialism, or simply, libertarian socialism.

By way of speculation (which is all any of us can entertain on such a point) I close by suggesting that the political story of the Western world for at least the past two centuries has been about the ongoing tension between a quasi-spiritual yearning for a democracy of the One, and an equally quasi-spiritual, though nicely disguised as merely pragmatic, yearning for a democracy of the Many. The story is about a struggle to invent a final political form lying somewhere between the two opposing ideals of a free collective unity, and masses of free autonomous individuals; between a Rousseauian mystical and moral corporate body into which all individualities are dissolved, and a Millian mass of morally autonomous individuals based on the absence of—actually, repudiating in principle—a corporate body.

Libertarian socialism may be that final form. And if that is so, we may add, with considerable justification, that, while it was politics that brought this form into existence, it was poetry that made it possible.