

**Freedom, Play and Judgment:
Michael Oakeshott on Education**

by
Christopher Gibson

L.L.B., University of Manchester, 1976

M.Ed., Simon Fraser University, 1999

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in the
Educational Leadership Program
Faculty of Education

© Christopher Gibson 2012
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Fall 2012

All rights reserved.

However, in accordance with the *Copyright Act of Canada*, this work may be reproduced, without authorization, under the conditions for "Fair Dealing." Therefore, limited reproduction of this work for the purposes of private study, research, criticism, review and news reporting is likely to be in accordance with the law, particularly if cited appropriately.

Approval

Name: Christopher Gibson
Degree: Doctor of Education
Title of Thesis: *Freedom, Play and Judgment:
Michael Oakeshott on Education*

Examining Committee:

Chair: Jean Warburton, Adjunct Professor

Geoff Madoc-Jones, Limited Term Senior Lecturer
Senior Supervisor

Patrick Keeney, Adjunct Professor
Co-Supervisor

Larry Johnson, Adjunct Professor
Committee Member

Kieran Egan, Professor
Internal/External Examiner

Hunter McEwan, Professor
College of Education, University of Hawaii
External Examiner

Date Defended/ Approved: October 12, 2012

Partial Copyright Licence



The author, whose copyright is declared on the title page of this work, has granted to Simon Fraser University the right to lend this thesis, project or extended essay to users of the Simon Fraser University Library, and to make partial or single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the library of any other university, or other educational institution, on its own behalf or for one of its users.

The author has further granted permission to Simon Fraser University to keep or make a digital copy for use in its circulating collection (currently available to the public at the “Institutional Repository” link of the SFU Library website (www.lib.sfu.ca) at <http://summit/sfu.ca> and, without changing the content, to translate the thesis/project or extended essays, if technically possible, to any medium or format for the purpose of preservation of the digital work.

The author has further agreed that permission for multiple copying of this work for scholarly purposes may be granted by either the author or the Dean of Graduate Studies.

It is understood that copying or publication of this work for financial gain shall not be allowed without the author’s written permission.

Permission for public performance, or limited permission for private scholarly use, of any multimedia materials forming part of this work, may have been granted by the author. This information may be found on the separately catalogued multimedia material and in the signed Partial Copyright Licence.

While licensing SFU to permit the above uses, the author retains copyright in the thesis, project or extended essays, including the right to change the work for subsequent purposes, including editing and publishing the work in whole or in part, and licensing other parties, as the author may desire.

The original Partial Copyright Licence attesting to these terms, and signed by this author, may be found in the original bound copy of this work, retained in the Simon Fraser University Archive.

Simon Fraser University Library
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

revised Fall 2011

Abstract

This dissertation is a study of the works of Michael Oakeshott, citing in particular his understandings of the way we learn to interpret the world around us, his views on the aesthetic and the moral, and his arguments against what he perceives as an overemphasis on rationalism. Central to this dissertation is the overlooked portion of the works of Oakeshott, his view of a human life as something to be enjoyed, a predicament in which we ought as much as possible to delight. The paper begins with Oakeshott's critique of the Post-Enlightenment celebration of and subsequent reliance on rationalism. It then discusses Oakeshott's ideas on how we come to understand this world of ideas, and examines his argument for the pre-eminence of a liberal education.¹ It turns next to a consideration of Oakeshott's ideas on the aesthetic and the moral, and the kind of life he finds most admirable, one in which play and Poetry² supersede the serious and the ideological. This latter concept is one that has so far been ignored. Oakeshott is discussed not as a conservative, elitist, or anachronism, but as a man who saw life as a brief adventure, a chance to enjoy the trivial, the poetic, the humorous, the serious and the absurd, accepting above all that we should wear our lives lightly.

This study concludes that Oakeshott's preference for a liberal education flows naturally from his predilection for a life that values the individual over the ideological.

Keywords: judgement; knowledge; poetry; idealism; play; morality

¹ I will treat the terms "liberal education" and "liberal learning" as synonymous in this paper.

² By Poetry, Oakeshott means to include the whole of the arts, "Painting, sculpting, acting, dancing, singing, literary and musical compositions" In *The Voice of Poetry*, RP p. 509.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and father. Both lived through times of rough wars and smooth politics, and both sacrificed much so that their children may have more.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the key people who have been helpful and supportive of me during the writing of this dissertation.

Dr. Geoff Madoc-Jones helped me navigate through the complex process of writing, formatting and submission, and was a valuable source of information throughout.

Dr. Keeney is a gifted writer and his input, suggestions and edits were of the utmost value.

Dr. Larry Johnson's careful reading and feedback for this thesis significantly improved this final edition.

The faculty and staff in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University have been unfailing helpful through classroom and personal discussions.

Peter Gibson advised me on the correct usage of the English language, and I am sincerely grateful for his suggestions and corrections.

Lastly I must acknowledge Victoria Dhaliwal, my sisters Marie and Anne, and my brothers, Ed, and Frank. All of you know why.

Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Partial Copyright Licence.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Table of Contents	vii
List of Abbreviations	ix
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 Reason and Tradition: Michael Oakeshott’s Critique of Rationalism	5
Personal History and Historical Background to Oakeshott’s Main Works	6
Oakeshott and Rationalism	9
Oakeshott’s Distinction between “Knowing How” and “Knowing What”	14
Morality, Tradition, and the Poetic Imagination	20
Judgement and Education	24
Chapter 2 The Individual among Citizens	27
The Failed Individual and the Rise of “Mass Man”	29
The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism.....	30
The Contrasting “Civil” and “Enterprise” Associations	36
Teaching and Learning the Language of “Civility”	43
Chapter 3 Oakeshott, Languages and Conversations	47
Education, Self-Understanding, and Culture	48
Education and the Languages of Understanding.....	50
The Understanding Self and the Liberal Arts	51
Learning as a Path to Individuality	54
Education as Understanding and Conversation.....	57
Chapter 4 Oakeshott and Aesthetics	61
The Importance of the Poetic.....	62
Oakeshott’s Developing Views on the Poetic	65
The Poetic and the Rational in Conversation.....	68
The Poetic and the Practical.....	70
Oakeshott’s Views on the Mistaken Beliefs about Poetry	75
Poetry and the World of Practice.....	78
Chapter 5 Morality and the Corruption of Consciousness.....	80
Myth and its Importance.....	82
Myth and the Tower of Babel.....	83
The Rationalist and the Inability to Create an Authentic Self	86

Education and the Morality of Habit	87
Education and the Authentic Self	89
The Connection between the Moral Self and the Liberal Arts.....	92
Chapter 6 Conclusion.....	96
References	104

List of Abbreviations

- EM *Experience and its Modes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1933
- HCA *Hobbes on Civil Association*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975
- MPME *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*. Edited by S. R. Letwin. New Haven: Yale University Press 1993
- OH *On History and Other Essays*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983
- OHC *On Human Conduct*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975
- PFPS *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism*. Edited by Timothy Fuller. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996
- RP *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Edited by Timothy Fuller. Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991
- RPML *Religion, Politics and the Modern Life*. Edited by Timothy Fuller. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993
- SJ "Shylock the Jew." *Caian* 30 (1921): 61-67
- VLL *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. Edited by Timothy Fuller. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989
- WIH *What is History?* Edited by Luke O'Sullivan. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004
- WP "Work and Play." *First Things* 54 (1995): 29-33

Introduction

The absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. (Kudera, 1984, p. 5)

Michael Oakeshott is a defender of modernity, accepting the contemporary human condition as one that is in Podoksik's (2003) words "a radical plurality resulting from fragmentation and individualization" (p. 32). He accepts the disappearance of the old hierarchies, in which church, state and social structures gave certainty and stability, but does not then conclude a relativistic, nihilistic worldview. Oakeshott accepts and celebrates modernity, applauding individuality and relishing the opportunities to live in the moment, and it is in this spirit of hope, optimism and celebration of life that I intend to examine Oakeshott's writings on the human experience, the Western tradition, and the role of education.

In fact, my main argument is that while Oakeshott (2006) was a distinguished scholar, steeped in classical and contemporary learning, his ideas about education come as much from his character as they do from his learning. His character has variously been described as "conservative, liberal, philosopher, opponent of rationality, postmodernist, polemicist, and skeptic" (p. 2). Clearly Oakeshott is hard to classify, but there are, I believe, important themes permeating his work. I will argue that Oakeshott is one of the few thinkers on education, politics, history, and the humanities who urges us not to imagine ourselves and our brief lives as a weighty, serious undertaking. He delights in the things that have no necessary instrumental value; poetry, love and friendship. Oakeshott believes the value of a human life is measured not in producing and consuming, but in the spaces between the practical, when as much as possible we can enjoy the moments of delight and contemplation.

I will proceed as follows. In the first chapter I will introduce Michael Oakeshott, giving a little of his personal history and the historical background to his writings. I then go on to give an overview of the main concepts in his works. I will discuss his main *oeuvres* in chronological order and discuss some of the important and consistent themes. An emphasis is placed on his view of

fragmentation and modernity, of his distrust and dislike of rationalism, and the importance he places on the distinction between “judgement” and “information,” the “knowing how” as opposed to the “knowing what,” the difference between “instructing” and “imparting” in education.

The second chapter is concerned with Oakeshott’s ideas around the individual and the modern concern with the role of the individual as one among many. Oakeshott applauds the individual, but is disparaging of the tendency of modern (Western) political systems to attempt to extinguish the self, substituting what he refers to a “mass man,” seeing politics as a series of problems to be solved in search of a better tomorrow at the expense of a playful today.

To illuminate his own ideas, Oakeshott introduces the dichotomy of the politics of faith and the politics of skepticism, the contrasting enterprise and civil associations, and the distinction between “education” and “training.” The metaphorical “trimmer” (one who keeps a boat on an even keel) is introduced to permit Oakeshott to give clear indication that his opposing examples are not the only exclusive ways of being, but are rather two horizons from which to view the world.¹

Chapter three is concerned specifically with Oakeshott’s (1975) idea of a liberal education, and his suggestions as to why he gives the humanities pre-eminence. Certain key themes will be recognised, specifically his dislike and distrust of the rationalist mind set, his discussion of the distinction between “knowing how” and “knowing what,” the role of both student and teacher, and the overriding context of the learning experience, that being the introduction of the pupil to the meanings, symbols and languages of our culture. Learning in effect what it means to be human, discerning meaning “in a unity in which the separate existence of text and context is resolved” (p. 4).

In Chapter four I expand the discussion of education to include Oakeshott’s views on the aesthetic experience. This topic is important in any understanding of Oakeshott, as it encapsulates what I will argue is his one overriding theme; that the most important part of life is “play” or enjoyment of the here and now, a stepping aside from the role of consumer or producer. It is

¹ There is some similarity in the metaphor of the Trimmer to sociologists use of Cybernetics, although Oakeshott appears to use the metaphor in a less complex manner.

within the language of what Oakeshott characterizes as “Poetry” that we may experience, albeit fleetingly, the delight and joy of the aesthetic moment; the unrehearsed, unscheduled, spontaneous reaction to a “pointless” work of art. Oakeshott, no sheltered academic,² was fully aware that the practical side of life inevitably dominated our existence, but was throughout his writings espousing the importance of that escape from the mundane and commonplace offered by Poetry. He decried the rationalist approach, whereby a human life is spent in search of projects to undertake in the hope of a brighter future. He (1993) describes this type of character thus. “The safe way is pursued, prudence is made a virtue, ... and for the sake of an hypothetical old man, who may bear his name thirty years hence, the young man hoards his energies and restrains his activities” (p. 31).

Chapter Five discusses Oakeshott’s views on the nature of morality, using in particular his interpretation of the well-known myth of the Tower of Babel. Oakeshott denies any instrumental use of Poetry, nevertheless I maintain that Oakeshott’s use of myth and story allows us to extrapolate from Poetry some guides on living well or morally, some signposts that help point the way to a richer understanding of our cultures’ “intimations.” From this can be deduced a “purpose,” albeit a very broad one, for education, and in particular the humanities.

In the concluding chapter I draw together what I see as the main components of Oakeshott’s world view, highlighting his use of the metaphor of conversation, and his constant use of dichotomy to illustrate not the exclusive positions and situations possible, but the boundaries of our world between which we compromise and negotiate in the continuous search to discover who we believe ourselves to be. The overarching aim is to locate liberal education within the world of practice.

“Why is it?” asks Robin Barrow (2005), “that a view of education as straightforward, persuasive and crucial as Oakeshott’s cannot get any purchase in the real world? Why, more generally, is a view of education as something

² During the Second World War Oakeshott served in France with the “Phantom” reconnaissance group in the rank of Captain.

essentially to do with developing the *mind*, which one could argue is, in outline, shared by all philosophers, nonetheless in practice ignored altogether?" (p. 53).

I believe that the works of Michael Oakeshott should be taken seriously; the liberal arts need to have a voice. Oakeshott argues that this is a loud and clear voice that says that education is for the mind, not the workplace. It is the means whereby we can make sense of our world, and thereby improve it as we pass through. It is an ongoing conversation with our contemporaries, our predecessors, and ourselves. It is the language of self-improvement and self awareness, and it is a voice that must be heard in the conversation of contemporary societies if we are to free ourselves from what Oakeshott describes as the tyranny of "barbaric affluence" (VLL, pp. 90-91).

Chapter 1

Reason and Tradition: Michael Oakeshott's Critique of Rationalism

The history of the liberal arts in the West shows this field of study is not a restrictive canon, nor a careless conglomeration of miscellany, but a body of work reflective of the culture, norms, traditions and practices of successive generations. There is contained in the liberal arts a sustained critical self reflection, an ongoing examination of public and private mores, an insatiable curiosity of the natural and social world, and a steadfast refusal to accept laws, customs or habits on the basis of appeals to authority. A liberal education in the western intellectual tradition is an education that invites its students to partake in the adventure that is the understanding of the self and the culture into which the self has been thrust.

This type of education, and the universities traditionally charged with its guardianship, are under threat¹ The accuracy of these dire prognoses is, of course, contested. Nevertheless, it is pertinent in the present climate of the seemingly unstoppable march towards the academic ascendancy of the practical, the vocational, and the economically viable to revisit the ideal of liberal education; to rediscover the joys of the non-instrumental, to suggest the benefits of a retreat from what Hegel called the *hic et nunc*² (the here and now)

¹ See for example Nussbaum, M. (2010). *Not for profit: why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton University Press; Bloom, A. (1987). *The Closing of the American Mind* New York: Simon and Shuster; D'Souza, D. (1991). *Illiberal education: The politics of race and sex on campus*. New York: The Free Press; Kimball, R. (1990). *Tenured Radicals: How politics has corrupted our higher education*. New York: Harper Collins.

² Cited by Oakeshott in Oakeshott, M. (1989). *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education* (p. 24). Timothy Fuller (Ed.). New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

and to advocate for an education that strives to enlighten our often darkened view of ourselves and our place in the world.

My intention is to put forward an argument on behalf of the liberal arts using the work of Michael Oakeshott. The significance of Oakeshott's (1989, p. 45) writings is his locating of education, and by this he means an education in the liberal arts, in what he refers to (citing Dilthey) as humankind's *geistige Welt* (Spirit World). This world is not a disembodied place, a world of phantoms and specters, but the concrete world of perceptions and experiences, the cultural world. Oakeshott sees education not as an adjunct to life, but as a lifelong endeavour to become who we are, or more specifically to learn to become who we are.

PERSONAL HISTORY AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO OAKESHOTT'S MAIN WORKS

Michael Oakeshott was born in Kent, England in 1901, the son of an agnostic father and an orthodox Christian mother. (Religion is of significance to Oakeshott throughout his life, and according to Grant (2003) "the mystical sense, the conviction that there is another dimension to everyday existence than the merely visible never left Oakeshott.") What makes Oakeshott himself, a middle class, privileged, conservative Englishman of the twentieth century worthy of study is his worldview in general and what he has to say about a liberal education in particular. His philosophy is relevant for western universities in the twenty first century. In the time of G.W. Bush's "No child left behind," Obama's "Race to the top" and his praise of Singapore for spending "less time on teaching things that don't matter and more time on teaching things that do" (Nussbaum, 2009) (i.e., anything unconnected to economic success), and the evidence from recent Canadian elections on the decline of young voter turnout, the view of education as a skill-training ground, as a preparation for the world of work, not play, seems prevalent.

There is certainly about Michael Oakeshott a whiff of nostalgia, a pining for an unspecified golden age in an unidentified past century. The casual

reader can glimpse a man weary of “rough wars and smooth politics.”³ Even his contemporaries considered him outdated. In a 1963 review of Oakeshott’s seminal paper *Rationalism in Politics*, George Catlin (as cited in Corey, 2006) commented that Oakeshott’s political theory was “about contemporary with Noah, that great navigator in the vastly general” (p. 262). David Kettler (as cited in Corey, 2006) posted a similarly unflattering review, referring to Oakeshott as “antique and irrelevant” (p. 259).

