

# The Worm at the Root of the Passions: Poetry and Sympathy in Mill's Utilitarianism

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I claim that Mill has a theory of poetry which he uses to reconcile nineteenth century associationist psychology, the tendency of the intellect to dissolve associations, and the need for educated members of society to desire utilitarian ends. The heart of the argument is that Mill thinks reading poetry encourages us to feel the feelings of others, and thus to develop pleasurable associations with the pleasurable feelings of others and painful associations with the painful feelings of others. Once the associations are developed, they are supported and maintained by our natural capacity for sympathy and by external elements in society, and provide motivation for the pursuit of utilitarian ends. Further, the additional support causes the associations to be strengthened to the extent that they come to be seen as 'natural and necessary', and as such are immune from the dissolving force of the intellect.

Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!  
And let the young Lambs bound  
As to the tabor's sound!  
We in thought will join your throng,  
Ye that pipe and Ye that play,  
Ye that through your hearts to-day  
Feel the gladness of the May!  
What though the radiance which was once so bright  
Be now for ever taken from my sight,  
Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind;  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering;  
In the faith that looks through death,  
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

Wordsworth<sup>1</sup>

During a period of severe depression in his twenties, John Stuart Mill was greatly affected by the poetry of Wordsworth. Mill was in the

<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Intimations of Immortality', in *William Wordsworth: A Lakedale Anthology*, ed. Piers Browne, London, 1991, p. 51.

midst of a personal crisis, a crisis in which he had come to doubt all that he had been taught and feared that he had discovered an insurmountable difficulty with the Benthamite philosophy upon which he had been reared.

This state [of depression] of my thoughts and feelings made the fact of my reading Wordsworth for the first time ... an important event in my life. ... I found that he too had had similar experience to mine; that he also had felt that the first freshness of youthful enjoyment of life was not lasting; but that he had sought for compensation, in the way that he was now teaching me to find it.<sup>2</sup>

Mill's crisis arose from his realization that he could no longer associate pleasure and the attainment of great happiness with the creation of a utilitarian society. He believed that the cause of this problem was that his education had rigorously trained his intellect but had underdeveloped his capacity for feeling.

For Mill, the realm of the intellect and the realm of the feelings are separate. The realm of the feelings is based upon arbitrary associations with objects, created as the result of conditioning in education and experience. Feelings of pleasure and pain are caused as the result of these associations. '[T]here must always be something artificial and casual in associations thus produced. The pains and pleasures thus forcibly associated with things, are not connected with them by any natural tie ...'<sup>3</sup> The problem was that the principal quality of a well-developed intellect is to discover which connections in nature are real and which are mere products of human prejudice and whim, and to dissolve or analyse away the latter. Such a quality was invaluable when it came to analysing the world and tendencies in nature, but a side-effect was that the intellect would also tend to dissolve the artificial bonds that connected the motivating associations of pleasure with the pursuit of utilitarian goals.

When Mill realized that he no longer associated pleasure with the creation of a utilitarian society, he fell into a great depression, fearing that he had discovered an insurmountable difficulty with the Benthamite precept that agents should pursue maximum happiness, since this pursuit would be foiled by the intellects of well-educated and clear-sighted agents.<sup>4</sup> But when Mill discovered that he could still

<sup>2</sup> J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, Toronto, 1981, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, i. 149–53.

<sup>3</sup> *Autobiography*, CW, i. 141.

<sup>4</sup> 'I felt that the flaw in my life, must be a flaw in life itself; that the question was, whether, if the reformers of society and government could succeed in their objects, and every person in the community were free and in a state of physical comfort, the pleasures of life, being no longer kept up by struggle and privation, would cease to be pleasures. And I felt that unless I could see my way to some better hope for human happiness in general, my dejection must continue ...' (*Autobiography*, CW, i. 149). Elizabeth S. Anderson has argued that from Mill's perspective his experience

experience pleasure and pain by reading poetry, his depression was lifted, and he began to place new importance upon the development of what he called the 'internal culture of the individual'. The effect on Mill extended beyond his personal habits; as a result of his experience, he constructed a new theory which incorporated his insights into a theory of the importance of poetic or aesthetic education to the basic structure of the utilitarian state.<sup>5</sup> Mill's new theory was that the development of the 'internal culture of the individual' was extremely important to the successful creation of a utilitarian society, and that the education of members of society should involve aesthetic cultivation as well as intellectual training.<sup>6</sup>

Mill's views on poetry and their connection to his utilitarianism need to be explicated, for there is a tension between Mill's associationist psychology and his utilitarian project: if the members of society are to be educated, then this education will work directly against the 'motivating association' that links the feeling of pleasure with the creation of a utilitarian society. The well-developed intellects of members of society will discover and dissolve the association between pleasure and utilitarianism, which means that those members will no longer be motivated to pursue utilitarian goals. Mill needs a way to resolve this dilemma, for if educated members of society cannot be motivated to promote (to desire) a utilitarian society, then his social agenda cannot be realized.<sup>7</sup>

## I. SYMPATHY

Before we delve into Mill's theory of poetry, it would be well to be as clear as possible about the notion of sympathy that Mill relies upon in his writings. Like his father, Mill accepted the psychology of associations of ideas. For Mill, the notion of sympathy is connected with the

('experiment in living') served to disconfirm Bentham's psychology. Elizabeth S. Anderson, 'John Stuart Mill and Experiments in Living', *Philosophers Annual*, xiv (1991), 1-23.

<sup>5</sup> I will use 'poetic' and 'aesthetic' interchangeably in this paper; what Mill called 'poetry' was not restricted to poems or poetry *per se* (see below).

<sup>6</sup> Mill's views on poetry have not received enough attention from philosophers. Extant works include F. Parvin Sharpless, *The Literary Criticism of John Stuart Mill*, The Hague, 1967, and a discussion in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* starting with John M. Robson, 'J. S. Mill's Theory of Poetry', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, xxix (1960), 420-38, and continuing with Edward Alexander, 'Mill's Theory of Culture: The Wedding of Literature and Democracy', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, xxxv (1965), 75-88 and Michele Green, 'Sympathy and the Social Value of Poetry: J. S. Mill's Literary Essays', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, lx (1991), 452-68. Also see Daniel Burnstone, 'The Very Culture of the Feelings: Poetry and Poets in Mill's Moral Philosophy', *Utilitas*, iv (1992), 81-104.

<sup>7</sup> Candace Vogler, 'Means, Ends and Mill', unpub. TS., 1994, also presents this problem.

important role that pleasures and pains play in utilitarianism. Sympathy involves the ability to understand the pleasures and pains of another by somehow taking on those pleasures or pains as one's own.

