Mill (1837–1840): The Limitations of Logic

Looking back on his life, Mill decided that, after 1840, there were 'no further mental changes to tell of'. Mill's personal experiences, as well as his intellectual interests, are at issue here, and they are closely linked. By 1840, the 1826 crisis was far away; his father was dead, and his relationship with Harriet Taylor was more settled. He had critically scrutinised Benthamism, English Idealism, and the post-Encyclopaedist developments in French thought. Despite the anguished tone of some of the articles written in the late 1830s, Mill became more confident in his search for the optimum definition and mode of perception, and his consideration of the implications perception had for action. By 1840, the Logic was finished: in the early 1840s, via that work, and those of Charles Bray, who was inspired by Mill's endeavour, Marian Evans encountered a crucially modified empiricism, and view of the function of speculation.

Mill's naming of 1840 as a terminal point coincided, not accidentally, with the end of a phase in English political life. By 1840, the Philosophical Radicals were a spent force. The late 1830s were dominated by the 'condition of England' question; England's notorious class divisions prevented the emergence of a broadly-based party of reform. The Philosophical Radicals were upper-middle-class intellectual Londoners, with little knowledge of the problems of the industrial working-class in the north and the midlands. In the election of July 1837, only nine retained their seats, and Durham's death weakened the party. Working-class disillusion with the Reform Bill was discussed by Charles Bray in 1841; Cross-thwaite, in Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, described the lack of understanding shown by a Liberal MP to a deputation of poor tailors. The working class turned to the Chartists whose leaders, ironically, derived their six points from the Radicals. In 1838, the People's Charter was published, and the Anti-Corn Law League.
established. 1839 saw the Chartist Convention, viewed by supporters and opponents alike as an alternative Parliament, meeting in London and Birmingham, and the presentation of the first Chartist petition. The incendiary riots in Birmingham in July of the same year were a reminder that Chartism was 'a protest as incoherent as the life that had provoked it'.³ By 1841, England had a Conservative government led by Peel. Radicals, Whigs, Tories, and the working class, all gave Mill grounds for despair: none were capable of introducing reforms by peaceful methods, or of basing those reforms upon a coherent philosophy. Mill's disengagement from his journalistic mission stemmed not solely from a conscious choice to return to the problem of logical method; such decisions were imposed upon him by a political situation which rendered his propagandist efforts null and void. The unexpected turns of events forced him to doubt whether truth could be contained within a system of ideas such as that which he had canvassed: he attempted to revise the theory of perception, and the logical method upon which that system was based. In his contemplation of both action and thought, Mill's pragmatism and eclecticism both became more deeply sceptical. In 1840, he handed the Westminster Review over to W. E. Hickson. Since 1837, he had devoted much of his time to A System of Logic, which he had started in 1830 and put aside in 1832. By 1840, the Logic, which showed an apparent attempt to reconcile Intuitionism and Associationism, was finished.⁴

Mill's rejection of a dogmatic theory of perception and logical method, and his disillusion with Radical practice, encouraged his interest in writers who were attempting to link a new logical method to novel political models. In 1837, Wheatstone brought to England the first two volumes of Comte's Cours de philosophie positive (6 vols, 1830–42). Mill had admired Comte's method when he read one of his papers in 1829 or 1830, and when, like Comte, Mill was involved with the Saint-Simonians. He had modified the Saint-Simonian concept of historical periodicity by reference to Comte's outline of theological, metaphysical and positive stages.⁵ Mill found Comte's discussion of logical method invaluable, and A System of Logic (1843) established Mill's role as a pioneer propagandist for the Cours in England.⁶ George Henry Lewes and Frederic Harrison both came to Comte via the Logic, and it extended Marian Evans's knowledge of Positivism.⁷ Reading the Cours also directed Mill back to the Saint-Simonians, and their ideas re-entered his