To suggest however that Oakeshott is somehow anachronistic, somehow dismissive of the modern world, is to misapply his general sentiments to a specific period of time. Oakeshott was not Luddite in the generally accepted meaning of that term; he was against “scientism” but not science. He was opposed to the shallow pursuit of those luxuries that technology can provide, not against the things in themselves. Oakeshott was opposed not to fads and fancies, but to the degree in which these trivialities were venerated. He was opposed to the bleak and shallow conversations and debates, the meaningless clichés of modern discourse, the slogans and the stereotyping. This uttering of banalities Oakeshott (1989) likened wonderfully to “the barking of a dog at the echo of its own yelp” (p. 41).

To give Oakeshott’s views a more concrete foundation it is helpful to examine briefly the political and historical times in which he lived.⁴ His life spanned most of the twentieth century, and he therefore witnessed two devastating World Wars, even joining the Army in 1941 and serving in Europe. More importantly he lived through the decline of the British Empire, the rise of the Welfare State, the Cold War, and the attempt to transform the British economy into the new technological age.

In the years after the Second World War, Britain had major economic problems, with a huge debt and shortages of the most basic products. The welfare state was being implemented, and the economy strictly planned, neither of which developments Oakeshott favoured. Economically, the plans

³ I am indebted to M. Fuller for this phrase. See Fuller, M. (1998). *Making Sense of MacIntyre* Althenaeum Press.

⁴ For a more complete version of the historical and political changes, and the response of Oakeshott, see Curtis, B. (2005). Against the Grain: Michael Oakeshott on the idea of a liberal education. *Journal of Philosophy and the History of Education*, 5.

were successful. Britain was free of the support of the Marshall Plan by the 1950s. The reforms in the post war society went beyond the economic to the domestic, and in particular to the education system. Wartime coalition governments, and commissioned reports from both Labour and Conservative Governments, stressed the need in this post-war, technological age for both the reorganization and expansion of the education system.

The Butler Act of 1944 and the Barlow Committee Report of 1946 put forward plans for both the K-12 system and the post-secondary system, urging a more planned, scientific, technological type of education. Politicians, industrialists, philosophers and social scientist continued the call for education for a technocratic age for most of the decade, a call which of course implied planning and social engineering, and which had implications for the type of education to be funded by the governments. The Barlow Report of 1946, for example, recommended doubling the production of graduates in science and technology from British universities. Michael Shattock (1996) says that this “cast a long shadow through the 1950s with the concern for a prolonged national investment in scientific and technological education at university level” (pp. 1-27).

In that current economic and social climate, these proposals were not unpopular or unreasonable. As Curtis (2005) explains: British corporations and industries needed a new generation of scientists and engineers for research on new products, machines, and other equipment to produce them. Scientists and engineers were also necessary if Britain were to remain a world power. The military occupation of part of West Germany and the cold war demanded that the armed forces not be reduced to the size of the pre-war limited force, but be maintained at a level that would enable Britain to project its power as a partner in the Atlantic Alliance. This attitude was especially evident in the generation coming to power after the war that stubbornly refused to allow any hint of future appeasement as it became clear that the Soviet Union was a menacing totalitarian state that threatened world stability. In addition, the decision to pursue the development of nuclear power furthered the need for increases in the scientific and technological communities (p. 52).

OAKESHOTT AND RATIONALISM

There was a body of intellectual opinion (including Oakeshott's) that was decidedly against scientific and technological planning and the attendant implications for the education system. In his article "*Rationalism in Politics*," which appeared in *The Cambridge Review* in 1947, Oakeshott derided what he considering to be the "rationalist" way of thinking. This way, the way he saw the modern social planners thinking, sought to solve all problems by the application of reason alone. They need not be students of history, or culture, or philosophy, simply reasonable and rational. The "Rationalist," according to Oakeshott, "never doubts the power of his 'reason' (when properly applied) to determine the worth of a thing, the truth of an opinion or the propriety of an action." This confidence of the Rationalist, according to Oakeshott (as cited in Curtis, 2005), is firmly seated in the Enlightenment belief that reason is common to all humans, that it serves as the foundation of argument, and that an honest and clear thinker will think as he or she does (p. 53).

Oakeshott's critique of rationalism largely shaped his understanding of knowledge and consequently of the way the education system should be arranged. He believed with Aristotle (and, more recently, Alasdair MacIntyre) that there are two forms of knowledge, the technical and the practical. The technical can be "taught." It lies in manuals, in written rules and regulations, can be demonstrated physically. Practical knowledge, however, can only be "imparted and acquired. It exists only in practice, and the only way to acquire it is by apprenticeship to a master (1991, pp. 5-6)." Rationalism, asserted Oakeshott, contains at bottom an epistemological fallacy which is the belief only in technical knowledge. Practical knowledge is seen as nonsensical or fallacious. If reason is the only supremacy, then technique is supreme. To rationalist thought, technical knowledge begins in absolute ignorance and ends in certainty. "What the Rationalist fails to understand," says Curtis (2005) in his explanation of Oakeshott's position, "is that the acquisition of any form of knowledge is the result of reconstructing that which is already in the mind. Thus the illusion that practical knowledge is complete ends in the illusion of certainty" (p. 53). Taking this further down a dark and dangerous road, and borrowing from O.W. Holmes (as cited in Watson, 2001), we might say that "certitude leads to violence" (p. 74).

To allow Oakeshott's thoughts to illuminate a discussion on the place of the liberal arts in contemporary western societies, certain concepts must be drawn out of his writings. This is no easy task, and he was notoriously vague on any practical aspects of his thoughts. He often changed his mind and his focus without much in the way of explanation. Nevertheless some key ideas can be distilled from his work, themes that retained some consistency over the period of his *oeuvres*, and it is with these themes that I hope to illustrate the importance of the liberal arts not as an adjunct to everyday life, but as a way of understanding, interpreting and flourishing in everyday life.

Oakeshott maintained throughout his life the idea that we are all inheritors of a culture, a tradition, that we must learn. In this spirit, it seems appropriate to examine briefly the culture and tradition that Oakeshott himself was introduced to. He has variously been described as a "moderate conservative," liberal, "post modern bourgeois liberal" and "unequivocal modernist," all these different labels cited by Podoksik's book (2010, p. 21) on Oakeshott.

Podoksik contends that Oakeshott's (1978) first important piece of work, *Experience and Its Modes*, was not an anachronistic exercise in nineteenth century British Idealism⁵ but a contemporary exploration of the current philosophical thought in Europe. Oakeshott's work was a response to and a critique of an earlier work by R.G. Collingwood (1924). Collingwood, a British Idealist, had put forward a now familiar (and still contemporary⁶) view of the malaise of modern society, stemming from a post-enlightenment loss by mankind of a sense of mental unity, where religion, art, science, community and culture were in harmony. Today, Collingwood argued, each "form of experience" (pp. 39, 48) battles for supremacy in an attempt to prove that one is the answer, that one is a superior form of knowledge. There is, however, no adjudication outside of the different forms of experience with which to judge the better argument, and so no conclusion is seemingly possible. Collingwood,

⁵ Franco, P. (2004). The book took over thirty years to sell the first thousand copies. p. 7.

⁶ See for example MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After Virtue*. Second Edition. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, for a contemporary view of the fragmentation of modern liberalist capitalist life, and the confusion caused by a post Enlightenment reliance on individualism, rationalism, and an idea of a telos.

drawing on a map of knowledge, argues however that the separation of the forms of knowledge is impossible to maintain, and suggests that perhaps there is some way to reconcile the different experiences, (what Podiksik [2010] refers to as a “neo-Hegelian” point of view [p. 18]).

Oakeshott’s concern in *Experience and Its Modes* is also the subject of fragmentation post-enlightenment, but his position is very different. Oakeshott maintains, (and this viewpoint Podiksik [2010] describes as “neo-Kantian” [p. 18]) that the different modes of experience, and here Oakeshott is talking specifically about Science, History and Practice, are separate and autonomous ways of looking at the world. He agrees post-enlightenment society is disjointed, whereas previously, society was static and certain. People had a fixed place and a role in society, and there was a hierarchy of knowledge, with religion at the apex of this pyramid. There was further the metaphor of the “great chain of being,” whereby the universe was a hierarchical structure organized by God, with each chain of superior or inferior importance. The rise of science and the scientific method, and the demotion of the influence of God, led people to the conclusion that they could pursue their own paths, move out of predetermined social roles, find a life that suited them, all without fear of divine retribution.

Experience and Its Modes follows the traditional Idealist viewpoint to a certain extent. Following Neill’s (2010) summation, Oakeshott argues firstly that there is no such thing as experience without thought (p. 20). We do not decide on the meaning of an experience from the experience itself, but rather interpret the experience in light of other experiences we have had, so that “there is never in experience ... and original, distinguishable from ... interpretation” (Oakeshott, 1933, pp. 31-32). Flowing from this, the only way we can ascertain the truth of an experience is in light of our other experiences. Consequently, “experience is always a coherent world of ideas” (p. 46). Our reality then is “a single system” (p. 48) and as Neill (2010) explains, “the only experience that is truly coherent and complete is one that encompasses the whole of experience—anything less that this will be partial, unfinished and abstract” (p. 21). Lastly, Oakeshott (1933) deems philosophy to be the search for absolute coherence, describing the activity of philosophizing as an engagement where “experience is sought and followed entirely for its own sake” (p. 82).

Oakeshott thus far has outlined the basic Idealist outlook, but where he departs from the traditional, breaking significantly with fellow Idealists F. H. Bradley (who he admired) and R. G. Collingwood, is in his insistence on the separation of the modes of understanding as distinct attempts to understand the whole of experience. History, Science and Practice are not attempting to define experience within their defined area, but are trying to understand experience as a whole. Consequently, conclusions arrived at in one mode are irrelevant in another. The world of science deals with quantifiable data (and hence his distrust of some social sciences which attempt to combine the quantitative with the qualitative), the world of history deals with what is purely in the past, and the pragmatic world is the attempt to move from what is to what ought to be. Philosophy can help towards an understanding of these modes, but it can in no way offer practical advice to the world of practice. "What is farthest from our needs" he wrote, "is that kings should be philosophers." (Oakeshott, 1933, pp. 319-21).

Oakeshott's *Experience and Its Modes* distinguishes itself in two other important ways. Firstly, Oakeshott applauds and celebrates the different modes both for their sound intellectual bases and the undoubted benefits conferred by their achievements. He approves of science and the world of causality, of history and the world of non-causality, and of the pragmatic. ("Great achievements are accomplished in the mental fog of practical experience" [Oakeshott, 1933, pp. 319-21].) Secondly, Oakeshott recognizes the fragmentation that occurred post Enlightenment and celebrates it. He sees the rise of the individual as a good thing. Oakeshott in this respect has a refreshingly optimistic worldview.

This worldview of Oakeshott in his earlier writings shows him to be a defender of modernism, or what Podoksik (2010) prefers simply to call "western civilization" (p. 28). By this phrase Podoksik implies the "developments and ideas such as objectivity, secularisation, science, aesthetic enjoyment, individualism, liberalism and many others" (p. 25). It is important for an understanding of Oakeshott's worldview to acknowledge the main themes that remained somewhat consistent throughout his life and are components of his thoughts on the nature of becoming human, on the role of government, and on the nature of education. Oakeshott was always a person of

his time, commentating and responding to the issues of his day. (This is not to be confused with his ideal of an education being a removal from the here and now.) *Experience and Its Modes* was not an anachronism, but a contribution to the current European philosophical debates of the day around modernism and fragmentation. His insistence on the separation of the modes of experience stayed with him throughout his life, although the incommensurability aspect he somewhat modified to include some dialogue between them, or more famously “conversation.” He remained convinced of the nature of philosophy as one of explanation, not of practical advice. (A point overlooked by those who claimed him to be the philosophical bases of the Thatcherite years.) Oakeshott was consistent in his belief that experience was a consistent whole, and was in consequence unimpressed by the ideological and the teleological, seeing these as motivation to action on the basis of a partial understanding or extraction from the whole.

It is this last point, that the world of experience is held together by its coherence, that points to Oakeshott’s criticism of rationalism, and to his belief that tradition is the sentiment that holds together the Western tradition. This position Oakeshott (1991) articulated in *Rationalism in Politics*, an essay initially published in the *Cambridge Journal* in 1947 and later included in a set of essays published in 1962. Oakeshott is clearly writing in response to the post-war social planning of the Attlee Labour Government, with the advent of the Welfare State and more obvious government intervention into the lives of citizens. This was not however his first disdainful comments on rationalism. As early as 1932 Oakeshott had written an essay on Bentham.⁷ The rationalist, he wrote (1991), “has a genius ... for *making* life and the business of life rational rather than for *seeing* the reason for it, for inculcating precise order, no matter at what expense, rather than for apprehending the existence of a subtle order in what appears to be chaotic ... it denies the traditions of the past” (p. 139).

Oakeshott maintains this theme in *Rationalism in Politics*. In the very first paragraphs he outlines the two main themes of the essay, the first being the debt each movement, ideology or trend inevitably owes to a past tradition. He

⁷ Oakeshott, M. (1991). *The New Bentham in Rationalism in Politics* op. cit. Originally published in *Scrutiny* Volume 1, 1932.

speaks of the modern day rationalism for example as having a “pedigree,” or reflecting a “more distant past,” by arriving at its present incarnation “by one road or another” (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 5). The second theme is the “character and disposition of the Rationalist,” and on these Rationalists he launches a polemic attack, drawing an almost cartoon like representation (and drawing also the criticism of putting forward a Straw Man argument) Oakeshott writes:

At bottom he stands (he always *stands*) for independence of mind on all occasions, for thought free from obligation to any authority save the authority or “reason.” His circumstances in the modern world have made him contentious: he is the *enemy* of authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional, customary or habitual. His mental attitude is at once skeptical, and optimistic: skeptical, because there is no opinion, no habit, no belief, nothing so firmly rooted or so widely held that he hesitates to question it and to judge it by what he call his “reason”; optimistic because the Rationalist never doubts the power of his “reason” (when properly applied) to determine the worth of a thing, the truth of an opinion or the propriety of an action. (p. 7)

OAKESHOTT’S DISTINCTION BETWEEN “KNOWING HOW” AND “KNOWING WHAT”

Oakeshott stresses at length his belief that the supreme fault of the rationalist is the error of cutting oneself off from one’s tradition. The rationalist, Oakeshott (1991) contends:

has no sense of the cumulation of experience, ... there are some minds which give us the sense that they have passed through an elaborate education which was designed to initiate them in to the traditions and achievements of their civilization; the immediate impression we have of them is an impression of cultivation, of the enjoyment of an inheritance. But this is not so with the mind of the Rationalist. (p. 7)

The mind of the rationalist, according to Oakeshott (1991), is one that is well trained rather than well educated. It is a mind “cut off from the traditional knowledge of his society, one that denies the value of education more extensive than a training in a technique of analysis” (p. 7). Oakeshott’s focus here is on the influence of rationalism on political activity, a negative influence which at this stage in his writings Oakeshott describes as an epistemological error, “a misconception with regard to the nature of human knowledge” (p. 37). The

Rationalists, to Oakeshott, possess a mind that sees only one form of knowledge, the “technical knowledge.” This knowledge is that which can be reduced to “rules, principles, directions, (and) maxims ... It can be learned from a book ... repeated by rote and applied mechanically” (p. 12).

There is another form of knowledge that Oakeshott introduces, and that is “practical knowledge.” This is knowledge that could be described as traditional knowledge, and exists “only in use.” Practical knowledge is not susceptible to precise formulation, it is expressed “in a customary or traditional way of doing things, or, simply, in practice ... it can neither be taught or learned, but only imparted and acquired ... by apprenticeship to a master” (p. 15). There is a clear link to the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* here, and doubtless Oakeshott wishes us to make this connection further to strengthen his notion of a Western tradition.⁸

The practical knowledge Oakeshott (1975) variously describes as “artistry,” “connoisseurship,” “style” and “judgment,” (p. 15). and the technical form of knowledge that which can “be taught and learned in the simplest meanings of these words.” They are distinct forms of knowledge, but are completely inseparable, and this conjoined nature is an important concept to understand at this point in Oakeshott’s thinking.⁹ For as Oakeshott is attempting to describe the rise of the political rationalist mind, he is also concerned about the normative aspect of political behaviour. To act politically is presumably to propose a course of action that is considered by the actors to be good, it is to ascribe an “ought” to a policy or ideology. If, as Oakeshott maintains all activity is the marrying of the practical and the technical, the question arises as to which form of knowledge should influence the “ought,” and secondly from where does moral behaviour spring?