[I]t is well known that the pains and pleasures of another person affect us; that is, associate with themselves the ideas of our own pains and pleasures, with more or less intensity, according to the attention which we bestow upon his pains and pleasures. A parent is commonly either led or impelled to bestow an unusual degree of attention upon the pains and pleasures of his child; and hence a habit is contracted of *sympathizing with him, as it is commonly, and not insignificantly named; in other words, a facility of associating the ideas of his own pains and pleasures, with those of the child.*<sup>8</sup>

When we exhibit sympathy towards another person, we understand their pains and pleasures by taking on these emotions ourselves. When someone to whom we are sympathetic (in Mill's sense of the word) experiences pain as the result of, say, censure, we feel pain also, by imagining ourselves receiving the same censure, which results in our imagining ourselves to be in the same sort of pain as that person.

The vivacity and sympathy of the expressions of the pains and pleasures of children, in their looks, and tones, and attitudes, as well as words, give them a particular power of exciting sympathy, that is, of associating with them trains [sequences of associated ideas] of the analogous feelings of ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

Sympathy with another results in a feeling of pleasure 'in association with the other as feeling pleasure' when the other person feels pleasure, and in feeling pain when she feels pain.<sup>10</sup>

Sympathy with others in virtue of our understanding of their pain and pleasure plays a significant part in Mill's ethical and political theory, for sympathy is part of the foundation for the moral feelings that are supposed to motivate agents to maximize the greatest happiness, or pleasure, for all.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, we are now prepared to understand Mill's aesthetic theory in the appropriate context.

<sup>8</sup> James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, 2 vols., edited with additional notes by John Stuart Mill, London, 1869, ii. 219–20. Italics added.

<sup>9</sup> James Mill, *Analysis*, ii. 220. Consider also: 'The affection which exists among Brothers and Sisters, has in it most of the ingredients which go to the formation of friendship. There is first of all Companionship; the habit of enjoying pleasures, in common, and also of suffering pains; hence a great readiness in sympathizing with one another; that is, in associating trains of their own pains and pleasures, with the pains and pleasures of one another' (James Mill, *Analysis*, ii. 225).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 218n. Sympathy should not be confused with sociability. Sociability involves the fondness of the company of others (which may involve companionship), whereas sympathy involves the ability to have an intimate, empathetic connection with others by 'taking on' or experiencing in some form the feelings of others. A sociable nature may increase one's capacity for sympathy.

<sup>11</sup> Mill does not explicitly give a definition of sympathy here, but his use of the word in his writings seems to rely upon the definition that was accepted by both his father and Alexander Bain. In Mill's writing upon Bain (J. S. Mill, *Bain's Psychology*, in *Essays on Philosophy and the Classics*, ed. John M. Robson, *CW*, xi, Toronto, 1981) and editing of

## II. MILL'S THEORY OF POETRY

For Mill, the poet characterizes experiences, objects and states of mind in terms of his own feelings, in such a way that those feelings are communicated to whoever reads the poem. What Mill calls poetry is a special aspect of art (which may be found in other art forms such as literature, painting and sculpture) that expresses human feelings.<sup>12</sup> 'All art, therefore, in proportion as it produces its effects by an appeal to the emotions partakes of poetry, unless it partakes of oratory, or of narrative.'<sup>13</sup> Although Mill focuses on written work of the sort that we would normally define as poetry, Mill's term 'poetry' can refer to any art form that appeals to feeling: what we normally call poetry often involves such an appeal, but other art forms that appeal to feelings are also covered.<sup>14</sup> The best poet (i.e. creator of poetry in the wide sense) is one who best understands and communicates his own feelings.

Mill defines poetry as the 'representation of feeling' or the 'delineation of states of feeling'.<sup>15</sup> A written discourse is poetry when 'the

his father's book (James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*), he is very outspoken when he disagrees, either in footnotes or (in the treatise on Bain), in the text itself. Since nowhere does Mill contradict this notion of sympathy and indeed seems to accept it without question, I think it is reasonable to accept the definition given by James Mill as John Stuart's also. The definition of sympathy as involving taking on the pains and pleasures of another is clearly laid out in James Mill, and J. S. Mill writes about this characterization of sympathy approvingly in the treatise on Bain (*Bain's Psychology*, *CW*, xi. 362–3). Further, in a footnote in James Mill, J. S. Mill indirectly endorses the definition of sympathy: 'By virtue of the same law of association it is pointed out in the present chapter that human actions, both our own and those of other people ... tend naturally to become inclosed in a web of associated ideas of pleasures or of pains at a very early period of life, in such sort that the ideas of acts beneficial to ourselves and to others become pleasurable in themselves, and the ideas of acts hurtful to ourselves and to others become painful in themselves ... Mr. Bain, in the preceding note, makes in this theory [of disinterested feelings of moral approbation and disapprobation] a correction, to which the author himself [James Mill] would probably not have objected, namely, that the mere idea of a pain or pleasure, by whomsoever felt, is intrinsically painful or pleasurable, and when raised in the mind with intensity is capable of becoming a stimulus to action, independent, not merely of expected consequences to ourselves, but of any reference whatever to Self; so that care for others is, in an admissible sense, as much an ultimate fact of nature, as care for ourselves; though one which greatly needs strengthening by the concurrent force of the manifold associations insisted on in the author's text. Though this of Mr. Bain is rather an account of disinterested Sympathy ...' (James Mill, *Analysis*, ii. 308–9).

<sup>12</sup> J. S. Mill, 'What is Poetry', part I of *Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties*, in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, Toronto, 1981, *CW*, i. 352.

<sup>13</sup> 'What is Poetry', *CW*, i. 354n. This was part of the actual text of the article when originally published, and changed to a footnote when the essay was revised for republication.

<sup>14</sup> Except, as Mill indicates, those that involve oratory or narrative. Unless otherwise specified, when I use the term 'poetry', etc., I will be using it in the wide, i.e. Millian, sense.

<sup>15</sup> 'What is Poetry', *CW*, i. 344, i. 347.

feeling ... becomes itself the originator of another train of association, which expels or blends with the former'.<sup>16</sup> Poets are able to express their emotions in poetry because they are those who 'are so constituted, that emotions are the links of association by which their ideas, both sensuous and spiritual, are tied together'.<sup>17</sup> Further, those with truly poetical natures, such as Shelley,

really feel more, and consequently have more feeling to express; but because, the capacity of feeling being so great, feeling, when excited and not voluntarily resisted, seizes the helm of their thoughts, and the succession of ideas and images becomes the mere utterance of an emotion; not, as in other natures, the emotion a mere ornamental colouring of thought.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the expression of feeling is the very essence of poetry. Poets are those who feel more strongly than others and also understand the world through their feelings; they have strong emotional associations that connect their ideas and can represent feelings in a unique way. For Mill, poetry conveys the essence of feeling more strongly than any other vehicle of expression.

