The Relevance of Ideas
(1844–1850)

not all art is alike remote from the world of thought.¹

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In many of the works Marian Evans read during this period there was a political dimension. Foster’s presentation of the dissenting consciousness, and the exegeses of the theories of perception in Rousseau, Saint-Simon, Comte and Hegel, extended beyond an analysis of the thought process to explore the implications of that analysis for a view of society. Macaulay offered lessons for the present, as well as pictures of past ages; Disraeli and George Sand meditated upon political philosophies. Yet George Sand’s testing of the validity of ideas as a means of interpreting existence, and her pondering upon the efficacy of political ideologies, stemmed from a radically sceptical stance. The environment of the 1840s presented Marian Evans with conflicting evidence about the extent to which political philosophies could be transformed into effective social solutions. The new revolutionary Europe lasted only from April 1848 to the following summer after which, although elements of liberalism remained, a conservative reaction set in. In 1848, Marian Evans’s interest in radicalism led her to watch with fascination the unfolding of events in France. On 10 December 1848, the presidential election returned to power Napoleon’s nephew, backed by a Conservative ministry. On 13 June 1849, the failure of a coup de force of democratic politicians led to more repression, and the flight of the leaders of that coup. In England, there was a widespread belief that the Chartists would use physical force, but although progressive thinkers often supported revolution abroad, after 1845 they favoured peaceful action at home. By the 1850s, the millenarium aspect of secularism had waned, probably in the light of the 1848 failures in Europe. In Coventry itself, Marian Evans witnessed radical ideas meeting with a mixture of success and
failure. The city's ribbon industry linked it to the silk-weaving trade of Manchester, and the ideological tradition of Manchester's labour relations permeated the Coventry trade in the 1840s as labour/capital conflicts increased. Between 1844 and 1848, Marian Evans saw the reforming corporation improve the city's water supply, and establish a local Board of Health; technological progress came with the introduction of steam power which reached even the Foleshill cottages. From the late 1820s onwards, some successful attempts were made to provide education for lower-class adults. Efforts in this direction were inspired by Christian sentiments and were undertaken by middle-class Anglicans or members of dissenting chapel congregations. The secular Mechanics' Institute Movement started in 1828. Yet at close quarters Marian Evans observed the failure of some of Bray's plans to improve the cultural lot of the working class.2

In returning again to the work of Carlyle, Marian Evans found a writer who was preoccupied with the relationship between ideology, reality and action. Her enthusiasm for Carlyle persisted and, in later years, it was his early writings to which she returned: she loyally defended the later works, but often privately disliked them. She described Past and Present (1843) as 'that thrilling book'.3 The work drew together views she had encountered elsewhere; it contained, as had Hegel's Lectures on the Philosophy of History, criticism of contemporary historiography. Carlyle often conceptualised the historical process for didactic ends. He saw the study of history as elucidating contemporary problems and, like other English social critics, he found political solutions in an idealised English past, rather than in contemporary social models. He suggested that history revealed human interdependence and the impossibility of isolation.4 In describing the historical process, he merged concepts. He reconciled notions of continuity and change and showed how the Ideal operated in the context of the real, so that context must be studied to understand how that Ideal was modified. Yet Carlyle retained the sceptic's sense, so evident in The French Revolution, that reality eluded total explanation. Jocelin of Brokeland was 'as in all History, and indeed in all Nature ... at once inscrutable and certain; so dim, yet so indubitable; exciting us to endless considerations'.5 Carlyle had concluded that only that mode of vision which was not slavishly bound to the implications of any single logic could truly interpret reality and prompt correct action. He criticised Methodists, Utilitarians and Encyclopaedists