⁸ Oakeshott draws a distinction between himself and the Aristotelian *phronesis*, explaining that Aristotle’s *phronesis* “was primarily his understanding of how to act rightly, I am concerned with the understanding implicit both in acting and in acting rightly.” Oakeshott, M. (1975). *On Human Conduct* (p. 89). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁹ Oakeshott appears up to this point to be attributing an epistemological fault to the rise of rationalism, whereas in later publications he seems to give a more historical account.

In *Rationalism in Politics* and subsequent essays in the 1940s and 1950s¹⁰ Oakeshott attempted to flesh out his ideas on rationalism, moral behaviour, the role practical and technical knowledge, and the importance of tradition. He identifies the rationalist problem in politics in the belief that the scientific method of enquiry can locate true knowledge of an event or situation, that from this form of enquiry a set of rules to apply to the event of situation can be formulated, and that these rules can be applied across the whole of society to effect a cure. The origin of this method of thought Oakeshott believes is traceable to the Enlightenment (and in particular to the origins of the scientific method of inquiry attributed traditionally to Descartes and Bacon).

Rationalism's rise to preeminence in Western politics Oakeshott (1991) attributes to "the incursion ... (into European politics) of at least three types of political inexperience-that of the new ruler, of the new ruling class, and of the new political society-to say nothing of the incursion of a new sex ..." (p. 28). The new ruler, according to Oakeshott, is not educated in the exercise of political power, and grasps on to a technique. This "short cut to education" (p. 29) was first provided by Machiavelli, who supplied what Oakeshott refers to as a "crib." This crib was "a technique for a ruler who had no tradition" who was far more likely "than the educated hereditary ruler to get himself into a tricky situation and to need the help of advice" (p. 30). Other cribs are mentioned by Oakeshott; Locke's *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, the writings of Bentham and Godwin, (who "cover up all trace of the political habit and tradition of their society") (p. 31) and in particular the work of Marx and Engels. The example given of the new political society is that of the United States around the time of independence, "a civilization of pioneers ... of self-consciously self-made men. Rationalists by circumstance and not by reflection ... who need no persuasion that knowledge begins with a *tabula rasa*" (p. 32).

This brief account¹¹ of the rise of rationalism in politics, described by Franco (2004) as "curiously truncated and uncomplicated" (p. 86) and his

¹⁰ See for example *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*, with five additional prefaces by F.A. Ogg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; New York.) 1942, "The Tower of Babel," *Cambridge Journal*, 2 (1948-9), pp. 67-83, *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (London: Bowes and Bowes), 1959 p. 63.

¹¹ A more full explanation of Oakeshott's views on the rise of rationalism is given in a polemical essay *The Masses in Representative Democracy in Rationalism in Politics* (1991).

previous expounding of the ideas of practical and technical knowledge and the centrality of tradition contain the bases of Oakeshott's view of the disastrous rise of rationalism in western politics and the inadequacies of ideologies. Political enterprises, the ends that they pursue and the means chosen to pursue them, cannot be thought out "in advance of a manner of attending to the arrangements of a society; *what* we do, and moreover what we want to do, is the creature of *how* we are accustomed to conduct our affairs" (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 53). As Spitz (1976) summarizes this point, "An ideology is the step child, not the parent, of political activity; it is the mere abridgement of a concrete manner of an already existing behaviour" (pp. 335-337). The rational, the technical, cannot spring forth independent of the practical, the traditional. Our tradition, or it could be said our culture, is a whole way of comprehending the world. An ideology is an abstraction, a part masquerading as a whole, and is therefore dangerously seductive. It appears to be a logical contrivance, a set or rules or principles designed by a rational mind, unencumbered by distracted thoughts of other, irrelevant problems. The ideology seems to offer a way from this position *x*, which is undesirable, to the new position *y*, which is where we *ought* to be. The rationalist offers a new reality, a new destination. The change may be labeled "revolutionary," or possibly a "paradigm shift."

Oakeshott's riposte to the rationalist and the technician¹² is to reaffirm the preeminence of tradition. All skill, all knowledge, is based not on precise formulae but on a body of habits and customs ("intimations") that underpin our actions. The chef, as Oakeshott illustrates, is not a person who can follow a recipe but a person skilled in the art of cookery. The chef is the product certainly of technical training, but what makes that person a chef is the exposure to and assimilation of the traditions passed on by an apprenticeship with a master chef.

For Oakeshott, the ignoring of tradition in politics and the adoption of the technical over the practical is simply to lurch from crises to crises, trading one unsatisfactory position for another. The rationalist cannot foresee the ramifications of his or her plans, cannot know whether or not the outcomes will match the predictions. You cannot, in Oakeshott's (1991) view, escape the

¹² Remembering of course that this definition is one given initially by Oakeshott himself.

errors inevitably caused by a rejection of tradition. The rationalists have rejected “in advance the only external inspiration capable of correcting error” (p. 37) have in Oakeshott’s phrase turned out the light and are then complaining that they cannot see.

In short then, the rationalist in politics uses abridgement as an illusion of the whole, tries to extrapolate single and simplistic ideals such as justice, freedom or equality and from these single intimations formulate a policy, a solution, that purports to move society along, presumably to some utopia in which all needs are met and all problems solved. Oakeshott however does not subscribe to this notion of history. He agrees neither with the Platonic view of the ideal state nor with Hobbes and his ideas on the reasonableness of rational conduct. Oakeshott believes that tradition is the foundation of rationality. Oakeshott (1991) writes:

Concrete activity is knowing how to act; and if “rationality” is to be properly attributed to conduct, it must be a quality of the conduct itself. On this principle, practical human conduct may be counted rational in respect of its faithfulness to a knowledge of how to behave well, in respect of its faithfulness to its tradition of moral activity. No action is by itself “rational,” or is rational on account of something that has gone on before; what makes it “rational” is its place in a flow of sympathy, a current of moral activity. And there is no ground here upon which we may exclude *a priori* any type of action. (pp. 129-130)

There is then no *telos*, no unfolding of history as one continuum from simple and humble beginnings as cave dwellers to some future mature and complete state of being. Acorns may grow into oak trees, but it is not the nature of human societies to follow a predetermined path from simple and incomplete to complex and perfect. This is the error of the rationalist. The assumption that rules can be devised, outside of a tradition, to improve the tradition. Oakeshott is not denying the undoubted value of the technical; he is in fact a strong supporter of the scientific. What he is arguing is that we have no guide in our political journey but our own past habits, our own culture. Our best hope, indeed our only hope, is to maintain our position. Oakeshott (1991) maintains that:

In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel. The sea is both friend and enemy, and the seamanship

consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behavior in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion. (p. 60)

In Oakeshott's (1991) own words, this is "a depressing doctrine" (p. 60). It appears to confine mankind to a drab determinism, with aspirations only to mediocrity. Oakeshott, however, is a writer of optimism. He maintains that the picture of depression dissipates when one considers the situation more thoroughly. If we are depressed or discouraged, then it is because we have been given false hope, sold to us by false prophets. There never was in politics a solution, a natural progression to perfection, a panacea to cure all dysfunction and disharmony.

The rationalist politician errs, according to Oakeshott, when he or she believes that practical behavior springs from the intellectual musings prior to and independent of the actual behaviour. This assumption that "theory" can be turned into "practice" is to Oakeshott a gross misunderstanding. Practice always precedes the formulating of rules and procedures. A recipe does not appear prior to the baking of a cake, but rather the activity of baking produces the recipe. Conduct and belief are inseparable. Rayner gives an excellent account of the distinction in Oakeshott's writings between the "accusation" that he is a conservative and the actual context of his work, which seeks to explain behaviour not to recommend it. Rayner (1985, pp. 313-338) writes that for Oakeshott:

properly understood, mind is the activity of drawing such distinctions as right and wrong, true and false, reasonable and unreasonable; this is what constitutes mind. Moreover, mind is expressed in conduct, in utterance and action. Abstract from conduct the activities in which judgments are expressed and distinctions drawn, and what is left is "not pure intelligence, but nothing at all." (RP, p. 90)

This notion that practice precedes technical knowledge is the foundation for Oakeshott's statements that political activity is the "pursuit of intimations" (RP, p. 133). The criticism that Oakeshott is simply suggesting a return to an out dated, "conservative" political system is incorrect. He is merely stating what in fact happens. Decisions are not formulated from a detached, "rational" theory but are always contingent on our beliefs and practices. There is nothing outside of experience. Discussing Oakeshott's liberal theory, Coats (1985) writes:

The best political guide remains careful consideration of proposed policies and legislation in the light of practices and traditions which are their wider context with an eye and ear for what is “intimated,” or tacitly acknowledged or does not range so far from existing practices as to be unconvincing.¹³

MORALITY, TRADITION, AND THE POETIC IMAGINATION

Thus far Oakeshott has been discussing the political actor, but what of the status of moral decisions? Oakeshott (1991) again stresses the importance of tradition his essay *The Tower of Babel*. The story is familiar enough. The people of a relatively successful community wish to acquire the bounty that is presumably stored in heaven, and apply all their physical and emotional resources towards building a means of reaching the heavens and from then hope to plunder what they may. Clearly for Oakeshott this tower of Babel represents what he would later term an enterprise association, whereby a society is in this case wrenched from its traditional base to embark on a project with dubious provenance and even more dubious prognosis.

The Tower of Babel is Oakeshott’s (1991) vehicle for examining what he refers to as “the moral life of the Western world” (p. 467) and his aim is to stress again the notion of tradition as the foundation for our actions and beliefs. He suggests in this essay that there are two forms of moral life. The first he describes as “a habit of affection and behaviour ... nothing more than the unreflective following of a tradition of conduct in which we have been brought up” (p. 468). This habit of conduct is not based on rules or precepts, but is rather acquired by living among people who habitually behave in a certain manner. As we acquire our language, so we acquire our moral compass. A person has this form of morality when they act morally not in response to rules or ideals, but in response to a feeling that this is who they are.

This morality based on tradition has for Oakeshott the advantage of stability and flexibility. Custom is “always adaptable and susceptible to the *nuance* of the situation ... rigidity and stability are foreign to its character.”

¹³ O’Sullivan, L. (2003, p. 3). Notes that Oakeshott said of this article by Coats that it “makes better sense of ... what I have written than I managed to make myself.”

Custom is flexible in the same way that a language is flexible. There is constant though subtle alteration, as “habits of moral conduct show no revolutionary changes because they are never at rest.” These subtle shifts do not amount to moral self-criticism but an “unselfconscious exploitation of the genius of the tradition of moral conduct” (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 471).

The second type of moral life Oakeshott describes is one where activity is determined “not by a habit of behaviour but by the *reflective application of a moral criterion*. It appears in two common varieties: as *the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals*, and as *the reflective observance of moral rules*.” This form of moral life is one in which actions follows contemplation on the rule or the end to be pursued. It is a morality which could be equated to the present concern with political correctness. The spontaneity, the movement to action is delayed whilst the actor considers whether or not the action conforms to the current mode of moral thought. The act itself becomes subordinate to the moral rules that have to be followed.

The education relevant to the differing types of moral life, the one based on tradition and the one based on reflection, are founded on what Oakeshott (1989) would later describe more fully as the distinction between “judgement” and “information,” (p. 54) the knowing “how” as opposed to the knowing “what.” In assimilating “judgement,” “we acquire habits of conduct not by construction a way of living upon rules or precepts learned by heart and subsequently practiced, but by living with people who habitually behave in certain manner: we acquire habits of conduct in the same way as we acquire our native language” (p. 468). Like language, this type of judgement is only truly assimilated once it becomes a habit without thought of following rules and precepts. In learning a language, the novice has to pause to reflect on the correct grammar, or use of vocabulary. If the language learned is a second language, then the learner has to think in the first language and laboriously translate mentally in the second. When this second language comes naturally and initially to mind then the language is learned. In similar fashion, Oakeshott’s position is that “the education by means of which we acquire habits of affection and behaviour is not only coeval with conscious life, but it is carried on, in practice and observation, without pause in every moment of our waking life, and perhaps even in our dreams; what is begun as imitation continues as a selective conformity to a rich variety of customary behaviour: it is inevitable” (p. 469).

By contrast, the moral life dictated by reflection requires a different adherent. This second moral life springs from:

first an intellectual training on the detection and appreciation of the moral ideals themselves, a training in which the ideals are separated and detached from the necessarily imperfect expression they find in particular actions. We require, secondly, training in the art of the intellectual management of these ideals, And thirdly we require training in the application of ideals to concrete situations, in the art of translation which our education has inculcated. Such an education may be made compulsory in a society, but if so it is only because it is not inevitable. (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 475)

The significance of this distinction for Oakeshott is that morality is robbed, in the second form of moral life, of spontaneity and flexibility. It loses what he would consider its “poetry.”¹⁴ Worthington (2002) argues that Oakeshott (1991) in the *Tower of Babel* is pursuing what is a consistent theme in his writings, that the poetic dimension of moral life, far from being responsible for nihilism and aestheticism, saves it from mere arbitrary preferences. A society that suffers the defect of “the denial of the poetic character of all human activity” (p. 479) is suffering from a “corruption of consciousness.” This corruption of consciousness is the disassociation manifest in the separation of the artistic and the moral from tradition, or custom, or culture in which it is properly founded. The aesthetic becomes a matter of fad or fashion. Art becomes mere entertainment; the serious and the trivial are conflated. Judgement of what constitutes good and bad, in the poetic and the moral, becomes a matter of subjectivity, of the contemporary, or the transient.

The practical outcome for Oakeshott of the corruption of the collective consciousness, (and this is the point in the *Tower of Babel*), is that Western culture has conceived of moral issues as isolated topics to be addressed. These topics are assumed to be the product of reflection, of rationalism, and therefore are worthy subjects of our attention. Issues therefore come to prominence from time to time, issues such as the redistribution of wealth, the need to become

¹⁴ See Oakeshott *Rationalism in Politics* p. 509 in which he describes poetry as “the making of images of a certain kind and moving about among them in a manner appropriate to their character. Painting, sculpting, acting, dancing, singing, literary and musical composition are different kinds of poetic activity.”

fluent in the language of the information age, increased (or decreased) consumption and production, minority rights, human rights, animal rights, and identity politics. These and more Oakeshott would agree are important, but as with the building of the tower, these issues, as Worthington (2002) says, “are presented as if they are self evident precepts born entirely of self conscious reflection with no reference to the moral practices that emerge in the contingent responses involved in living one’s life” (p. 308) They are abstracted from the whole that is a culture, ideologies that reflect only a part of a tradition. The rationalist will see these as problems to be solved, a situation, that is, which needs to be moved into the situation that ought to be. Resources of the community, (the property of all), are directed to an “arbitrary selection of moral eccentricities” (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 482). It is the endless and futile pursuit of a perfect (and non existent) world, accommodation for future events that ignores the more important present.

The function of the poetic imagination in Oakeshott, treated sometimes idiosyncratically in his writings, can be better understood when tied to the notions of culture, tradition and rationalism. It is synonymous with how humans conduct themselves, how they interpret themselves in this world of meanings. Worthington (2002) explains:

Poetic imagination encompasses all aspects of Oakeshott’s characterization of human conduct. Human conduct, whether it be in the realm of morality or religious experience, or theoretical endeavours to understand the world historically, philosophically, or scientifically, expresses an inescapably creative character. The poetic imagination is emblematic of the fact that for Oakeshott the human world is one created by humans both individually and collectively. (p. 310)

The poetic imagination then is the comprehensive expression of a culture, of a tradition. It is how we each see ourselves reflected in our communities, and in our history. We create ourselves in a world of meanings, and this creation involves how we act morally. Oakeshott believes that we do not assimilate this self-creation, but have to be taught. We learn what to make of ourselves, and what we make of ourselves affects the sort of citizen, spouse, sibling, friend, or role model we become. This is no small matter, and accepting that we learn what we become leads us back to an examination of the type of education best suited to this type of learning.

JUDGEMENT AND EDUCATION

Peter Watson (2005, p. 742), in his comprehensive book *Ideas, a History of Thought and Invention, From Fire to Freud*, claims that in the realm of ideas, history has consisted of two main streams: the history of the world outside man, that is the world of observation, discovery, measurement, and experimentation etc. Secondly the history of the exploration of man's inner life, the soul, the second self, the higher self. In Watson's view, the first adventure must be considered a huge success, whereas the second has proved to be disappointing. Rationality, and the use of reason has been hugely profitable for human kind; the search for the meaning of life and our existence, the search for what constitutes the good life for the self, has been inconclusive. Yet, those defenders of the liberal arts (including of course Oakeshott) would argue vigorously that it is this form of education that is the most beneficial, that acquiring judgement within a tradition supersedes the mastery of a technique.