In addition to the expression of the poet's feelings, poetry (if effective) inspires feelings in those who read it.<sup>19</sup> Poetry, as the pure expression of feeling, is expressed without regard to its influence upon others.<sup>20</sup> However, the value of poetry for the reader, as Mill discovered when he read Wordsworth, is that it *does* influence others, in that it inspires and awakens feelings in the reader.<sup>21</sup> The poet describes an experience in a special emotion-oriented way (since for the poet the experience is entwined with the emotion that is connected to the experience), and this description allows the reader to understand the ideas of these emotions as the poet experienced them. John Robson argues that, for Mill, the poet

has a unique method of mental association – between ideas, and between idea and sensation, the link is emotional. ... The natural poet, untrained in mind but strong in feeling, is [different from the non-poet]: in him sensations call up emotions immediately, so that the ideas connected to the sensations are welded to the ideas connected to the emotions ... [the poet] throws off a series of images connected emotionally with the sensation.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> J. S. Mill, 'The Two Kinds of Poetry', part II of *Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties*, in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, Toronto, 1981, *CW*, i. 362.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Two Kinds of Poetry', *CW*, i. 365.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Two Kinds of Poetry', *CW*, i. 361.

<sup>19</sup> 'What is Poetry', *CW*, i. 353–4n.

<sup>20</sup> 'What is Poetry', *CW*, i. 349.

<sup>21</sup> 'What is Poetry', *CW*, i. 353–4n. Given that the poet and the reader have enough similarity in character and mind, i.e. they must think about things in somewhat the same way. Vogler has a nice discussion of this point.

<sup>22</sup> Robson, 'J. S. Mill's Theory', 424–6.

Robson argues further that Mill makes the case that the portrayal of human nature given by the poet is essential, for such a portrayal is inaccessible using 'mere observation'.<sup>23</sup>

If the reader is a normal person, feelings of pain expressed by the poet will cause the reader to feel pain by sensing the pain of the poet, and feelings of pleasure will cause the reader to feel pleasure by sensing the pleasure of the poet.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the reader may feel pleasure when reading poetry which expresses pleasurable feelings such as love or the experience of beauty, and may feel pain when the poet expresses his feelings of anguish and loss. Although there are doubtless other ways of understanding the emotions of others, the medium in which the communication of feelings is cultivated in our society is the medium of poetry; the main object of poetry is to show the feelings of the poet as deeply and honestly as possible in order to allow the reader to partake of the poet's emotional states.

There is no generic distinction between the imagery which is the *expression* of feeling and the imagery which is felt to *harmonize* with feeling. They are identical. The imagery in which feeling utters itself forth from within, is also that in which it delights when presented to it from without.<sup>25</sup>

More explicitly:

For it is through these thoughts and images [of the poet's, which must be 'given up to a state of feeling'] that the feeling speaks, and through their impressiveness that it impresses itself, and finds response in other hearts ...<sup>26</sup>

Not only is poetry the most effective way to express feelings; as a result of its effectiveness it is the best way to inspire feelings in others.

This ability of poetry to stimulate others actually to experience a feeling associated with the poet's feelings is important. Throughout his works, Mill argues that one of the best ways for an individual actively or truly to understand an idea is to have personal experience with it. He makes this point clear in *On Liberty*, where he emphasizes the need for debate and discussion of alternative points of view, instead of a dogmatic presentation of the received view, and when he discusses the need for experiences in order to understand the full meaning of truths.<sup>27</sup>

The great instrument of improvement in men is to supply them with the other half of the truth, one side of which they have ever seen; to turn them the white

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.

<sup>24</sup> J. S. Mill, 'Sedgwick's Discourse', in *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, Toronto, CW, 1963, x. 60.

<sup>25</sup> 'What is Poetry', CW, i. 354n.

<sup>26</sup> 'The Two Kinds of Poetry', CW, i. 361.

<sup>27</sup> J. S. Mill, *On Liberty, Essays on Politics and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, Toronto, 1977, CW, xviii. 249–50, xviii. 262.

side of the shield, of which they, seeing only the black, prove that the shield is black. It is not considered sufficient by many zealots, for even right opinions, that you have done little or nothing for a man, when you have merely given him an opinion. An opinion suggests hardly anything to an uninformed mind; it may become a watchword, but can never be a moving and influencing and living principle within him. Words, or anything which can be stated in words, benefit none but those minds to whom the words suggest an ample store of correct and clear ideas, and sound and accurate knowledge, previously acquired, concerning the things which are meant by the words.<sup>28</sup>

Poetry is special, for it enables us to sense, in a particularly intimate fashion, the feelings and experiences of another, and thus to share the idea of pleasure or pain in another mind. In this way, poetry allows us to see the world through the mind of the poet, and gives us an intimate connection to his mind. 'Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind.'<sup>29</sup> When we read the poet's expressions of joy and despair, we are presented with the ideas of emotion in the mind of the poet, 'in association with the other person as feeling them'.<sup>30</sup>

The imagination ... [is] that which enables us, by a voluntary effort, to conceive the absent as if it were present, the imaginary as if it were real; and to clothe it in the feelings, which, if it were indeed real, it would bring along with it. This is the power by which one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another. This power constitutes the poet, in so far as he does anything but melodiously utter his own feelings ...<sup>31</sup>

Thus, for Mill, poetry is the a particularly effective medium for the expression and communication of feeling, because of the way it gives us an intimate *experience* of others' feelings.

We need to develop the capacity to empathize with the emotions of others in order to understand the ideas and viewpoints of other people, since the experience of understanding the ideas of another plays a central role in our understanding of the pleasures and pains of that

<sup>28</sup> J. S. Mill, 'Letter to Gustave d'Eichthal', in *The Earlier Letters*, ed. Francis E. Mineka, 2 vols., Toronto, 1963, *CW*, xii, 42.

<sup>29</sup> 'What is Poetry', *CW*, i, 348.

<sup>30</sup> James Mill, ii, 218n. Green argues that Mill thinks that conceptive genius, the kind of genius that is necessary to understand any work of art, depends on the ability mentally to create the 'structure' of the mind of another ('Sympathy and the Social Value', 459).