Following Oakeshott, we can characterize the liberal arts as an education in morality and values. It does not for him teach morality in the sense that carpentry or plumbing can be taught, it is more that the student is brought into contact with the values, histories and beliefs of his or her tradition, and is invited then to make what they will of themselves in this light. The passing on of values from one generation to the next is of course not new; the history of the liberal arts has this as a continuous thread. Different foundations have been claimed, religion being the most dominant, and different opponents have surfaced. In relatively recent times the Enlightenment, that seventeenth century proliferation of spectacular rational discoveries, seemed to usher in an era whereby the scientific method could unravel any mystery. Nevertheless there is beyond Oakeshott a tradition of intellectual support for the liberal arts, some with a more teleological stance certainly, but these supports need to be repeated in order to emphasize the value of tradition over rationality.

One of the first writers in the last three centuries to argue for the study of mankind was Giambattista Vico, a Neapolitan student of jurisprudence who Watson (2005) says "with stunning simplicity sabotaged Enlightenment ideas about the centrality of science" (p. 608). Vico published in 1725 his *Scienza Nuova* in which he claimed that knowledge about human culture "is truer than knowledge about physical nature, since humans can know with certainty, and

hence establish a science about what they themselves have created.” He noted that people share a nature, and therefore must share similarities in cultures. Man, he thought, had expressed his nature in his myths and poetry, and therefore the study of these must be the study of “the record of human consciousness” (p. 609). Vico put human sciences on a par with natural sciences.

Another influential figure in the insertion of the liberal arts more formally into pedagogy was Johann Herder. Building on Vico’s ideas, he published in the late eighteenth century four volumes of his *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* in which he advocated the study of human nature through the comparative history of different peoples, arguing that “We live in a world we ourselves created,” and asking “Has a nation anything more precious than the language of its fathers?” (Watson, p. 609). History and literature, and the humanities in general, became the means whereby the individual and society were studied.

The question has been posed many times however, “What exactly do we learn by studying literature, history, music and art?” One answer is the idea brought forward earlier by Oakeshott, we learn “judgement.” We learn the “what,” rather than the “how.” By studying what Matthew Arnold described as “the best that has been thought and said” we can access the Aristotelian notion of knowing both the right judgement and the right sentiment. Scruton (2000) argues that “Moral (liberal) education has just such knowledge as its goal: it is an education of the emotions” (p. 15). The common culture, Scruton believes, tells us how and what to feel, and in so doing raises our lives to the ethical plane, where the thought of judgment inhabits whatever we do. This feeling exists when it finds objective form in a word, gestures, or plans, and involves a particular stance towards the world. It involves at bottom an understanding of the world.

This then brings us back to the central argument. Oakeshott and others maintain that reason and rationality of course are essential. To deny these would involve a reasoned, rational argument in support of the denial, which is of course absurd. However, what is of at least equal importance, is the acknowledgement that humans have to learn not just the facts of the physical world, but also the ways of being a person in the world. We have to be introduced to the many ways of interacting with the world and the people in it,

to learn how to create ourselves by understanding the many relationships we are faced with. These Oakeshott (1989) refers to as “feelings, sentiments, imaginings, fancies, desires, enterprises, customs, conventions, procedures and practices, canons, maxims and principles of conduct, rules which denote obligations and offices which specify duties” (p. 65). Each generation has to introduce the younger members to this world of meanings, and for this task rationality alone is inadequate. A liberal education, with its own history of development, significances, canons, and traditions is as close to the ideal vehicle as has been developed. Acorns may grow into oak trees, but we do not grow into complete human beings. We must be taught. As Ortega y Gasset (1936) said (later to be echoed by Oakeshott) “Man has no nature, what he has is his history” (p. 313).

Oakeshott believes then in each of us by necessity having the obligation to learn how to act, practically and playfully, in the world into which we have been thrust. It is an individualist approach, but not necessarily a self-centered approach. In the following chapter I discuss how Oakeshott sees this self-created individual functioning in a society whose members have each to some extent created themselves. Oakeshott shows himself again not only to be an astute interpreter of the human condition, but consistently a proponent of a life spent flourishing, discovering, delighting. A life seen not as a heavy burden but as a fleeting opportunity to play a little, to seek adventure, understanding, and delight.

Chapter 2

The Individual among Citizens

The idea that we inherit, maintain, adapt, and then bequeath our customs and traditions is an attractive one. It lends itself easily to metaphor and simile. Images are quickly formed of a comfortable consensus, nurtured and valued, which serves as a blueprint for generations in which the moral and political orders are laid down. It is however in the presuppositions that the tensions within this notion of society surface. What is being assumed is a homogenous citizenship living under the auspices of a benign government. What we have in fact is a collection of individuals, each valuing personal freedom, and each pursuing perceived wants, within a bureaucracy each feels is inadequate. It is to these tensions that Oakeshott addresses two works, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism* (published in 1996 but written circa 1953)¹ and *On Human Conduct*.

Michael Oakeshott's arguments in favour of a liberal education, and his intense dislike of a rationalist approach to learning, stems above all else from his staunch belief in individualism; the belief that we each have the ability, if not the duty, to understand our world and ourselves as we alone understand it, and to create a life that is uniquely our own. The individual for Oakeshott is one who has thoughts rather than feelings, opinions rather than impulses, passions rather than inabilities. The individual in society is one who requires a ruler, not a leader (Oakeshott, 1990, p. 371). The individual is formed through interaction with others, and through the teaching of others, but is at bottom self-made. As Charles Taylor (1994) says:

¹ Many of Oakeshott's recently published articles were discovered in his personal belongings after his death. The actual date of writing is often not explicit and estimates have been given by Oakeshott scholars.

The crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally *dialogical* character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression ... we learn these modes of expression through exchanges with others. People do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own. Rather, we are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us ... The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical. (p. 32)

The appearance of this sense of self has had enormous repercussions. Oakeshott (1991) describes “the emergence of the disposition to be an individual” as “the pre-eminent event in modern European history” (p. 370). Its inception Oakeshott traces to thirteenth century Italy (p. 365), spreading from there throughout Europe. According to Kant the Enlightenment, that “liberation of man from his self-imposed minority,” hastened the pace of the notion. The appearance of the individual was of course a complex phenomenon, but some intellectual, emotional and political transformations are distilled by Scruton (2000, p. 22) and here I follow his analysis.

Firstly, by the time of the French Revolution, the culmination of the Enlightenment, people had ceased to define themselves in terms of place, history, tribe or dynasty and had instead laid claim to a universal human nature, with laws valid for all human kind. Secondly occurred what Scruton (2000) refers to as “the retreat of the sacred” (p. 23). This process, begun by the Reformation and Luther’s disdain for the indulgences, permits “the gods and saints to cease to haunt their shrines, the old ceremonies to lose their divine authority, the sacred texts to be put into question and doubt cast on all but the most abstract versions of religious doctrines” (p. 23). The relationship between god and self no longer required a clergy whose authority resided in the divine. Peasant and king alike could speak directly to the deity without intermediary. Thirdly, inherited authority lost its hold. Authority was seen to rest in those who had voluntarily submitted to the government. The subjects themselves had freely accepted the form of government, and it thereby assumed the form of a social contract rather than a socially derived hierarchy.

There followed in Oakeshott’s opinion a kind of “golden age” of parliamentary government in England and elsewhere in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in which the aspirations of the individual wedded

perfectly with the form of public administration. "The first demand of those intent upon exploring the intimations of individuality," he says, "was for an instrument of government capable of transforming the interests of individuality into rights and duties." This required three attributes of government. Firstly it must be single and supreme. This concentration of power would allow the individual to escape the constrictions of church, or guild, or community that inhibited the emergence of the authentic self. Secondly, the government must be sovereign in that it had the power to dissolve or otherwise dispose of past restrictions on individuality. Old, inherited powers and rights could be banished. The participants in this form of government were not masters and slaves but equal participants who enjoyed equal rights. Thirdly, the government must be powerful enough to protect the claims of the individual, but not so powerful as to pose a threat to individuality. This gave rise to the parliamentary lawmaker, a person who with others made laws suited to the interests of individuality.

Oakeshott (1991) goes on to describe the conditions he sees flowing from this form of government, in terms of approbation reflected later (although with less flourish) in *On Human Conduct*:

The law they made was favourable to the interests of individuality: it provided the detail of what became a well understood condition of human circumstance, commonly denoted by the word freedom. In this condition every subject was secured of the right to pursue his chosen directions of activity as little hindered as might be by his fellows or by the exactions of government itself, and as little distracted by communal pressures. Freedom of movement, of initiative, of sociation, of bequest and inheritance; security of person and property, the right to choose one's own occupation and dispose of one's labour and goods; and over all the rule of law: the right to be ruled by a known law, applicable to all subjects alike. And these rights, appropriate to individuality, were not the privileges of a single class: they were the property of every subject alike. Each signified the abrogation of some feudal privilege. (p. 369)

THE FAILED INDIVIDUAL AND THE RISE OF "MASS MAN"

This association of individuals allowed for the enjoyment and exploration of individuality. The possibility of choice, Oakeshott maintains, was everywhere. In philosophy, commerce, literature, art, politics and industry. Not everyone however was prepared, by circumstance or personality, to embrace this brave

new world. The “individual that failed” Oakeshott (1991) contends is not a historical character but is in fact the modern European individual, born of “debility, ignorance, timidity, poverty, and mischance” (p. 371). For this individual, the making of choices is a “burden,” and those who acted on behalf of this “individual that failed” saw government in an entirely different light.

The government of what Oakeshott refers to as “mass man” aims to further “the public good.” This government relieves mass man of having to make decisions, and is the designer, builder and keeper of this public good. The ruler was not an umpire between the different wants of individuals but the “moral leader and managing director” of the community. Mass man wants rights, but not the rights of the individual. The rights sought are the rights to be safe in a social protectorate, relieved of the burden of decision-making. These circumstances had to be imposed on all alike, as mass man could not tolerate others exercising their individuality.

Thus Oakeshott maintains that the parliamentary government was modified, to accommodate the needs of this failed individual. The security sought was a security against having to make choices, and having to cope alone with the fluctuations in life’s fortunes that chance throws our way. Mass man claims this as a right, and insists that everyone becomes like this. Oakeshott refers to the new form of government, the form of government willing and able to act on everyone’s behalf, as “popular government.” This form of government is not an intimation of parliamentary government but is in direct opposition to it.

THE POLITICS OF FAITH AND THE POLITICS OF SKEPTICISM

Oakeshott then posits in modern Europe two distinct moralities, the individual and the anti-individual, and, correspondingly, two understandings of the offices of government, the parliamentary and the popular. In *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism* and *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott gives a more considered view of both forms of government, and the relevance to educators is in the attempt to recognize the faults and favours of both. Political extremism in any form has historically proved to be unfavourable to the majority of citizens, and the ability to recognize this extremism, by way of understanding, is a necessary though perhaps not sufficient bulwark against such systems emerging.

In any understanding of Oakeshott's work on the State and on politics it is important firstly to accept that he is describing ideal types, not ones which necessarily exist in the real world. ("They are the horizons of an activity." [PFPS, p. 21]) He posits extremes in order that we may examine the nature of the thing under discussion. He is not putting forward a case study. Secondly, Oakeshott will readily admit that each political organization or institution is a necessary amalgam of his extremes. Thirdly, it is useful for the reader to bear in mind the historical times in which Oakeshott is writing. *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism* was written shortly after the end of the Second World War, during which the excess of National Socialism were felt on an almost global scale, and also during the time of the emergence of the Labour Party in Britain and the attempt at social engineering to rebuild a shattered national psyche and economy.

The essay is, in Oakeshott's words, "concerned with government, the activity of governing and being governed" (PFPS, p. 2) and his stated purpose is to examine the "two masters" that political vocabulary has in modern times been forced to serve, the two masters he calls the politics of faith and the politics of skepticism. The point is to "enlarge our knowledge of the styles themselves" (p. 22).

In the politics of faith:

the activity of governing is understood to be in the service of the perfection of mankind. There is a doctrine of cosmic optimism which, not from observation but as an inference from the perfection of its creator, attributes unavoidable perfection to the universe ... Human perfection is to be achieved by human effort, and confidence in the evanescence of imperfection springs here from faith in human power and not from trust in divine providence ... the achievement of perfection depends upon our own unrelaxed efforts, and that if those efforts are unrelaxed, perfection will appear. (PFPS, p. 23)

This style of politics Oakeshott refers to as "Pelagian."² By effort, and by dint of the fact that humankind is the creature of circumstances, their perfection is "identified with a condition of those circumstances." It so comes about then that "the activity of government is understood as the control and

² A Pelagian is a person who follows the 4th century theologian Palagius in denying original sin and arguing that salvation depends on one's own efforts rather than divine grace.

organization of human activity for the purpose of achieving human perfection" (PFPS, p. 24).

Two features of this politics of faith Oakeshott draws particular attention to. Firstly, government is not seen as one agent amongst many that strives for this perfection. Government here is the orchestrator of the pursuit, and the designer of the route. Government sees itself as having the mandate and the power to "save mankind." Secondly, this idea of "perfection" is not merely the preserve of utopian politics but can be applied to many political initiatives. "If you posit a single road, no matter how slowly you are prepared to move along it or how great the harvest you expect to gather as you go, you are a perfectionist." This is not because you know in detail what lies at the end of this road, but because the road has been chosen to the exclusion of all others. Government is seen as a way of getting to the "truth." The objectives of government are not merely stops along the way, but the terminus wherein lies the common good.

Such a government embraces power, and does not conceive of an excess of power. There will be no private space, for the enterprise of government is the "spiritual, if not physical, conquest of the world." In the politics of faith, tradition and precedent have no place, as yesterday and today are unimportant. Tomorrow is the sole direction of travel. The government adopts a mantle of moral superiority, and the persons involved in governing become what the priests used to be, the definers of all that is evil and good, the guides on the path to perfection and the guardians of the believers.

Oakeshott (1996) identifies two strands of the politics of faith that stem from this pose of moral correctness, the religious and the economic. The religious strand is exemplified by the seventeenth century politics of English puritanism. Here the attempt was to impose "by government a single comprehensive pattern of activity upon all subjects without exception, a pattern which they identified with righteous conduct ... they opposed all other religious beliefs than their own, not because a variety of religious beliefs was observed to be liable to provoke disorder, but because all but their own were identified with error" (p. 60).

This vision of a holy state, a physical location within which the populace behaved as god wished them to behave, emerges according to Oakeshott from

a vision of power. God is seen to have bestowed on those who govern great authority, and it must therefore be that god intends the government to use this power to impose his will. Power is not delegated to thwart the wishes of the delegator. Therefore, in puritan government (and indeed for Oakeshott all those past and present who adhere to the politics of faith) "formality in government gives place to activism governed only by the possession of power and the zeal for righteousness; no scruple is permitted to stand in the way of imposing the pattern of perfection; prevention is preferred to punishment; and no power is deemed too great to harness to the pursuit of righteousness" (p. 61). This vision of religious extremism is not unfamiliar in our age.

What diluted and quickly swamped the religious version of the politics of faith was the ingress of economics. Oakeshott claims that from the early seventeenth century it began to be accepted that a government of power, bent on the pursuit of perfection, had to control all the activities of its subjects. This idea, typified by the writings of Francis Bacon, Oakeshott (1996) refers to as "productivist," "government is the organization and direction of a "productivist" society (p. 62). In this society the exploitation of the world's resources is not one of many activities of the people, it is the only enterprise. It is an error to believe otherwise. Production becomes the only path to perfection. It assumes moral and religious overtones:

This belief expresses itself in the extended (as opposed to the narrow) meanings of words in our political vocabulary. "Security" becomes first "welfare" and then "salvation," "work" becomes first a right and then a duty; "treason" is recognized as unfaithfulness to a moral or a religious creed; and every minimum is converted into a maximum until "freedom from want" and the enjoyment of happiness, are proclaimed as "rights."

The politics of faith is the politics of the power of government enforcing its view of perfection onto an impotent populace. Oakeshott believes that the benefits of technological advances that have hastened our ability to exploit the materials of the world have led to a moralization of the productivist enterprise, a process that has been ongoing for the last four centuries. It has, in its religious guise, spawned the excesses of the theocracies of the world, with claims that god's laws are being followed and any subsequent actions in compliance with god's laws cannot therefore be "wrong." It is evident in the headlong rush to economic growth, with the targets of the previous fiscal year having always to

be exceeded. Tomorrow must always be better than today. It can be seen in the disparities of wealth and health of the richer and poorer nations, those who can more efficiently exploit the world claiming moral superiority over those who cannot. The changes in our environment and our climate have yet to reveal to us what this vision of a perfect tomorrow will actually look like.

The politics of skepticism is the counterpoise to the politics of faith as outlined by Oakeshott, both being abstractions or ideals that are the opposite horizons of the same land. Neither model is meant to reflect an actual model of political organization, but both are rather posited so as to allow an understanding of the extremes to inform our ideas of the centres.

Oakeshott's notion of the politics of skepticism is one of minimalist government, whose role is to referee the activities of the populace rather than direct or inform them. It is the acceptance by government of "the permanent (but not exclusive) egoism of human behaviour as is revealed in the life of practice." The business of politics in this guise is:

to make use of the *strongest*, and not merely the *highest*, human impulses in a continuous attempt to correct ascertainable mischief's and to suppress actual malpractices in society, but without turning either the mischiefs or their cure into abstract principles, and without being led away by the illusory project of establishing permanent justice in the world. For such a view, politics is the art of the statesman (the art of choosing the least evil of the available courses of action), and is not the rationalism of the social engineer, the supposed science of perfecting human society. (Greenleaf, 1966, p. 45)

It is then the politics of those who believe that human behaviour is too complex to predict, direct, control or define. The idea that the good life, or the perfect state, can be planned for by politicians is rejected in favour of the notion that governments should attend to the differences in the citizenship, and not their similarities. It is a politic that accepts individual aspirations (and desperations) and does not contemplate homogenous humanity. Politics is not a science based on quantitative data and experimentation. There is to Oakeshott no independent fact: fact is "what has been made or achieved; it is the product of judgement" (EM, p. 42). In this situation, the only reasonable form of government is one which allows each citizen to use his or her own judgement to design what is for them an honourable life. Oakeshott elsewhere states the purpose of this government:

(It is) not to impose other beliefs and activities upon its subjects, not to tutor or educate them, not to make them better or happier in another way, not to direct them, to galvanize them into action, to lead them or co-ordinate their activities so that no occasion of conflict shall occur; the office of government is merely to rule. This is a specific and limited activity ... The image of the ruler is the umpire whose business it is to administer the rules of the game, or the chairman who governs the debate according to known rules but does not himself participate in it. (RP, p. 381)

This is the government in which power is used economically. The tenets of the administration are the judgements of the past and present practitioners, and the results of their experiences. In this way the decisions are not a rigid creed, but neither are they arbitrary. The only justification for the use of great power is to dissuade the formation internally of other great powers. It preaches moderation and restraint.

Oakeshott clearly prefers the politics of skepticism. His purpose however is not to promote the one form of government over the other. Oakeshott speaks of ideals, but he is not ignorant of the practical world. The point of the essay is to highlight the extremes, or horizons, to illuminate the centre wherein lies the actual practice of government. His need is to stress the desire in politics for the use not of dogma and direction but of judgement. The ability to recognize, not from textbooks but from a type of Aristotelian *phronesis*, that the vagaries of life require not a leader but a “trimmer” (PFPS, p. 122).

This “trimmer” Oakeshott introduces citing the metaphor of Lord Halifax in *The Character of a Trimmer*. The “trimmer” is the person who keeps a boat on an even keel by shifting their weight to counteract an over strong force in one way or another. The concern is not with direction or destination; the concern is with keeping the boat sailing in an even manner. This involves no sudden movement, or drastic change, but rather the ability to recognize a pull one way or the other that could upset the equilibrium, and in a timely manner to counteract this pull either port or starboard. Port or starboard are not choices dependant on preference but on expediency. The trimmer chooses not simply the middle path, but the most appropriate path.

This nautical image blends well with a description in Oakeshott’s writing of what is to him the nature of the politics:

In political activity ... men sail a boundless and bottomless sea there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion. (VLL, p. 149)

Oakeshott's *Politics of Faith and Politics of Skepticism* is an illustration of the complexities of modern European politics. By extracting two models, two poles of the same magnet, he wishes to show that each is flawed, and each cannot stand on its own. The politics of faith can lead to excesses of productivity, consumerism, or religious extremism. The politics of skepticism can lead to inertia, to an excess of moderation, to a society unable to adapt to significant changes.

The main points to be distilled from the work are that politics is a complex undertaking, that modern western politics is drifting closer to the shores of Faith than Skepticism, and it is of great import that we begin to understand our society by first understanding the language we use to describe our situation. Oakeshott uses the words "democracy" and "popular" as an example, but he could also use "welfare," or "justice," or "public." Simple definitions can make easy solutions attractive. The complex frequently behind simple language, and in Oakeshott's view we need to reveal once more this complexity.

THE CONTRASTING "CIVIL" AND "ENTERPRISE" ASSOCIATIONS

The ideals of Faith and Skepticism need further to be considered in relation to Oakeshott's 1975 work, *On Human Conduct*, and in particular his distinction between Civil and Enterprise association. *On Human Conduct* firstly sets out to describe what exactly constitutes human conduct, and Oakeshott distills this into several key concepts. Firstly "human conduct" is distinguished from "behaviour" in that human conduct is the expression of our free will. It is the conscious actions of human agents with each other, against a background of understanding. Animals exhibit behaviour, but they do not conduct themselves. As Frowe (2007) says:

The type of conduct that Oakeshott has in mind here is essentially that of a reflective consciousness engaging with others in a relationship of

mutual understanding. It is in this activity that freedom resides because the agent's response is not a mechanical or biological reaction to a situation but a conscious response to an understood situation. (p. 272)

Conduct then is for Oakeshott a result of intelligence, and all human conduct is regulated by what he refers to as practice. These practices "enable performances to occur and also imbue those performances with meaning; it is only against a background practice that performances acquire whatever meaning they have" (p. 272). Practices are to conduct as language is to expressing oneself. The rules of a language stipulate the many ways in which you can say something and still remain intelligible to your listeners, but they say nothing of what you can say. You cannot speak intelligently in no language at all, and thus the rules are crucial for effective communication. Similarly with practices as they relate to conduct. They are the silent conditions that give meaning to our actions.

Oakeshott draws the nature of practices very broadly:

A practice may be identified as a set of considerations, manners, uses, observances, customs, standards, canons, maxims, principles, rules, and offices specifying useful procedures or denoting obligations or duties which relate to human actions and utterances. It is a prudential or an authoritative adverbial qualification of choices and performances ... in which conduct is understood in terms of a procedure. Words such as punctually, considerately, civilly, legally, candidly, judicially, poetically, morally, etc., do not specify performances; they postulate performances and specify procedural conditions to be taken into account when choosing and acting. (OHC, p. 55)

Practices are described as being of two types, prudential and moral. The former are those practices which lead towards a definable end, the automobile at the end of a production line for example. A moral practice on the other hand has no extrinsic purpose. It is concerned with "good and bad conduct." A moral relationship is not a relationship based on "the achievement of a common purpose" but a relationship "in respect of conditions to be subscribed to in seeking the satisfaction of any want" (OHC, p. 62).

The key component of this is that all conduct is "performance related to practices (and in particular to a moral practice) *which have to be learned*" (my italics). A practice has to be understood rather than learned. There is no book of rulers, or textbook of diagrams that lead the student to the right answer. As

Oakeshott (1975) says “(A practice) is a language at once responsive to and critical of (an agent’s) wants and aspirations, in which he discloses and enacts himself and upon which his³ performance may leave a deep but never indelible impression” (p. 65). The understanding this entails is “not that of knowing the rules but knowing how to speak it; that is knowing how to use its resources in order to respond to a situation in an action or an utterance which, in using this language, acknowledges its authority and utility” (p. 91).

Oakeshott outlines two forms of government, again by way of ideal types, to illustrate the opposing poles of political activity. It should be stated here once more that Oakeshott is not describing what political actors should or should not do. He is not attempting a “how to” of politics, but rather an attempt to understand the modern political situation. The forms of government Oakeshott outlines, the enterprise association and the civil association, complement the politics of faith and skepticism. Civil relationship is firstly a relationship between people and hence is the product of human conduct. Following this therefore the relationship is between free agents who understand each other’s actions and utterances. The civil association is a relationship of intelligent actors. This relationship is governed by rules of conduct, “conditions to be observed while performing the substantive actions of their engagement” (OHC, p. 113). The agents will also be related in the “mutual acknowledgement of the rules or uses of some practice or practices ... these practices are compositions of prudential considerations; their rules and uses are mutually understood instruments to promote the transactions they govern. They are so to speak languages in which engagements of bargaining for the satisfaction of substantive wants are conducted” (p. 113).

In contrast, the enterprise association is one where, importantly, the agents can leave voluntarily. These associations comprise almost any voluntary organization:

³ Oakeshott refers always to “he” in his writings, and this now rather quaint habit could be ignored if not for the fact that he does seem to be writing for men. In *On Human Conduct* he writes “With us, women are apt to speak this language differently for men; sometime more and sometimes less punctiliously, but rarely with same. They are apt to get along without any profound respect for rules and they are both more obstinate and more generous; when timid they are more servile and when courageous more reckless.” p. 65 This seems to contradict his claim that we as a species have no nature.

Agents thus related may be believers in a common faith and concerned or not concerned to propagate it, or they may be partners in a productive undertaking (a bassoon factory); they may be comrades or allies in the promotion of a "cause," colleagues, expeditionaries, accomplices or conspirators; they may be joined in belonging to the same profession or in having the same trade ... The ties of this association may be close like those of a corporation; or they may be looser ties of partnership or alliance. (OHC, p. 114).

Oakeshott then is dealing with two "categorically discrete modes of human relationship: the one substantial, concerned with the satisfaction of chosen wants and from which an agent may extricate himself by a choice of his own, the other formal and in terms of the considerations which compose a practice" (OHC, p. 121). Simply put, the enterprise association is the ends to be pursued; the civil association can be thought of as the means. Civil association is the moral code by which citizens pursue their ends, a code based on "practice." Our decisions are not arbitrary, but contingent on the practice within which we have been brought up. He is careful always to point out that each of us has to learn this practice, not merely to accept it but to "subscribe" (p. 15) to it. The word "subscription" clearly denotes not rote acceptance but understanding of and agreement with the practice.

The preference of Oakeshott (1976) for the civil association, for the politics of skepticism, has led to criticism that he is a Conservative with a "hardened carapace." Seemingly unconcerned with justice in the distribution of wealth and the protection of the more vulnerable from the excesses of capitalism, he is caricatured as a man of privilege and wealth content to see the weakest go to the wall in the name of personal freedoms. This is I think to misunderstand the importance Oakeshott attaches to the enterprise associations, and consequently the importance he attaches to a liberal education that prepares one for the responsibilities of membership in a free society.

Oakeshott, having seen the rise of the Labour party and its policy of social planning in the 1950s, and having witnessed the rise of communism in Eastern Europe amongst other places, and furthermore living through the Cold War, is keen to confront what he sees as a danger to the Western notion of freedom, the association that denies the right to exit. Clear examples would be the communist states. The "right of voluntary association is also a right of voluntary dissociation. And it means also the duty of not forming of joining

any association designed to deprive, or in effect depriving, others of the exercise of any of their rights” (RP, p. 392). However, as Boyd (2004) stresses, “Oakeshott is not insensitive to the goods of purposive association” (p. 605). Indeed as Oakeshott says:

(the) only animosity I have ever entertained or expressed towards “community” or association in terms of the pursuit of a substantive purpose is concerned with the attribution of this character to a state or the attempt to impose it upon a state. And, indeed, genuine purposive association can exist only when this character has not been imposed upon a state. (RP, p. 367)

The purposive state then extinguishes our freedoms by compelling us to join in an endeavour from which we cannot disassociate ourselves, and secondly constricts our freedom of association by denying the forming of groups perceived to be counter to the mission of the purposive state. To leave an enterprise under these conditions becomes not merely an inconvenience to the association, but “treasonable” in the eyes of the state as the person is acting counter to the aims of society.

On the other hand, a civil association has no purpose or direction. It cannot therefore stifle organizations on any other ground than they are stifling the freedom of others. The direction, purpose or mandate of enterprise associations cannot be counter to the mission of the state as the state has no such mission stipulated. Oakeshott in *On Human Conduct* describes this:

In virtue of civil association not having any substantive purpose of its own a state understood in these terms is inherently accommodating to all expressions of the associative properties of its members, noticing them (as it notices all other actions and utterances of cives) only in terms of the civil conditions to which they are required to subscribe. (RP, p. 314)

Now, the simple ability to leave an organization does not necessarily denote a “freedom” in the acceptance sense of the word. “Freedom” we consider in general to imply unlimited choices from which we as thinking people determine the one in which the consequences are to our liking. Several examples can be brought forward to illustrate that this is not always the case. Consider membership of one’s family for example. A person can “leave” the family, but this departure could have adverse consequences outweighing the original points of contention. A person may have been offered lucrative

employment in an organization whose trades union is a “closed shop.” In other words, employees have to be members of the union to work at the location. If the man or woman is opposed to Trades Unions but is supporting a family, they can simply not take the position, but the necessity to earn a living wage puts constraint on the “free” nature of the choice. Other organizations can be not merely convenient to us, but rather define us. The religion to which we were born into is “voluntary” in the sense that for Oakeshott would be sufficient; we can leave. The consequences of leaving are not though analogous to leaving the local tennis club. Similarly with marriage. The legalization of divorce means that marriage is a voluntary association, but is it not much more than this?

Oakeshott is aware of this. He acknowledges in his description of associations that as citizens we are subject to powerful groups and organizations, and it is not merely the state that attempts to lay claim to our behaviours. Nevertheless his definition of independence is strict. Our actions and utterances are the outcome of what we understand our situation to be by virtue of our being “a reflective consciousness” (OHC, p. 38). Our understanding of a situation is a “diagnosis.” We view a situation as unsatisfactory, and not merely a non-specific lack of satisfaction. It is unsatisfactory to our own situation, and invites a response from ourselves as authors of our own action. We are “free” because our response to our situation “is the outcome of an intelligent engagement ... it (freedom) entails only the recognition of ‘doing’ as an intelligent engagement, action linked with learned and understood belief, distinguished from a genetic, a psychological, or a social process or from a consequence of causal conditions” (p. 41). We are free because the actions we choose are our own, chosen as a result of our own deliberations based on what we have learned to become. Our actions and utterances are “self disclosures and self enactments” (p. 41).

In a civil association, the citizens (or *cives* as Oakeshott describes the participants) are free to act as they see fit, but are bounded by the mutual obligation to treat each other as moral equals. The civil condition is enacted in a “vernacular language of civil understanding and intercourse,” a conversation amongst those who recognize that each is entitled to pursue the life they consider to be worth living within a set of rules. These rules (or *lex*) prescribe “the common responsibilities (and the counterpart ‘rights’ to have these responsibilities fulfilled) of agents and in terms of which they put by their

characters as enterprisers and put by all that differentiates them from one another and recognize themselves as formal equals” (OHC, p. 128).

Liberty then, to Oakeshott, is according to Boucher (2005):

not related to the size of government, but instead to its manner. Each state is an amalgam of instrumental and non-instrumental rules, and the individual is free to the extent that they are non-instrumental and unfree to the extent that they are not. Freedom within the constraints of the rule of law is to be free from arbitrary domination. No purpose is being imposed upon the individual, and the freedom enjoyed is to make choices within the constraints of a developed system of non-instrumental rules. Freedom is not an abstraction; it is, as it was for the Romans, embedded in the laws and customs of a traditional way of life. A rule, in the sense in which Oakeshott urges us to understand it as non-instrumental, is concerned, not with the expediency of conduct, but with its propriety. The validity of a rule is not in its success in achieving substantive outcomes, but in its authenticity. (p. 92)

In this ideal state (*civitas*) then it is the individuals themselves who make of their living conditions what they will. Guided by tradition and practice, *cives* subscribe to rules that ask that they be “just” to one another. Issues that today dominate political practice, such as the equitable distribution of wealth, multiculturalism, the numerous “rights” claims, international responsibilities, are not resolved under Oakeshott’s view of civil association, but neither are they ignored. The *civitas*, having no end of its own, does not thwart enterprise organizations that promote their own agendas but rather is in a strong position to protect all groups. The right to associate freely, to argue one’s case in the language of the civil association, is paramount. Indeed, only in a civil association is the comprehensive right to form groups guaranteed.

To understand Oakeshott’s ideas of the politics of faith and skepticism, and to read his work on the civil and enterprise associations, is to gain one viewpoint from which to regard our modern political trends and organizations. His work is descriptive, not prescriptive. Oakeshott is describing what he considers to be not polar opposite systems, but different horizons of the same vista. Remembering the tale of the Trimmer, Oakeshott offers two ideal situations and suggests that the moderate course is usually the preferred direction.