<sup>31</sup> J. S. Mill, 'Bentham' in *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, Toronto, 1963, *CW*, x, 92. J. B. Schneewind in the introduction to his (ed.) *Mill's Essays on Literature and Society*, New York, 1965, argues for this thesis, and further that, 'through the power of poetry, [Mill] thought, we can work to overcome our natural one-sidedness and to reach that understanding of a wide variety of men and institutions which is essential to a sound social science. From that basis we may be able to move ahead to plan for the reconstruction of a stable society' (p. 19).



person. It is the ability to have empathy with others about experiences and feelings that others have had that that allows us to broaden our minds and develop a fuller understanding of human nature.<sup>32</sup>

Without [the power to enter into the mind and circumstances of another], nobody knows even his own nature, further than circumstances have actually tried it, and called it out; nor the nature of his fellow-creatures, beyond such generalizations as he may have been able to make from his observations of their outward conduct.<sup>33</sup>

### III. ASSOCIATIONS

To understand fully the importance of poetry for Mill, we must examine Mill's psychological theory of associations and the problem of the intellect. For Mill, good and bad moral feelings are the products of associations which have been created through experience or education. Thus, we desire a thing, action or type of contemplation if we associate pleasurable ideas with it, and avoid it if we associate it with painful ideas. The associations are formed artificially by the repeated correlation of pleasurable and painful experiences with the object, action or contemplation; eventually, as the result of these correlations, the individual's mind creates associations which cause the corresponding feelings of desire or aversion upon presentation or suggestion of the objects (or actions, etc.). The right sort of education would encourage the association of pleasurable ideas with actions or things that would benefit humanity, so that the student would desire the right things, and encourage the association of painful ideas with whatever was detrimental, so that the student would not desire the wrong things.<sup>34</sup>

Now, agents with keen intellects and clear perspectives are necessary to foster good government, intellectual advance, and a just society. To foster such a society, these agents must have moral associations that cause them to desire 'all things beneficial to the great whole, and of pain with all things hurtful to it'.<sup>35</sup> This is especially the case for utilitarian agents, as the basis of the utilitarian morality is that sympathy with human beings, or the desire for the good of humankind, should be the primary objective in order to maximize the pleasure of all. A good education must also encourage the development of the

<sup>32</sup> Additional support for this hypothesis comes from Mill's notes for a speech he gave for the London Debating Society: 'There is no depth, no intensity, no force, in our descriptions of feelings, unless we have ourselves experienced the feelings we describe ...' J. S. Mill, 'Wordsworth and Byron', *Journals and Debating Speeches*, ed. John M. Robson, 2 vols., *CW*, Toronto, 1988, xxvi. 438.

<sup>33</sup> 'Bentham', *CW*, x. 92.

<sup>34</sup> *Autobiography*, *CW*, i. 141.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

intellect, so that the student would be prudent, clear-sighted, and equipped to bring about the beneficial ends that her education had designed her to desire.<sup>36</sup>

However, to the young Mill, it was this necessary combination of the development of the intellect and the cultivation of moral associations that seemed to be on a direct collision course. Mill feared that the development of the intellect subverted the moral associations that were so necessary to foster the utilitarian goals, since the intellect would 'fearfully undermine all desires, and all pleasures, which are the effects of association, that is, according to the theory I held, all except the purely physical and organic'.<sup>37</sup> Thus, an educated person could not help but realize that her desire for a particular goal was merely the product of an association that was not 'natural', i.e. 'physical' or 'organic'. This was especially true for the sorts of associations created simply by using praise and blame, e.g. of the sort instilled by parents in young children. Once the realization that the association was arbitrary occurred, the association was destroyed, and the desire (and thus the motivation to achieve the goal) was also destroyed.

Mill realized this problem when he himself experienced the sundering of his association of pleasure with the achievement of a utilitarian society.

I had always heard it maintained by my father, and was myself convinced, that the object of education should be to form the strongest possible associations of the salutary class; associations of pleasure with all things beneficial to the great whole, and of pain with all things hurtful to it. All this appeared inexpugnable, but it now seemed to me on retrospect, that my teachers had occupied themselves but superficially with the means of forming and keeping up these salutary associations. They seemed to have trusted altogether to the old instruments praise and blame, reward and punishment. ... But there must always be something artificial and casual in associations thus generated: the pains and pleasures thus forcibly associated with things, are not connected with them by any natural tie. ... For I now saw ... that the habit of analysis has a tendency to wear away the feelings.<sup>38</sup>

His depression seems to have been the product of two effects, his inability to feel pleasurable associations and his concomitant worry that this meant that the theory of associations put utilitarianism in deep trouble. However, when he discovered that reading poetry could arouse feelings of pleasure in him, he began to recover from his

<sup>36</sup> For Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, the utilitarian state would be made up of such individuals; James Mill had educated Mill accordingly, so as to be the perfect utilitarian agent. '[My father] endeavored to give, according to his own conception, the highest order of intellectual education' (*Autobiography*, *CW*, i. 7).

<sup>37</sup> *Autobiography*, *CW*, i. 143.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 115.

depression, and in the process developed a solution to the problem of the incompatibility of the feelings with the intellect.

For Mill, reading Wordsworth caused him to share in the poet's pleasurable feelings, and thus to understand and derive pleasure from the feelings and experiences of others. 'What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty.'<sup>39</sup> Mill had discovered a remedy for his lack of feeling: he was able to experience pleasure by reading Wordsworth's expressions of pleasure, such as Wordsworth's poetic descriptions of the joy of experiencing natural scenery.

Moreover, Mill thought that he could use his experience to fashion a solution to the problem of the destructive analysis of the intellect.<sup>40</sup> Although it is not clear exactly how this solution is supposed to function, there is enough information in Mill's writings to permit us to construct a plausible story. We have seen that, for Mill, a person can gain access to the ideas of feeling in the poet's mind by reading the expression of those ideas in the poet's verse. Mill's idea of how we experience the feelings of another is complex: when we read of someone's agony in a poem we have a sort of 'second order' feeling or sense of that agony.

It is ... obvious that the pleasure or pain with which we contemplate the pleasure or pain felt by somebody else, is itself a pleasure or pain of our own ... but if it be meant that in such cases the pleasure or pain is consciously referred to self, I take this to be a mistake. By the acts or other signs exhibited by another person, the idea of pleasure (which is a pleasurable idea) or the idea of pain (which is a painful idea) are recalled, sometimes with considerable intensity, but in association with the other person as feeling them, not with one's self as feeling them.<sup>41</sup>

If these feelings are pleasurable feelings, the reader is able to have pleasurable feelings when she contemplates the pleasurable feelings of the poet by reading his poetic presentation of them. However, if the poet expressed despair, unhappiness or anxiety in his poetry, then the reader would also experience a sense of despair, unhappiness or anxiety, and thus experience unpleasant feelings when contemplating the expression of the unpleasant feelings of another.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 151.

<sup>40</sup> Anderson ('John Stuart Mill', 14) argues that Mill's crisis led him to adopt the hypothesis that 'a lasting attachment to objects of pleasure (besides physical ones) depends on viewing them as intrinsically valuable'. Although Anderson may be correct, this paper presents an alternative explanation of the role of the aesthetic in Mill's programme and of the way poetry fostered Mill's recovery. If my argument is correct, then Mill need not be seen as adopting a view of the intrinsic worth of ends that conflicts with the utilitarian rejection of nonhedonic (pleasure-independent) values.

<sup>41</sup> James Mill, ii. 218n.

<sup>42</sup> Yet we may still take pleasure in reading a poem which expresses painful feelings.