TEACHING AND LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF “CIVILITY”

What in fact Oakeshott is suggesting, (and his obvious preference for civil association indicates this, despite his claim not to be giving directions or solutions) is the ascendancy of a civic morality, an attitude amongst the *cives* that they ought to act civilly not merely because the rules proscribe it, but because we all recognize in each other a moral equal. Civility in these terms is seen not as an imposed way of life, but as a public enactment of who we are as moral actors. The language of civility is a language that we are both taught and learn, based on our traditions and our practices. Like any language it is subject to amendments, and like any language we learn not what to say but how to say it. There will be those who will not or who cannot learn the language, and there will be sanctions imposed for this. There can be no appeal though to a higher authority if there is dispute over the desirability of some rules, “no custodian of moral sentiments to whom (the complainants) might present a petition calling for the repeal or modification of the disapproved virtues” (OHC, p. 160). To accept the language is to accept its meaning.

Applying the Oakeshottian lens then to some current political issues in western democracies permits a clearer view of the points of conflict and dispute. Take firstly religious extremism, or fundamentalism. A civil association, having no direction or telos of its own, would not proscribe organizations that professed a purpose. The rulers however would be obligated to test whether or not an association was treating the *cives* as moral equals, allowing them the space to act out their own choices and decisions. The rules of a civil association are “not imposed upon an already shaped and articulated engagement; they relate to the miscellaneous, unforeseeable choices and transactions of agents each concerned to live the life of a ‘man like me’” (OHC, p. 160). Any organization that had as its objective the compulsory membership of all or most of the *civitas* is not acting in a civil manner, not speaking the language of civility. The rulers of a civil condition cannot say that it is “wrong” to pursue the *telos* of enlisting all in a particular religion, but they can say that any such enterprise is not treating as moral equals those other citizens who will have their own ideas as to how to live. The civil condition allows the rulers to say to such associations, “within our boundaries, we speak the language of civility. We are not bi-lingual. If you do not speak our language you cannot be

heard. There may be another place in which your language is spoken, but this is not that place.” The ends of the religious fundamentalists are those they choose to pursue following their own deliberations, but the means to secure the ends have to conform to the rules of civility.

A second issue of huge import in the politics of the western democracies is the claim by, for example, women’s groups and racial minority groups that the conversation lauded by Oakeshott has in fact erroneously barred them from participation. A wrong that needs to be righted by the state, it is claimed, by the introduction of legislation to enforce minority rights. The question of right and wrong is certainly problematical for Oakeshott’s view of the civil society. Our tradition of behaviour he says is the result of “continuity” (RP, p. 61) with authority “diffused between past, present and future; between the old, the new, and what is to come.” The language of civility then seems to be the product not of intellectual deliberation but simple longevity. Our traditions could be the result, as many civil rights advocates or women’s rights supporters would claim, of the strongest in society imposing what is advantageous to them.

This demand to be heard by those in society who claim to have little or no voice in the conversation could be seen as an inevitable result of the Oakeshott concept of a somewhat *laissez-faire* attitude to government. If after all ruling a civil association is a matter not of substance but of procedure, then the more powerful will prevail. This is possibly to misunderstand Oakeshott’s affinity with individualism and with enterprise associations. We can I think assume that civility attaches not just to the rules of a civil association but also to the members of an enterprise association. If we each have been taught, and learned, the morality of the civil enterprise through custom and tradition then it would be reasonable to assume that our individual morality would infiltrate our membership of any group we decide to join. Why would a civil person join an organization with uncivil ends?

Furthermore, as Oakeshott points out, the civil association is the most effective way of protecting the facilitating the proliferation of enterprise associations. This is significant in the light of for example Hannah Arendt. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she writes (1951, p. 426) that the rise of the totalitarian state is a result in part of the alienation of the citizenry. Modern citizens were isolated and lonely, and sought inclusion in totalitarian

governments with mass rallies and uniform behaviour. She saw the “massification” of society as “a step towards totalitarianism” in the West, this massification arising oddly from the individual lacking a sentiment, a class or group identity. Alienation from a cultural or social identity leads, Arendt believes, to an attachment to unthinking, uncritical to social abstractions:

The truth is that the masses grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership in a class. (p. 317)

The problem she saw as the centralization of bureaucracy, and the growth of huge corporations. She saw, astutely, that politics would evolve into what she referred to as the personalization of politics, what we now call the politics of identity. The citizens needed to take back some control, and would do so by forming what Oakeshott would term enterprise associations. This development is very close to his idea that a concentration of power is best counteracted not by a strong state, but by numerous and diverse organizations each pursuing their own ends. Protected of course by a ruler of a civil association.

A third aspect to consider in applying Oakeshott’s ideal societies to contemporary issues is the most important one, the nature of education in a civil association. We have witnessed in the past five decades an increased secularization and rationalization of our instruments of government. Morality, detached from religion, has become the property of the state. A common moral code has been replaced by an official mode of behaviour in which “right” and “wrong” are construed as “politically correct” or “politically incorrect,” “socially acceptable” or socially unacceptable,” “appropriate” or “inappropriate.” We have the appearance of government sanctioned “role models” to impart not morality but “social capital.”

Perhaps inevitably, as the government exercises more and more control over the content and finances of education, the whole process seems to be bending to the aims of the increasingly rationalist bureaucracies. From Performance Indicators to a tightening of the finances, governments have controlled more and more what is imparted to students. As Minogue (2003) describes, “An activist government seeks to turn education into an instrument for achieving its own specific ends; productivity, equality, diminishing crime,

fewer teen age pregnancies and so on, whatever comes into the heads of our rulers." The distinction he draws, following Oakeshott, is one:

between education (as cultivation of an inheritance) on the one hand, and training (as acquiring the power to bring about some effect) on the other. You educate people, but you train dogs. Training is often learning how to use various bits of technology, but in the process the learner tends to become part of the technology itself. It is learning how to perform set tasks in an orderly way. Training is largely unreflective, and much cheaper than education. The move from education to training is a move from creativity to formula or mechanism. (Minogue, 2003, p. 4)

If we have no nature but a history, and if we have to know and understand our traditions in order to develop a sense of the "just" that is an integral part of the *civitas*, we would seemingly be better off educating our students rather than training them. Vocational instruction is clearly essential, but so to is imagination and judgment. The current trend is to increase the amount of educational resources in those courses that profess "employment outcomes." This is too narrow a focus for the individual as citizen. We need to learn and teach the language of civility, a task for which Oakeshott would argue the liberal arts is admirably suited and to which vocational training is surely not. Training, for Oakeshott, is aimed at the world of work. He does not decry this world, but seeks instead to put the "lighter" side of our lives to the forefront. This constant theme of his, to move away from man the problem solver, the rationalist, the builder of utopia towards the man of spontaneity, of judgement and "lightness" is the theme of the next chapter, Oakeshott's defense of a liberal education.

Chapter 3

Oakeshott, Languages and Conversations

Michael Oakeshott (1965) asks us to consider the origin of our word “school,” that origin being the Greek *skole*, which means “leisure” or “free time.”¹ A school, for Oakeshott was “a place where one was introduced to those activities and attitudes towards the world that were *not* concerned with satisfying wants, where one was introduced to those activities of explanations and imagination that were free because they were pursued for their own sake and were emancipated from the limitations and anxieties of ‘work’” (WP, p. 33). The point of his argument is to suggest that in “play” (and here Oakeshott includes all activities not aimed at satisfying wants, specifically mentioning the playing of games as well as Philosophy, Science, History and Poetry) humans become “civilized.” The “barbarity” is, he believed, most pronounced in education when the “gift” of play is corrupted by educators who see Philosophy, Science, History and Poetry as “merely recognized for the useful knowledge they may happen to supply and are thus assimilated into the so-called great business of human life – satisfying human wants” (WP).

This separation by Oakeshott of education from the satisfying of human wants is an important theme in his writings on education, and may be particularly relevant at the present time. Universities it could be argued have stopped asking questions about the nature of the good. There appears no longer to be a discussion about the nature of “the educated mind,” of meanings and actions, of practical reasoning. Universities seem to some degree to have lost the confidence to ask what exactly constitutes the “good life.” There seems to be the loss of the notion of a “first principle,” an avoidance of “questions that

¹ Michael Oakeshott’s *Work and Play* (WP) was published posthumously in 1995.

are inescapable for any reflective human being” (Newman, 2009). What Oakeshott would call the “fact of life” and the “quality of life” are conflated.

EDUCATION, SELF-UNDERSTANDING, AND CULTURE

The view of education as a skill-training ground, as a preparation for the world of work, not play, seemed in Oakeshott’s view to be prevailing. He would contend that the continuing irrelevance of the humanities and the growth in vocationalism and scientism is not merely a different educational route to the same destination. The descent of the liberal arts began centuries ago, with the new sciences moving away from an understanding of the human condition to a desire to transform the world around us. There has been, in Deneen’s (2009) words, “a rejection of older claims of tradition and culture, of cult and creed, of myth and story ... modern science aspires to reach beyond the mastery of nature to the mastery of *human* nature. ... The displacement of the humanities has led inevitably to a Gnostic disdain for the human” (p. 60).

In Oakeshott’s world view, the humanities then sought to teach what it is to be human, and what it means to be a responsibly free human, how to use liberty well. This liberty was not the freedom to overcome obstacles and to seek constantly to satisfy our wants; the older humanities knew and taught that that beast is always hungry. The freedom now extolled, the freedom to pursue all our wants, leads not to satisfaction but to constant disappointment. It leads in fact to enslavement to our desires, a relentless and pointless chase of the mirage of personal contentment by material acquisitions. It is at this point of uncoupling with the past that Oakeshott most rewards his readers. He is the antidote to those educational reformers such as Dewey who believe that the past is no guide to the future, and that innovation and change are the new idols to be accommodated. The present to them is not a palimpsest but a *tabula rasa*. To Oakeshott, liberal learning emphasizes self-examination and a suspension of previously held notions. It is not part of the world of work and economics, where the satisfying of immediate needs is pre-eminent. Oakeshott saw the blurring of the distinction between these two activities as the greatest threat to universities.

Oakeshott’s main writings on education have been brought together in one title by Timothy Fuller (VLL, 1989), and it is this text which I will primarily

use to disclose and discuss Oakeshott's ideas on liberal learning and the role of the university. Firstly though there are some general comments about Oakeshott's specific writings on liberal education. Those reading Oakeshott in search of answers to the current state of the humanities will be sorely disappointed. In fact, a lack of a definitive solution is rather the point of Oakeshott's writings. Any who look to this "conservative" philosopher to confirm their prejudices will likewise be dissatisfied. Oakeshott was not one either to denounce or to give fulsome praise. Again this is somewhat the point, not to take oneself and one's ideas too seriously. Asked what sort of human character he valued, Oakeshott replied (and this is apparently an accurate portrayal of himself) "He will have an amused tolerance of himself; he will be skeptical about his own opinions; he will not take himself seriously, but he will be interested in what he finds himself to be; he will accept without dismay, but also without approval, his own want of greater perfection" (Corey, 2006, p. 262).

Oakeshott's view of education may today seem quaint, almost naïve, certainly euro-centric and possibly elitist. To note this is not to denigrate the views of Oakeshott but rather to cast the views and opinions of our current education system in a very poor light. For Oakeshott's view of education in general, and liberal education and universities in particular, displays an affirmative view of life, a celebration of the human condition, and a belief that at bottom humans are more than mere satisfiers of wants and needs.

Education to Oakeshott (1989) is firstly an adventure in human self-understanding, which in turn involves learning to participate in a "culture." This culture is "a continuity of feelings, perceptions, ideas, engagements, attitudes and so forth, pulling in different directions, often critical of one another and contingently related to one another so as to compose not a doctrine, but what I shall call a conversational encounter" (p. 28). Culture is all the past human dramas, successes, encounters with the genius and the fool, literature, drama, gods and devils, and all the other ways in which those who have gone before us have tried to understand the human condition, tried to comprehend what indeed it means to be human. He does not invite us to accept the truth or falsity of the past, but to "look, listen and reflect."

A person is, to Oakeshott, what that person has learned to become. We inhabit an entirely human world, not because we are the only thing in it, or

even the most important, but because our understanding of the world derives from our human interpretation of it. We have constantly to learn meanings in order to function intellectually, and the more we learn, the more we are educated, the more civilized we will become, the more we will understand ourselves and the communities around us. Learning, to Oakeshott, is not something that we do as humans to achieve something else. There is no *telos*, no means to an end. It is an ongoing adventure in human understanding.

Education, “liberal learning” in the sense that it frees us to see the world and ourselves, is best undertaken outside of the here and now, the urgency of everyday life, the pressures of time limits, and the frivolities, whims and fancies of much of modern culture. Schools and Universities have traditionally been such places, but according to Oakeshott the spectre of “relevancy” has appeared in these places. Schools of Business, Journalism and other “relevant” disciplines are now not merely common but pre-eminent. Oakeshott gives a remarkably succinct definition of those courses he feels not to be part of liberal learning: any courses which “if they are not up to date ... are worthless” (VLL, p. 31).

This pursuit of relevancy, this chase after the courses that bring in most profit, is not for Oakeshott the most pressing ailment to address. He is most venomous, indeed, and uncharacteristically, almost apoplectic, about the transformation of the learner into a role player in a social system. Learning, that self-examination, that life long journey of understanding and interpretation, is being transformed into mere “socialization.” This “most insidious of all corruptions ... portends the abolition of Man” (VLL, p. 32).

EDUCATION AND THE LANGUAGES OF UNDERSTANDING

How should those who engage in the teaching of and promotion of liberal learning understand the undertaking? Oakeshott suggests that outside of the defining characteristic of detachment from the contemporary and transient, the components of a liberal education can be understood as different languages, the language of philosophy and of history for example.

These “languages” comprise not just the words and phrases of what we normally consider a language, but reflect the way in which History or

Philosophy, for example, are discussed. It is the language of understanding within the discipline, and familiarity with the language exhibits knowledge of the subject. This does not necessitate expertise with the subject matter, but simply an understanding of the terms and conditions under which the discipline comports itself.

The languages according to Oakeshott are autonomous and distinct. They are incapable of refuting each other, and cannot therefore be joined in a debate. One is not more complex or worthy than another. What they do have in common is the characteristic of all languages, continuity. They cannot be learned by seeking only the most current version; to be familiar with the language one must know the body of knowledge that precedes its time.

Oakeshott joins these seemingly discordant voices into the whole of liberal learning by likening their components to:

a culture of voices, each the expression of a distinct and conditional understanding of the world as a distinct idiom of human self-understanding, and of the culture itself as these voices joined, as such voices could only be joined, in a conversation – an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure in which, in imagination, we enter into a variety of modes of understanding the world and ourselves, and are not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inconclusiveness of it all. (VLL, p. 39)

Liberal learning is above all, “an education in imagination, an initiation into the art of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices; to distinguish their different modes of utterance, to acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to their conversational relationship and thus to make our debut *dans la vie humaine*” (VLL, p. 39).

THE UNDERSTANDING SELF AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

There is nevertheless the prosaic question as to how the advocates of the liberal arts retain the significance of this field of study in the face of what has been described as a world replete with weapons of mass distraction, where the pressure to be “up to date” is immense? More so now than in Oakeshott’s time, instant gratification and a sense of entitlement are pushed from every TV channel and from the ubiquitous social network sites of the Internet. Text and

email seem to facilitate mindless chatter that lacks substance and form but is essential because it is “instant.” What appear at first sight to be inane, narcissistic and vacuous technologies such as “Twitter” are immediate successes because they offer immediacy.

Furthermore, all these things need to be paid for, and young people are fully aware that this means the world of work, not play, is a high priority. Why should they pursue the liberal arts, which promise knowledge with no financial reward, a difficult engagement with no compensating pay cheque? Oakeshott simply asks that universities continue to invite into the conversation those who wish to understand fully themselves and the human condition. Without fanfare, without demonstrations, simply confidence in the value of the pursuit and a “quiet refusal to compromise” (VLL, p. 42).

Learning, to Oakeshott, is clearly something more than digesting and regurgitating facts, more than the application of logic to social, economic or political problems, and more than the initiation into a craft, trade or profession. Learning for him is “the comprehensive engagement in which we come to know ourselves and the world around us” (VLL, p. 43). It is an engagement because as humans we have to learn, and we cannot be passive about this. It is comprehensive as learning involves the development of ourselves as humans, both intellectually and culturally.

Oakeshott does not believe in “human nature.” We are not, he insists, born a human being. We are born human, but we have no predisposition to develop into fully functioning member of society. The apocryphal boy raised by wolves would not grow up to appreciate Mozart, but would remain a wild animal like the rest of the pack.

Learning is possible only to a person of intelligence, one who is capable of choice and self-direction in relation to the world around them. A learner is not a passive recipient, nor one who simply reacts to circumstances. Unimpressed with behaviourism or progressivism in education, Oakeshott says that “analogies of clay and wax, of receptacles to be filled and empty rooms to be furnished, have nothing to do with learning or learners” (VLL, pp. 35-36). A teacher is a learned (he describes this word as an archaism) person who “learns” the pupil. Oakeshott is not denying that we only learn by being taught, but is

simply specifying the type of activity he is describing. The teacher is defined only in relation to the pupil, as master is to servant or actor to audience.

What, according to Oakeshott, is taught, (indeed can be received only by being learned) is his conception of the contents of a liberal education. "It is," as he puts it, "what every man is born an heir to." It is "an inheritance of human achievements; an inheritance of feelings, emotions, images, visions, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, understandings, intellectual and practical enterprises, languages, relationships, organizations, canons and maxims of conduct, procedures, rituals, skills, works of art, books, musical compositions, tools, artefacts, and utensils" (VLL, p. 45).

Oakeshott follows this important passage with a further significant definition. He explains his belief that one inherits a world of facts not things, of human expressions that have meaning and must be understood because they are the achievements of human minds. The world itself has no meaning in and of itself, but is a world of interlocking meanings, establishing and interpreting one another.

Learning, as defined previously, is the only gateway into this world. To enter is the only way to become a human being, and to inhabit this world is to be a human being. There is nothing else for a person to learn. The teacher is responsible for nothing less than the inculcation of the pupil into a "participation in human life" (VLL, p. 46) and this view of a liberal education explains the passion with which Oakeshott defends the practice. For him, the teacher's task is to make the pupil recognize herself in the mirror of the inheritance, to see her place in the convoluted, contradictory, sometimes incomprehensible whole.

Significantly for our day, when academia seems to have lost confidence in the liberal arts, Oakeshott stresses that the teacher must have just this confidence in what he or she is teaching. Not confidence necessarily in the subject matter, which may on occasion show human beings in a poor light, but confidence in the enterprise, confidence that the inheritance being passed on contains all that is worth learning, for good or ill. Those without the enthusiasm for this enterprise, without the courage to face civilization's heroes and villains, triumphs and failures, simply have nothing to teach.

Oakeshott we have seen is not simply pining for a static, canonical curriculum in the Western Intellectual tradition. He was an avowed

conservative, but this did not mean he refused to countenance anything of value in the present times. He describes the conservative frame of mind towards the acceptance of things new: "Innovation entails certain loss and possible gain, therefore for the conservative, the onus of proof is firstly to show that the proposed change may be expected to be one that would be beneficial, rests with the would-be innovator" (RP, p. 172).

Secondly, he believes that the more closely the innovation resembles growth (that is, the more clearly it is intimated in and not merely imposed upon the situation), the less likely it is to result in a preponderance of loss.

Thirdly, he thinks that the innovation which is a response to some specific defect, one designed to address some specific disequilibrium, is more desirable than one which springs from a notion of a generally improved condition of human circumstances, and if far more desirable than one generated by a vision of perfection.

Fourthly, he favours a slow rather than a rapid pace, and pauses to observe current consequences and make appropriate adjustments. Finally, he believes the occasion to be important; and other things being equal, he considers the most favourable occasion for innovation to be when the projected change is limited to be what is intended and least likely to be corrupted by undesired and unmanageable consequences" (RP, chapter 6).

His conservatism therefore was not the traditional kind. He was not averse to progress, merely cautious of it. He did not reject the immediate, the fad, the whim; he simply took time to assess how well it fitted in to our overall inheritance of the past ages. And he did not decry the innovator, but was astute enough to ask slowly and thoughtfully if change was really necessary or desirable. He was, in short, an educated man.

LEARNING AS A PATH TO INDIVIDUALITY

In true education, Oakeshott believed that the two notions of "knowing what" and "knowing how," all too easily separated, should be conjoined in any teacher-pupil relationship. Information is easy to transmit, and must be known. Information alone, however, never endows an ability to do, or to make, or to understand or explain anything, just as a knowledge of the principles of balance and velocity

will not save a novice from falling off a bicycle. This “knowing what” must be combined with a “knowing how,” or what Oakeshott terms “judgment.” This “judgment,” essential for keeping a person upright on a bicycle, is even more crucial in the liberal arts, when we move from the manual to the sensual skills. The importance of “judgment” in art, literature, philosophy, in moral reasoning and scientific understanding supersedes the “what.”

Here Oakeshott returns to a theme of utmost importance to his views on teaching and learning. The pupil, he contends, must be initiated into the “modes of thought.” Oakeshott is here alluding to the process of learning to the hearing of the voices in the conversation that homo sapiens has had with itself since the birth of language. These modes of thought he also refers to as “language,” not in the sense of Spanish or French, but in the language or poetry, or history, or philosophy. This language is the style within which these disciplines are discussed and practiced. The point being stressed is that judgement, understanding, interpretation, and discernment come not from understanding the rules of the language, but from recognizing the language and going outside of the rules. “Until one can speak the language in a manner not expressly provided for in the rules, one can make no significant utterance in it” (VLL, p. 56).

The task of the pupil, and by association the teacher, is not an easy one. Learning is hard work. The pupil has to acquire judgment, and knowledge of the facts of things. They must also learn things that seem to have no practical application to the immediate world around. Furthermore, the intellectual virtues of “disinterested curiosity, patience, intellectual honesty, exactness, industry, concentration, and doubt” (VLL, p. 60) have to be assimilated. The reward for this effort is for Oakeshott the inheritance of human achievements. The teacher facilitates this inheritance by example, by being enthusiastic about the intellectual virtues. As he says, “Not the cry, but the rising of the wild duck impels the flock to follow him in flight” (VLL, p. 62).

As for the pupil, her role is to learn to distinguish the voices, and the style of the voices. The student has to listen to the language spoken, to recognize the individual intelligence in each utterance. Liberal learning is learning the ability to feel and think, and this can only be learned in everything that is learned. Liberal learning is the opportunity to eavesdrop on an

intelligent conversation, and to recognize in that conversation the style, the wit, the morality, the wisdom and the folly of our intellectual inheritance.

For Oakeshott, one of the most egregious developments of the twentieth century was the substitution of “socialization” for “education.” By “socialization” he meant an apprenticeship in the world of adults that taught not the grandeur of human understanding, but more parochially the “skill, activities and enterprises” of the local world around the pupil. This simple act of learning an assigned role in a grand association of civil servants was to Oakeshott the antithesis of education as it had an “end” or “telos,” and this end was to him distasteful. It meant the rearing of the most “current” people, using the word in the same way it is used for coins of the realm. He saw education being reduced to the function of providing people who know only how to complement modern society in order to keep it going, people who will fulfil an economic role.

That Oakeshott should decry this “socialization” with the force that he did reveals firstly his absolute conviction of the importance of a liberal education, and secondly a continuation of the great unifying theme in his writings, that of the individual versus the collective, the enterprise association contrasted with the civil association. Of the move to train rather than educate the population of the Western European nations, he says: “The design to substitute “socialization” for education has gone far enough to be recognized as the most momentous occurrence of this century, the greatest of the adversities to have overtaken our culture, the beginning of a dark age devoted to barbaric affluence” (VLL, p. 90).

This would to most ears seem sheer hyperbole. In possibly the most momentous of all centuries, in which there were two World Wars, the birth of the atomic age, the dawn of quantum physics, and the communications revolution, to call this “socialization” of education “the most momentous occurrence” seems absurd. He is not, however, simply referring to the contents of the university curriculum, or the advent of some new “ism” with which to “deconstruct” the great books.

Oakeshott saw in this “socialization” the quieting of the art of conversation that “always distinguishes the civilized man from the barbarian” (VLL, p. 86). The “barbarians” were those social engineers, the architects of the post war European nations, who saw homogeneity as the proper aim of city planners and educationalists, who had “visions” of the future, and who saw

not mental stimulation but material wealth as the *telos* of civilization. Oakeshott saw this as the approach of a new barbaric age:

I suppose that at no time in the history of the world has mankind been more determined to devote itself to exploitation of nature for the satisfaction of all its wants, less dismayed at the proliferation of wants to be satisfied, or more confident of success. This enterprise, I have suggested, is as old as the human race, as old as the emergence of man as a creature of wants rather than of needs. What is comparatively new is the faith and fervour with which it is being pursued and the manner in which all else tends to be regarded as subordinate to the happiness that comes from the satisfaction of wants. (VLL, p. 86)

Oakeshott was in no doubt that “happiness” did not lie at the end of this metaphorical rainbow:

When what a man can get from the use and control of the natural world and his fellow men is the sole criterion of what he thinks he needs, there is no hope that the major part of mankind will find anything but good in this exploitation until it has been carried far enough to reveal its bitterness to the full. (Mosley, 2006)

EDUCATION AS UNDERSTANDING AND CONVERSATION

These main themes of Oakeshott are the basis of his desire to re establish within the “sanctuary” of the university true liberal learning, that which is without *telos*, but is simply an education of the mind that facilitates understanding, interpretation, and improvement of the human condition. He prefers “civil association” over “enterprise association” in the organization of the State. The former is an association whose members have no shared purpose and whose rules do not derive from a shared substantive goal but instead reflect the moral practices of the community and establish common constraints on how agents may pursue their separate goals (McCabe, 2000, p. 462). The latter is a group of persons organized around the collective pursuit of some substantive purpose; given its members’ shared subscription to that purpose, it is appropriate that the rules governing such association be derived from considerations relating to its advancement (p. 462). Oakeshott prefers the former as the correct role of the State, a conservative, slightly “laissez faire” capitalism.

Naturally, had he the benefit of view from the late twentieth century and early twenty first century, witnessing the damage wrought on the world economies by the collapse of the home equity markets, or the social, political and environmental disasters brought on by the relentless pursuit of oil, he may have reconsidered. These occurrences would have confirmed his view that the vapid pursuit of wants, the vigorous mining of the world for its material treasures, leads to no paradise. (The keys to heaven also unlock the gates of hell.) Conversely, he may have doubted the wisdom of the civil association in a time of ravenous consumption, when unbridled greed could unhinge the entire environment, and strict controls would appear to be desirable. Nevertheless, and it is important to re-emphasize this point, the discussion concerns an “ideal” of the university and liberal education; casuistry can ambush the best of intentions.

The second of Oakeshott’s themes is the metaphor of the “conversation”; the different “languages of understanding” that comprise the liberal arts coming together in a discussion that neither resolves nor concludes, but rather maintains and enriches our shared culture and our individual selves. This, he maintains, should be the stuff of a university education, not the mere passing on of skills, a form of training which causes liberal education to “creep out of the back door.” Clearly Oakeshott here leaves himself open to the charge of elitism, and to a willing perpetuation of the class system that so retarded the flourishing of working class people in Britain.

Egan (2008) explains this other possible viewpoint of the distinction between education and socialization:

What Oakeshott presents as an ideal of education, the progressives see as precisely the social problem. Oakeshott approvingly quotes Ortega y Gasset’s tag: Man does not have a nature, what he has is history. The progressives would rather say: Man does not have a nature, what he has is society (and thereby a future). It is only the upper and middle classes, and the males among these, that have a history. The working classes, peasantry, and women are relatively history-less and, in the progressives’ view of the traditionalist position on education, thus they are treated as less human. Given Oakeshott’s claim that we become human as we are initiated into the fullness of human culture, it is clear that some are much more human than others. The working classes and peasantries, however, have had and have a society no less than the upper classes. And on this criterion are no less human and have no less a claim on the future. (www.educ.sfu.ca/kegan/read823/Edsoc)

Further criticism that should be addressed of this apparent elitism is found in Searle's (1990) review of Oakeshott's writings on liberal education. Searle seeks in Oakeshott a comprehensive theory of undergraduate education, and is disappointed. He finds several areas in which he takes issue. Firstly, he contends that in the Oakeshott university there is apparently no room for contrary points of view. "Oakeshott does not," Searle claims, "have much to say about the critical purpose of education. His educated person does not look as if he would produce any intellectual revolutions, or even upset very many intellectual apple carts. What Oakeshott implies is not exactly conformity, but a kind of acceptance of the rules of the various discourses" (Searle, p. 42).

Searle's second and most serious complaint about Oakeshott's writing on university education is that the natural sciences are assigned only a peripheral status, as the sciences exist in a world of things not meanings. Oakeshott, he maintains, fails then to acknowledge one of the great tensions in education, the aping of the tremendously successful methods of the natural sciences by other disciplines, and furthermore the power and value of the model aped. Searle (1990) acknowledges that "the strength of his (Oakeshott's) account is in perceiving that one of the great contributions of education lies not in what is explicitly said, but in the kind of sensibility that is imparted" (p. 42), but takes great issue with Oakeshott's characterization of the working class students entering the universities of the 1950s. Searle cites what he describes as a "chilling passage":

In the past a rising class was aware of something valuable and enjoyed by others which it wished to share; but this is not so today. The leaders of the rising class are consumed with a contempt for everything which does not spring from their own desires, they are convinced in advance that they have nothing to learn and everything to teach, and consequently their aim is loot—to appropriate to themselves the organization, the shell of the institution, and convert it to their own purposes. The problem of the universities today is how to avoid destruction at the hands of men who have no use for their characteristic virtues, men who are convinced only that "knowledge is power." (p. 43)

There is this side of Oakeshott that is difficult to defend. However, it is perhaps churlish to transpose Oakeshott's generalizations and ideals into the practical world of the political and the economic. He is simply offering us a bulwark against the gathering forces at the vanguard of the armies of

consumerism, materialism, and relativism. There is in Oakeshott, however, no siege mentality, no necessity to adopt the language of the market place or the economist to justify the liberal arts. He would violently disagree for example with Cornwell (2001), professor of Philosophy and English at a respected university, who writes:

In a context of globalized neo-liberalism, liberal education has had to adopt market discourse to describe its work and justify its results. Quite apart from how faculty may see their endeavours, public culture increasingly regards liberal education as a certain kind of product. As colleges market themselves to consumers, they have to develop a "brand," a distinctive image.

This for Oakeshott is speaking in the wrong language. The idioms familiar to the economist are inappropriate to the language of those speaking of intrinsic values. Michael Oakeshott is looking not for branding to keep our culture alive, but rather a sentiment. The liberal arts are quite simply an introduction into how to be human. Oakeshott argues that to understand the world is to become free, in that a person is acting on their own beliefs rather than being directed by outside determinations. The students who understand the world about themselves, both the familiar world, and the parts of the world they encounter that are initially strange, can make of their lives a challenging and fulfilling adventure. The defence of this form of education does not require the application of a price tag, or a profit and loss sheet, but simply an articulation of the values and a quiet refusal to compromise this inheritance.

In the following chapter I want to continue with the theme of this paper, extracting from Oakeshott's works that which I feel is his central theme, the notion that we should take from our lives as much satisfaction, as much playfulness, as much Poetry as possible. The world of practice, the world of making and taking, cannot be ignored. There is however, in the world of the Rationalist, what Oakeshott would consider an insistence on the burden of life, the imperative of consumption and production, the insistence on life being a never ending building project. Oakeshott's views on the Poetic stress the alternative, that importance lies in the spaces between these weighty issues.

Chapter 4

Oakeshott and Aesthetics

Michael Oakeshott's view of a liberal education within a university as "the gift of an interval" (VLL, p. 126) can be expanded to exemplify what to him was one of the most important insights on the human condition, the idea that we are most human in the moments when we undertake those activities that have value in themselves. Oakeshott has been described as a "right wing guru" (RP, p. 649) the architect of Thatcherite economics, and is often given the label "conservative" and "elitist," but what is missing in these and most other descriptions of Oakeshott is what I see as the most rewarding theme in his writings, the central and simple idea that life is to be enjoyed.

This basic description does not convey the richness and complexity of Oakeshott's thoughts on the subject, and in this Chapter I intend to explore more fully his writings on the poetic experience, and in doing so insert Oakeshott's ideas on the liberal arts into a more comprehensive view of the human experience, for it is here I think that Oakeshott's work is most rewarding. His world view is a possible antidote to the incessant cry of the rationalist that a human life is the striving today for results tomorrow, that education is the preparation today for work tomorrow, that working for the future is the business of today.

Oakeshott's views on "Poetry," the term he most recently used to describe the aesthetic, remained in some ways consistent throughout his life, although they did on one significant facet shift considerably. He wrote little in his earlier work about the aesthetic experience, addressing the issue in some detail in *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) and coming only to a complete elaborate aesthetic theory his essay "The voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," (RP, 1991) a view which seems to inform much of his thoughts on rationalism and conservatism.