Thus, the insight that poetry has the power to create feelings in the reader that are connected to the feelings of the poet can be used to re-create the motivation to pursue the pleasure (and thus the happiness) of others. For, if we can have pleasurable feelings by understanding the pleasure of others (through understanding the expression of pleasurable feelings in poetry), then we have the means to develop pleasurable associations with this experience, and so to develop pleasurable associations with the pleasurable feelings of others. Likewise, by having painful feelings as the result of understanding the pain of others, we may develop painful associations with the pain of others. Since if a feeling of pleasure or pain is connected enough times with an action, event or thing, we develop a pleasurable association with that thing, we can interpret Mill's thesis as the idea that reading poetry can create associations of pleasure and pain connected with the pleasures and pains of another person.<sup>43</sup>

By having pleasurable associations with the pleasure of others, an agent would thus desire that others experience pleasure, and act so as to maximize the pleasure of others, in order to maximize his own pleasure.<sup>44</sup> Mill's Inaugural Address to the University of St Andrews provides support for this thesis: Poetic cultivation 'brings home to us all those aspects of life which take hold of our nature on its unselfish side and lead us to identify our joy and grief with the good or ill of the system of which we form a part'.<sup>45</sup> We may thus speculate that Mill thought that through reading poetry he could foster in himself and in others the association of regard to the feelings of other human beings,

To resolve this (apparent) paradox, we need to make a distinction between the feelings that are 'called up' by the poem, and the feelings we feel as the result of experiencing art in general. I suggest that we may have feelings of pleasure when we read a good poem if we enjoy experiencing something of aesthetic value. This does not conflict with the experience of being inspired to feel the second-order pain (pleasure) of the poet through the poet's expression of these emotions in her verses.

<sup>43</sup> Robson argues that poetry played an essential role in Mill's revision of Benthamism. Robson thinks that for Mill the poet 'presents a scene and characters so representative of valid human feelings as to be a moral lesson to all who hear him. He teaches men to share the feelings of others' ('J. S. Mill's Theory', 434). Robson also argues that the function of the poet is to show people how to develop empathy, based upon his contention that for Mill, the poet is moralist who portrays other-regarding affections (those who portray selfish and immoral feelings are not true poets.) Robson's main thesis is that Mill's conception of the poet is the moralist-poet, and that 'the ethical claim of the poet [is] apparent: he presents scenes and characters which play upon the feelings of the readers in such a way as to pattern out for them a standard of beautiful conduct' (ibid.). His interpretation is supported by passages in 'Wordsworth and Byron', *CW*, xxvi. 441.

<sup>44</sup> In addition to directly supporting utilitarian ends, Mill's new thesis taught him that happiness is a by-product of a search for some other goal, i.e. the happiness of others, the improvement of mankind, or perhaps the perfection of some quality or art (*Autobiography*, *CW*, i. 145-7).

<sup>45</sup> J. S. Mill, 'Inaugural Address', in *Essays on Equality, Law and Education*, ed. John M. Robson, Toronto, 1984, *CW*, xxi. 254.

an association that causes one to desire utilitarian ends, since these ends would bring the maximum happiness to the maximum number of people.

[Wordsworth's poems] seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings; which had no connection with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. From them I seemed to learn what would be the perennial sources of happiness, when all the greater evils of life had been removed. And I felt myself at once better and happier as I came under their influence ... I needed to be made to feel that there was real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth taught me this, not only without turning away from, but with a greatly increased interest in the common feelings and common destiny of human beings. And the delight which these poems gave me, proved that there was nothing to dread from the most confirmed habit of analysis.<sup>46</sup>

Our pleasurable associations with the happiness of others can motivate us to work actively towards the promotion of happiness for others in general.<sup>47</sup>

Mill would thus emphasize the cultivation of the internal individual through aesthetic education as a necessary condition for personal and social improvement.

What we desire unselfishly must first, by a mental process, become an actual part of what we seek as our own happiness; that the good [pleasure] of others becomes our pleasure because we have learnt to find pleasure in it: this is, we think, the true philosophical account of the matter.<sup>48</sup>

The development of the internal individual could be used in general as a countervailing influence to the disruptive power of the intellect and thus as a solution to the problem of education.

[E]xclusive cultivation [of the intellect], while it strengthens the associations which connect means with ends, effects with causes, tends to weaken many of those upon which our enjoyments and our social feelings depend ... therefore, the corrective and antagonist principle to the pursuits which deal with objects only in the abstract, is to be sought in those which deal with them altogether

<sup>46</sup> *Autobiography*, i. 151–2. Also: 'I have learned from Wordsworth that it is possible ... to connect cheerful and joyous states of mind with almost every object, to make every thing speak to us of our own enjoyments or those of other sentient beings, and to multiply ourselves as it were in the enjoyments of other creatures ...' ('Wordsworth and Byron', *CW*, xxvi. 441).

<sup>47</sup> For Mill, to have motivation towards a goal an individual must have some sort of reason or personal experience that inspires real and heartfelt conviction (*On Liberty*, *CW*, xviii. 258, 261). The experience necessary to feel motivated to maximize happiness for all people is provided by the experience of understanding the emotions of another. This idea is consistent with Mill's ideas about the role of experience in understanding truth and meaning (*ibid.*, pp. 247–50, 258, 261).

<sup>48</sup> J. S. Mill, 'Whewell on Moral Philosophy', in *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, Toronto, 1963, *CW*, x. 184n.

in the concrete, clothed in properties and circumstances: real life in its most varied forms, poetry and art in all their branches.<sup>49</sup>

Since poetry could be used to stimulate and develop the positive moral association of regard to the pleasures and pains of others, education should develop both the intellect and the 'internal individual'. Because of its unique and effective ability to connect us intimately with the pleasures and pains of others, poetic education or encouragement of the culture of the internal individual should be a part of the utilitarian program.<sup>50</sup> Mill thus endorsed a 'utilitarianism which takes into account the whole of human nature ... which holds Feeling at least as valuable as Thought, and Poetry not only on a par with, but the necessary condition of, any true and comprehensive Philosophy'.<sup>51</sup>

Poetry would thus help people to develop the proper moral associations necessary for the motivation to enact a utilitarian state:

The idea of the pain of another is naturally painful; the idea of the pleasure of another is naturally pleasurable. From this fact in our natural constitution, all our affections, both of love and aversion towards human beings ... are held, by the best teachers of the theory of utility, to originate. In this, the unselfish part of our nature, lies a foundation, even independently of inculcation from without, for the generation of moral feelings.<sup>52</sup>

Mill's view was that much of customary morality, or the common-sense views about morality held by those of his day, were based unobviously upon utilitarianism. Utilitarian morality is the 'first principle' and customary morality, since it is derived from much the same values as utilitarianism – maximizing happiness for all is unobviously behind many of the ends that customary morality selects as good – can be seen as a 'secondary principle', i.e. it follows from utilitarianism. Although in many places, such as *Utilitarianism*, *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women*,<sup>53</sup> Mill was critical of the parts of customary morality that were derived from selfishness, partiality and prejudice, much of it was acceptable in that it used the same principles as utilitarianism to define morally good acts. The unacceptable parts of customary moral-

<sup>49</sup> 'Sedgwick's Discourse', *CW*, x. 39. Further, '[t]he habit of analysis has really this tendency [to wear away the feelings] when no other mental habit is cultivated ...' (*Autobiography*, *CW*, i. 115).

<sup>50</sup> Alexander argues that 'Mill's definition of poetry's moral function as its power of arousing imaginative sympathy is the link between his theory of literature and his idea of a democratic culture. By widening the sympathies of men and extending them to more objects, poetry re-enforces the peculiar power of democratic society; by elevating the sympathies of men, poetry brings to democratic society precisely those aristocratic qualities which it lacks' ('Mill's Theory', 87).

<sup>51</sup> J. S. Mill, 'Letter to Edward Lytton Bulwer', in *The Earlier Letters*, ed. Francis E. Mineka, 2 vols., Toronto, 1963, *CW*, xii. 312.

<sup>52</sup> 'Sedgwick's Discourse', *CW*, x. 60.

<sup>53</sup> J. S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, in *Essays on Equality, Law and Education*, ed. John M. Robson, Toronto, 1984, *CW*, xvi.

ity resulted from the application of a method for determining what was morally good that was imprecise and not as impartial as it ideally should be.

In the ideal world, we would be impartial utilitarians and discard this imperfect (customary) system. But for now, until we have developed the capacity for impartial sympathy that we need to have in order to become good utilitarian agents, we should follow the imperfect method that is already in place. And here we have the possibility of a connection with poetry and the need for poetic education: by reading poetry, we develop and enhance our capacity for impartial sympathy, thus improving our ability to become good utilitarian agents and motivating us to become so. This does not conflict with our use of customary morality; rather, as we read poetry and develop our (impartial) sympathetic sensibilities, we will be able to refine and improve the method of customary morality (since it is based on the same ideas as utilitarianism) so as to make it into a more perfect instrument. The better our capacity for sympathy, the better we can evaluate different ends as morally good or bad. Eventually the method of customary morality will improve enough to become more perfectly utilitarian in that it will incorporate the impartial analysis needed to correctly determine the ends that result in the greatest happiness.<sup>54</sup>

When we interpret Mill to be saying that poetry has the power to

<sup>54</sup> A related topic involves the cultivation of the will. In J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, Toronto, 1963, *CW*, x, 238–9, Mill discusses a distinction between the will to be virtuous and the desire to be virtuous. As Mill sees it, we desire something if it brings us pleasure. However, the truly virtuous agent (as common opinion would have it) does not act virtuously because of the pleasure she receives by doing so: in fact, many times the pain a virtuous agent receives will far outweigh the pleasure. Mill grants this, explaining that often agents will things as a matter of habit, since the will can be cultivated to cause people to act so as to fulfil a general intention (i.e. the intention to be virtuous) even when to do so means that they experience pain instead of pleasure. ‘The distinction between will and desire thus understood, is an authentic and highly important psychological fact; but the fact consists solely in this – that will, like all other parts of our constitution, is amenable to habit, and that we may will from habit what we no longer desire for itself, or desire only because we will it’ (*Utilitarianism*, *CW*, x, 238). For this reason (and because the trained will provides a useful constancy of habit), the will should be cultivated so as to encourage virtuous behaviour. People are to be trained to desire morally good ends by associating them with pleasure, which will then cultivate the will and thus the force of habit to encourage the selection of morally good over bad ends. Here again we see a possible role for poetic education, since the cultivation of the sympathetic sentiments via poetry could help to cultivate the agent’s will to achieve ends that benefit humankind by strengthening or implanting pleasurable associations with the pleasure of other people. (Poetic education is certainly not *inconsistent* with the need for the cultivation of the will.) ‘It is by associating the doing right with pleasure, or the doing wrong with pain, or by eliciting and impressing and bringing home to the person’s experience the pleasure naturally involved in the one or the pain in the other, that it is possible to call forth that will to be virtuous, which, when confirmed, acts without any thought of either pleasure or pain’ (*Utilitarianism*, *CW*, x, 239).

develop and foster moral associations of pleasure in the pleasure of others based on the way it can allow us to understand the feelings of the poet, we can understand why Mill emphasized the importance of poetry and aesthetic education in his theories, and why he thought that his discovery of the poetry of Wordsworth and his subsequent recovery from depression ‘proved that there was nothing to dread from the most confirmed habit of analysis’. We can also see how Mill’s revision of Bentham’s views on associationism and poetry could be related to Mill’s development of utilitarianism, since he holds the moral feeling of regard to the pleasures and pains of others as the fundamental and essential sanction for the advancement of a good and just society.<sup>55</sup> If we may use poetry to counteract the tendency of the intellect to destroy our motivation to pursue the good of others and as an instrument for refining the methods of determining morally good ends used by customary morality, our progress toward the perfect utilitarian society is not in jeopardy.

#### IV. REGARD FOR OTHERS AND FELLOW-FEELING

But how could Mill think that he had overcome the problem with analysis merely by discovering that he could create the proper sorts of associations by reading poetry? After all, it is the business of the intellect to destroy arbitrary associations, and it would seem that the moral association of regard to the pleasure and pain of others that is derived from poetry is no different. Even if the right associations could be created by the development of the internal culture of the individual, constant maintenance of one’s motivating associations would be required in order to retain the desire to pursue utilitarian goals. If this were the case, Mill’s solution would be at best a palliative for the problem of motivation.

However, Mill thought that these associations *were* different for two (related) reasons. First, the associations created by reading poetry are special because they result from a kind of *experience* that the agent has of the pleasure and pain of another. We have already seen the importance of experience for Mill: it is the key to achieving full and complete understanding of the views of another. By entering into ‘the mind and circumstances of another’, an intimate connection is created between ourselves and other human beings. Simple associations of praise and blame do not involve an experience of the feeling of others. The associations of pleasure (pain) that are based upon experience are forged more powerfully and thus are stronger than associations created merely by using rewards or punishments.

<sup>55</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW, x. 230–1.



The second, related reason why such associations were different was that once they were created in sufficient strength, they would act in concert with and be supported by the sympathetic faculty (or fellow-feeling) which is natural to all human beings.<sup>56</sup> Remember that sympathy involves associating the pains and pleasures of another with analogous pains and pleasures in ourselves. '[Sympathy is not] an emotion, but ... the capacity of taking on the emotions, or mental states generally, of others.'<sup>57</sup> It is poetry, and not (in general) associations created using praise and blame, that allows us to experience feelings of pleasure (pain) that are directly connected to the feelings of pleasure (pain) of another person (the poet). The experience of feeling the emotions of others is thus an exercise of the sympathetic sentiments. In this way, the regard we feel for the pleasures and pains of others is bound up with our capacity to empathize with others and our sympathy with fellow creatures. Poetry, as that which allows the individual to experience the emotional states of others, is uniquely fitted to foster the sentiment of sympathy, since the experience of feeling the emotions of another connects with our sentiment of sympathy with fellow creatures. Recall the passage cited earlier:

They [Wordsworth's poems] seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings ...<sup>58</sup>

If the sympathetic sentiments can be developed well enough, then the association of pleasure with maximum happiness (pleasure) for all would not be dissolved.

But moral associations which are wholly of artificial creation, when intellectual culture goes on, yield by degrees to the dissolving force of analysis: and if the feeling of duty, when associated with utility, would appear equally arbitrary; if there were no leading department of our nature, no powerful class of sentiments, with which that association [of regard to the pleasures and pains of others] would harmonize ... if there were not, in short, a natural basis of sentiment for utilitarian morality – it might well happen that this association also, even after it had been implanted by education, might be analysed away. But there is this basis of powerful natural sentiment; and this it is which, when once the general happiness is recognized as the ethical standard, will constitute the strength of the utilitarian morality. This firm foundation is that of the social feelings of mankind; the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures, which is already a powerful principle in human nature ...<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Robson also makes this connection between poetry and sympathy. However, he does not argue extensively for the point. Although I agree with his assertion, I have attempted to develop it in more detail and to provide a clear assessment of the need for such a thesis in Mill's utilitarianism.

<sup>57</sup> 'Bain's Psychology', *CW*, xi. 162–3.

<sup>58</sup> *Autobiography*, *CW*, i. 151.

<sup>59</sup> *Utilitarianism*, *CW*, x. 230–31.

Now, Mill thought that both selfishness and sympathy with others were part of human nature.<sup>60</sup> The natural selfishness of humans is counteracted by the education and cultivation of the feeling of sympathy with others.<sup>61</sup> The sentiment of sympathy, or the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures, is necessary and is present in every person (unless there exist 'unusual circumstances' or there is an 'effort of voluntary abstraction'). This sort of sympathy is *impartial* in that the agent sees herself as part of a society of human beings where 'the interests of all are to be consulted'.<sup>62</sup> As societies develop, sympathy plays an important and necessary role in this development, and thus societies encourage it until it becomes the 'second nature' of their members.<sup>63</sup>

If it be said, that there must be the germs of all these virtues in human nature, otherwise mankind would be incapable of acquiring them, I am ready, with a certain amount of explanation, to admit the fact. But the weeds [of selfishness] that dispute the grounds with these beneficent germs [of sympathy], are themselves not germs but frankly luxuriant growths, and would, in all but some one case in a thousand, entirely stifle and destroy the former, were it not so strongly the interest of mankind to cherish the good germs in one another, that they always do so, in as far as their degree of intelligence (in this as in other regards still very imperfect) allows. It is through such fostering, commenced early, and not counteracted by unfavourable influences, that, in some happily circumstanced specimens of the human race, the most elevated sentiments of which humanity is capable become a second nature, stronger than the first, and not so much subduing the original nature as merging it into itself.<sup>64</sup>

Mill's remarks in his Inaugural Address suggest that it is aesthetic education that fosters the 'beneficent germ' of sympathy.<sup>65</sup> Art provides the link between moral feelings and sympathy with fellow creatures, since the contemplation of the 'higher pleasures' inspires us to have an 'elevated character'.<sup>66</sup> For Mill, the noblest quality of poetry is 'that of

<sup>60</sup> J. S. Mill, 'Nature', in *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, Toronto, 1963, *CW*, x, 394.

<sup>61</sup> 'Nature', *CW*, x, 394–6; *Utilitarianism*, *CW*, x, 231.

<sup>62</sup> *Utilitarianism*, *CW*, x, 231.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, *CW*, x, 231–2.

<sup>64</sup> 'Nature', *CW*, x, 396.

<sup>65</sup> Anderson makes this point as well: 'Mill thought it essential that a person's moral training appeal to sentiments cultivated by aesthetic and not just scientific training ... Aesthetic education provides this connection [between moral associations and the social sentiment of unity with fellow creatures], linking the moral sentiments with the sympathetic elements through the aesthetic ones ... Thus, aesthetic education inspires the feeling of unity with mankind which Mill thought necessary to support a utilitarian morality' ('John Stuart Mill', 15n).

<sup>66</sup> 'Inaugural Address', *CW*, xxi, 255. Fred R. Berger, *Happiness, Justice and Freedom: The Moral and Political Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, California, 1984, also argues that Mill thought that 'the idea of others experiencing pleasure through acts of our own can be itself pleasurable and be the cause of other acts.' Further, Berger discusses the link to sympathy via the associations we have with respect to the pleasures and pains of

acting upon the desires and characters of mankind through their emotions, to raise them towards the perfection of their nature'.<sup>67</sup>

There are few capable of feeling the sublimer order of natural beauty ... who are not, at least temporarily, raised by it above the littlenesses of humanity, and made to feel the puerility of the petty objects which set man's interests at variance, contrasted with the nobler pleasures which all might share ...<sup>68</sup>

Poetry connects to sympathy because poetry causes us to take on the emotions of others.<sup>69</sup> The feelings we have and the associations we

others. However, Berger does not develop the connection between poetry and these associations. '[Mill's] idea seems to have been that sympathy arises out of a process of association in which we experience pleasure in the pleasure of others, and pains in their pains' (p. 21). Berger suggests tentatively that we simply develop these associations via our interaction with others.

<sup>67</sup> J. S. Mill, 'Tennyson's Poems' in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, Toronto, 1981, *CW*, i. 414. The development of the link between the moral feelings and sympathy seems to be what Mill is emphasizing when he argues for the importance of 'character' ('Inaugural Address', *CW*, xxi. 255-6).

<sup>68</sup> 'Inaugural Address', *CW*, xxi. 255.

<sup>69</sup> Green also argues that aesthetic education is supposed to work in tandem with sympathy. Her thesis is that Mill's theory of poetry is part of a wider programme, put forward by English Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge, in which sympathy connects poetry to moral and social philosophy. The Romantics argued that poetry was the main vehicle for expanding and developing one's capacity for sympathy, and that to be virtuous one must be sensitive to the pains and pleasures of others. Green argues that Mill placed himself between this group and the Benthamites, arguing for the moderate view that sympathy, as opposed to self-interest, could become a motive for promoting a utilitarian society. According to Green, Mill attempted 'to show how poetry, by faithfully presenting human motives, inspired sympathy. In order to facilitate a sympathetic identification, poets must represent human feelings as accurately as possible ... If the poet does not present a true and recognizable expression of human emotion, he or she will be unable to prompt the reader's sympathy' ('Sympathy and the Social Value', 459-60). For more on the relationship between Mill and the Romantic poets, see Lawrence Poston, 'Poetry as Pure Act: A Coleridgean Ideal in Early Victorian England', *Modern Philology*, lxxxiv (1986), 162-84. Green seems to assume the connection between sympathy and poetry based upon the earlier work of Robson and Sharpless and her thesis that Mill was receptive to the philosophy of the Romantics. However, the references to Mill which are cited as justification for the poetry-sympathy connection do not clearly state the connection she makes (i.e. 'Bentham', *CW*, x. 113-14, *Autobiography*, *CW*, i. 112-15, 143-5, 151). Although I agree with much of Green's thesis and I find the connection between Mill and the Romantics enlightening, I think that the idea that, for Mill, poetry and sympathy are intimately related requires the additional justification, i.e. of the sort that I present above.

Burnstone criticizes Green, Robson and Alexander, arguing that they have over-emphasized the role of poetry in Mill's thought, and that the link between poetry and sympathy has not been effectively advocated. His position is that Mill encourages aesthetic education merely in order to promote the self-development of members of society, and that this sort of self-culture is 'better seen against the background of *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women*, than in the context of those parts of Mill's thinking which are directly focused on collective or co-operative virtues' ('The Very Culture', 103). However, Burnstone's criticism does not address the connection between Mill's theory of psychological associations and the problem of motivation of agents. The existence of this problem, the emphasis on poetry in Mill's autobiography, and the comments in many of the lesser known works cited in this paper, provide an argument against Burnstone's position. I take this paper to be an attempt 'effectively to advocate' the connection between Mill's theory of poetry and sympathy.

form as the result of reading poetry 'harmonize' with our natural inclination to associate our pleasure with the pleasure of others, or to 'identify our feelings more and more with their good, or at least with an ever greater degree of practical consideration for it'.<sup>70</sup> This harmony between the associations of regard to others and sympathy is developed by society, for it is in the best interests of society to encourage the idea that the interests of others are the same as the interests of the individual.<sup>71</sup>

Now, whatever amount of this feeling [that the interests of others are his own interests] a person has, he is urged by the strongest motives both of interest and of sympathy to demonstrate it. ... Consequently, the smallest germs of the feeling are laid hold of and nourished by the contagion of sympathy and the influences of education; and a complete web of corroborative association is woven around it, by the powerful agency of the external sanctions. This mode of conceiving ourselves and human life, as civilization goes on, is felt to be more and more natural. Every step in political improvement renders it more so ...<sup>72</sup>

The connection between the associations of regard to others and society's need to encourage fellow-feeling provides the key to the problem of the intellect. '[T]he delight which these poems gave me, proved that there was nothing to dread from the most confirmed habit of analysis.'<sup>73</sup> Since sympathy is firmly entrenched as a necessary condition for a healthy society, the associations of regard for others (which Mill thought could be developed or stimulated through poetry) can be strengthened and held fast by the society as well.

Not only does all strengthening of social ties, and all healthy growth of society, give to each individual a stronger personal interest in practically consulting the welfare of others; it also leads him to identify his *feelings* more and more with their good ... He comes, as though instinctively, to be conscious of himself as a being who *of course* pays regard to others. The good of others becomes to him a thing naturally and necessarily to be attended to, like any of the physical conditions of our existence.<sup>74</sup>

Not only does the association of regard to others harmonize with the natural sentiment of sympathy, but the development of the society of which the individual is a part encourages the association to become as

<sup>70</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW, x, 231.

<sup>71</sup> Sharpless argues that for Mill 'the development of the moral feelings depends upon an imaginative conception of the experience of others, when that experience is something of which we have no first hand knowledge. When we make this conscious effort to sympathize with others, and when our feelings have been cultivated to a proper degree of awareness and keenness, then, the concern for others becomes natural' (*The Literary Criticism*, 206).

<sup>72</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW, x, 232.

<sup>73</sup> *Autobiography*, CW, i, 152.

<sup>74</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW, x, 231-2.

though it were a necessary condition of existence. If a positive association with the good of others seems like a necessary part of one's existence, as necessary as eating when hungry or sleeping when tired, then it will not be seen as an arbitrary association. Instead, as a fundamental part of human existence, it will be seen as a natural need with which we associate pleasure when fulfilled, much as we associate pleasure with a good night's sleep or a rest after hard physical exercise. The harmony between the natural sentiment of sympathy and the association of regard to the pleasure (or the good) and pain of others causes the associations to be regarded by the intellect as though they were *physical* associations. This provides the answer to our problem with the intellect, for the physical associations are among the small class of associations which are immune from its dissolving force.<sup>75</sup> If an association seems necessary and natural, it will not be attacked as arbitrary when examined by the analytic mind.

The deeply-rooted conception which every individual even now has of himself as a social being, tends to make him feel it one of his natural wants that there should be harmony between his feelings and aims and those of his fellow creatures. If differences of opinion and of mental culture make it impossible for him to share many of their actual feelings ... he still needs to be conscious that his real aim and theirs do not conflict ... This feeling in most individuals is much inferior in strength to their selfish feelings, and is often wanting altogether. But to those who have it, it possesses all the characters of a natural feeling. It does not present itself to their minds as a superstition of education, or a law despotically imposed by the power of society, but as an attribute which it would not be well for them to be without. This conviction is the ultimate sanction of the greatest-happiness morality.<sup>76</sup>

In this way, the associations created by poetry are strengthened by the support of the human capacity for sympathy to the point where they are insoluble even by the potent force of a well-educated intellect.

If Mill did adopt the theory which I have attributed to him, he was able to fashion a thesis that could make his psychological theory of associations consistent with his utilitarian programme. The apparent tension between Mill's utilitarian goals and his views on associationist psychology that jeopardizes the motivation that agents have to pursue utilitarian ends can be resolved by recognizing the role of aesthetic education in fostering motivation. Mill's personal crisis and his larger philosophical worries about the feasibility and consistency of the utilitarian theory are resolvable by developing an approach where aesthetic education, the interests of society, and the natural capacity for sympathy effectively act to inhibit the dissolving force of the intellect with respect to the associations of regard to the pleasure and pain

<sup>75</sup> *Autobiography*, CW, i. 143.

<sup>76</sup> *Utilitarianism*, CW, x. 233.

of others. These associations could then motivate agents to pursue utilitarian ends. With the extermination of the debilitating threat posed by the 'perpetual worm at the root of the passions', Mill could consistently promote his utilitarian ideals.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> I am indebted to Sarah Buss, Roger Crisp, Elijah Millgram and John Skorupski for helpful comments which led to the improvement of this paper.