Some definitions are important here before discussing Oakeshott's writings on aesthetics. He uses the terms Art, Poetry and Aesthetics interchangeably; making clear in "The Voice of Poetry" that Poetry covers for him all the different kinds of art and artists. He writes "By poetry I mean the activity of making images of a certain kind and moving about among them in a manner appropriate to their character. Painting, sculpting, acting, dancing, singing, literary and musical composition are different kinds of poetic activity" (RP, p. 509).

The notion of "culture" itself is a difficult concept to define, but Oakeshott's own view seems to be that of "a personal criterion" characterized by "an improvident desire for freedom and integrity," the only important content being "an integrated self, whose purpose is ... to live a life contemporary with itself." What is of value in this viewpoint on culture is "not the fruit of experience, but the flower ... a present enjoyment" (RP, p. 721).

These are the early views Oakeshott had on culture, and they are views he maintained throughout his life. It was, as Podoksik (2002) explains, an "emphasis on personal integrity as a condition of human freedom, the radical insistence on the importance of the present, and the idea of an aesthetic resignation from the endless process of satisfactions of desires" (RP, p. 721). For Oakeshott, the accumulation of things and the pursuit of material goods is not the path to a fruitful, meaningful life. To follow this path is to strive constantly and without cessation for wants that always outnumber the means by which they can be obtained. It is to live in the past and the future, whereas Oakeshott believed life should be lived in the present.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE POETIC

The first discussion on Poetry from Oakeshott comes in an essay written for his college magazine, "Shylock the Jew: An Essay in Villainy" (1921). It is unfair possibly to attach great significance to a piece written when he was in his late teens, but it is worthy of note in that it displays an interest in the topic at an early age. In this essay, Oakeshott speaks of the artists' ability for empathic creativity, permitting an appreciation for the whole rather than the stereotype. "Sympathy does not imply any absolute moral standard; in fact it requires a casting aside of all preconceptions which may color our judgement, so that we

may, so far as possible, be at one with him whom we wish to know" (p. 63). It is interesting to note that this early separation of moral judgement from the artistic appreciation remains constant in his work. A further constant, seen in embryonic form here, is Oakeshott's distrust and dislike of the derivative ideals, in this early case the simple assumption of a Jew as an unfeeling businessman. Oakeshott will later develop this more fully to argue for a morality stemming from unreflective habits of conduct (RP, pp. 467-472).

Another earlier work, unpublished until 2004, reflects again the development of Oakeshott's views on Poetry. This "Essay on the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry, and Reality" attempt to classify two types of knowledge, the philosophical and the intuitive. The philosophical as described in this early work has echoes of the later "rationality" to which Oakeshott is so vehemently opposed. "Philosophy enquires whether or not there be a rational whole, and if so what is its nature. It seeks to formulate a *theoria* of the whole universe. It is a systematic enquiry into the ultimate nature of Reality ... It desires to know the rational whole, to relate every part of our experience to every other part, and to relate the present to all that has gone before" (p. 78).

Poetry on the other hand has its foundation in "feeling." The only knowledge it can lay claim to is "intuitive, immediate knowledge" which is "foreign to the intellect." Philosophy "uses words for the meaning they convey" (p. 94) but to the poet the words have "no intrinsic meaning, only a power to evoke in others a feeling." To Oakeshott, Poetry:

cares nothing for analysis, it desires only the soul, the thing itself, the truth behind the form. Its intuitive grasp can contain life itself; its fingers do not touch to kill but to feel the pulse of life beating at the centre. It carries with it no categories, and its conception of Reality does not depend on any other thing. (p. 100)

Poetry then is something outside of the normal experience. It is separate from the rational, philosophical world of things. It is timeless, for as Oakeshott (2004) says "poetry has no need of a road, it passes none by the way, for the conception of time and distance are wholly foreign to it. Its end is achieved so soon as the search is begun" (p. 100). Poetry takes us into a world of "unchanging values ... and if we have ever thought seriously about the source and meaning of our life we are driven to appeal to considerations which are

personal and mystical. Whenever in our lives we have been certain beyond all appeal, in that same moment we have been poets" (p. 101).

The genesis then of Oakeshott's views on the Poetic is here. Poetry is timeless, in that it is in the present always. It is personal, in that we react to it each in our own way. We are in fact making ourselves into who we are. It is also apart from the world of logic and rationality, and apart from morality. This separateness is further described in a work of around the same time period. Oakeshott's *Work and Play*, undated and unpublished until 1995,¹ is a short essay which describes the world of humans as having two distinct worlds, those of "work" and "play." The world of "work" Oakeshott describes as "the activity of satisfying wants in a world like ours that can be made to satisfy wants but does not do so automatically" (WP, p. 3). Within this world of work, "a creature composed entirely of wants, who understands the world merely as the mean of satisfying those wants and whose satisfactions generate new wants endlessly, is a creature of unavoidable anxieties." These anxieties arise because wants are only temporary satisfactions, leading to more wants. Every achievement in this life is a "frustration"; a person cannot live in the present as there is a continual need to strive for tomorrow's wants.

"Play" on the other hand does not seek to use or change the world. It is an "experience of enjoyment that has no ulterior purpose, no further result aimed at, and begins and ends in itself. It is not a striving after what one has not got and it is not an assault upon nature to yield the satisfaction of a want" (WP, p. 4). The aim of play is to explain and to understand. Philosophy, science and history are described as belonging to the world of play, and Poetry is singled out as being particularly distant from the world of work. "The activity of the poetic imagination is perhaps even more securely insulated from an liability of being confused with the satisfaction of want than these explanatory activities. It is also less likely to be corrupted by it" (WP, p. 6).

¹ See Worthington, G. "The Voice of Poetry in Oakeshott's Moral Philosophy" *Review of Politics* 64 (2002) endnote 36 for an argument for a date of around 1938.

OAKESHOTT'S DEVELOPING VIEWS ON THE POETIC

The thrust of these latter essays, *Shylock the Jew* and *Work and Play* is the notion that Poetry is apart from the worlds of both morality and conduct. It is timeless, an expression of the "spirit," akin to religion in that it seeks no rational, material conclusion or outcome. It is therefore on the one hand surprising that Oakeshott apparently contradicts this in his first important work *Experience and Its Modes* and secondly understandable that he does an about face in later works, admitting to the error.

In the Preface to *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* Oakeshott says of the essay on *The Voice of Poetry* that this essay is a "belated retraction of a foolish sentence in *Experience and Its Modes*." The sentence he is referring to is a reference to religion and poetry (or the aesthetic experience) as similar experiences, and both he says belong to the realm of conduct. Oakeshott here states that "The most thoroughly and positively practical life is that of the artist or the mystic." From this he concludes that "art, music and poetry ... in the end ... are wholly taken up with practical life" (1933, chapter 5).

Experience and Its Modes is not concerned with the aesthetic experience or with religion predominantly. In this work Oakeshott is discussing conduct, and concludes that there is an inherent tension in conduct between the world "as it is" and the world "as it ought to be." This is what defines human conduct, and the "foolish sentence" clearly places the aesthetic experience within the set of activities that contain a moral lesson, or a direction as to how we "ought" to behave. It is both descriptive and prescriptive. Oakeshott has defined the philosopher as one who does not point the way to the future, but strictly illuminates the present. He now perversely includes the aesthetic in the group of conducts that gives moral guidance. At odds entirely with the very early *Shylock* and the slightly later *Work and Play*. The retraction then is not the *volte face* it is sometimes referred to but more an aberration in the whole *corpus* to that date.

The next major exploration by Oakeshott of the aesthetic is in his 1939 essay "*The Claims of Politics*." In this essay he argues that political systems do not have a major role to play within society. They modify and correct the legal and social order, but do nothing to recreate society. This function can only be performed by the artist and the philosopher, who should operate outside the political sphere. These artists and philosophers, according to Oakeshott, should

work “in another and deeper sphere of consciousness” (p. 95) (than the politician). Their public role is to lessen “a little their society’s ignorance of itself” and to help society become “conscious and critical of itself.” Oakeshott here believes that the corruption of a society’s consciousness is “the last corruption that can visit a society” (p. 95) and imposes on the aesthetic the role of gatekeeper in the retention, recreation and reaffirmation of societal values.

Of interest is the fact that Oakeshott in this latest essay makes no mention of religion. He has previously joined the aesthetic and the religious, but now seems to isolate the Poetic, placing it both within society whilst at the same time somehow not of society, being detached in some ill-defined way. The aesthete and the philosopher are no longer like the rest of us. They are moving away from Oakeshott’s notion of “practice.” As Corey (2006) comments:

The philosopher, however, as we recall from *Experience and Its Modes* is someone whose activity cannot ever be called practical. Philosophy, after all, is an attempt “to escape from the conduct of life” and to “throw off the responsibility of living.” Therefore, to associate the poet with the philosopher, as Oakeshott does here, would seem to signal that he has begun to question whether or not the poet ought to be classified unambiguously within practice. Indeed he observes that the poet, artist and philosopher must be free from the world in order to make their most profound contributions. (p. 142)

The question as to how exactly the poet, outside of society, can in fact influence society, is explained somewhat by Oakeshott in his next significant essay touching on the subject *Leviathan: A Myth*.² In this short piece, he describes Hobbes’ *Leviathan* as a “work of art in the proper sense, one of the masterpieces of the literature of our language and civilization.” To Oakeshott, society is not solid but “a collective dream”:

The office of literature in a civilization is not to break the dream, but perpetually to recall it, to recreate it in each generation, and even to make more articulate the dream-powers of a people. We, whose participation in the dream is imperfect and largely passive, are, in a sense, its slaves. But the comparative freedom of the artist springs not from any faculty of wakefulness (not from any opposition to the dream), but from his power

² Oakeshott, M. *Hobbes on Civil Association*, foreword by Paul Franco (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000). Chapter: 4: *Leviathan: a Myth* Accessed from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/668/165297>

to dream more profoundly; his genius is to dream that he is dreaming. And it is this that distinguishes him from the scientist, whose perverse genius is to dream that he is awake. The project of science, as I understand it, is to solve the mystery, to wake us from our dream, to destroy the myth; and were this project fully achieved, not only should we find ourselves awake in a profound darkness, but a dreadful insomnia would settle upon mankind, not less intolerable for being only a nightmare.

This echo of Blake's reference to "Newton's Sleep" is further explained:

The gift of the greatest literature – of poetry – is a gift of imagination. Its effect is an expansion of our faculty of dreaming. Under its inspiration the familiar outlines of the common dream fade, new perceptions, and emotions hitherto unfelt, are excited within us, the till-now settled fact dissolves once more into infinite possibility, and we become aware that the myth (which is the substance of the dream) has acquired a new quality, without our needing to detect the precise character of the change.³

Oakeshott then has moved from his early views of Poetry as having a place in practice, as instructions for conduct, to the more ethereal realm of "imagination," "inspiration," and "myth." It does not seek to explain, as does philosophy and science, but rather to "illuminate." It has a general relationship with society, but is firmly embodied in a personal experience. This detachment of the aesthetic from the practical is fully explored in his 1959 essay *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (in RP, 1959).

Predictably, as *The Voice of Poetry* is a repudiation of that "foolish sentence" mentioned earlier, the essay is the abandonment by Oakeshott of the idea that Poetry is part of the practical world. He begins the essay by stating his well-known metaphor of "conversation," explaining that we have moved from "some primordial condition" (RP, p. 488) in which every utterance (including the religious and magical) had a base in the practical to one where there is more than one mode of speaking. In particular, the voices of "poetry," "science," and "history" have become audible in their own right. There is then a difficulty in discerning a unity in human utterances.

³ *ibid.*

THE POETIC AND THE RATIONAL IN CONVERSATION

The temptation nevertheless is to accept all human utterances as part of one voice, that voice being raised in "a debate among inquirers, about ourselves and the world we inhabit" (RP, p. 489). According to Oakeshott, this interpretation recognizes only one voice, "namely the voice of argumentative discourse, the voice of 'science,' and all others are acknowledged merely in respect of their aptitude to imitate this voice." This does not adequately reflect the "diverse idioms of utterance which make up current human intercourse," and the meeting place for these voices is not in the debating chamber but, according to Oakeshott, in "conversation":

Conversation is dialogue wherein the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no "truth" to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought. They are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another, and therefore the cogency of their utterances does not depend upon their all speaking in the same idiom: they may differ without disagreeing ... and voices which speak in conversation do not compose a hierarchy ... it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure. (RP, p. 490)

This "conversation," bringing with it an appearance of frivolity or skepticism, Oakeshott fears may appear not to reflect accurately all of human activity. It may be seen for example to overlook the passion and vigour with which scientific inquiry is pursued. This is not necessarily the case, however. For Oakeshott, "the excellence of this conversation springs from a tension between seriousness and playfulness ... in conversation each voice learns to be playful, learns to understand itself conversationally and to recognize itself as a voice among voices. As with children, who are great conversationists, the playfulness is serious and the seriousness in the end is only play" (RP, p. 493).

This playfulness has to Oakeshott been lost in recent years. The voices of the scientist and the politician have drowned out others, this exclusion turning what should be a conversation into a dispute. Oakeshott then sees this as the appropriate time to consider again the voice of poetry in this conversation. "What is now needed is some relief from the monotony of a conversation too long appropriated by politics and science ... an inquiry into the quality and significance of the voice of poetry may do something in this interest" (RP, p. 494).

This then is the reason for the essay, simply to “say something worthwhile on behalf of poetry.” Oakeshott admits that “neither the poet nor the critic of poetry will find very much to his purpose in what I have to say.” He is not setting out to give a theory of aesthetics, nor is he interested in linking the Poetic to the Moral, although he is of course fully aware of the attempts to link art to lessons in Morality, negating the “art for art’s sake” approach.

As Corey (2006) argues, “The question foremost in Oakeshott’s mind must be something like this: ‘what kind of human experience might be said to be most satisfactory and least incomplete?’ His answer of course is poetry, and his essay is a defense of this answer. This is not primarily a theory of aesthetics; for poetry as it appears in this essay is not an artifact that may be empirically described. Instead it is a kind of human activity whose defining characteristics are self sufficiency and insulation from the considerations of other kinds of experience” (p. 151).

Oakeshott then describes this self-sufficiency in terms of the self and non-self. This “self” is activity, and the “non self” images, images that are always connected to other images or fields of images “which on any occasion constitutes the not-self” (RP, p. 497). It is a union of activity and image not found in any other voice. Poetry, to Oakeshott, is “the activity of making images of a certain kind, and moving about them in a manner appropriate to their character.” This activity he describes as “contemplating” or “delighting.” To view aesthetically is to see images *as* images. To contemplate or delight is to recognize the Poetic activity⁴ as itself. There is no question of fact or non-fact to be ascribed. They are not of the practical mode, and therefore have no place in any discussion of pleasure or pain, use or uselessness, moral approval or disapproval (RP, p. 510).

The idea that the liberal arts, the study of Poetry, is in some way a “useful” form of education is a common justification given by those defenders of this field of study. The argument is put forth that it teaches “citizenship,” or provides a moral compass. Oakeshott here somewhat controversially denies this. He is firmly of the belief that “images of approved or disapproved desire

⁴ Oakeshott describes poetic activity as “Painting, sculpting, acting, dancing singing literary and musical composition” (RP, p. 509).

and aversion are known only in the activities of approving and disapproving” (RP, p. 502), and this is the practical realm. Moral attitude is concerned with the relations between selves “engaged in practical activities,” moral activity is the “balance of accommodation between the demands of desiring selves each recognized by the others to be an end and not a mere slave of somebody else’s desires.” Poetry, this contemplating and delighting, is not part of the practical world and therefore can not produce lessons or guidance in the practical world.

THE POETIC AND THE PRACTICAL

I wish to deal with Oakeshott’s views on morality in the next chapter, but more needs to be said on his views on the lack of “usefulness” in Poetry. It seems central to our understanding of Poetry that there is a connection between Morality, that is human conduct, and the great works of art and literature. How do we not draw conclusions about the nature of poverty in Victorian England after reading Dickens? Or ponder on the results of excessive pride after Milton’s *Paradise Lost*? Or the efficacy of totalitarianism following Orwell’s *1984* and *Animal Farm*?

Oakeshott’s response to this is a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. If we are allowed to conclude fact and non-fact questions from obviously poetic images, then:

We might ask, in respect of Donatello’s David: Was David (whoever he was) of these proportions? Was he accustomed to wearing a hat of this sort, or did he wear it only on the occasions when he was posing for the sculptor? Of Anna Karenina we might relevantly ask: Is it a fact that she said these words on this occasion, or has Tolstoy misreported what she actually said. Of Hamlet we might inquire: What was his normal bedtime? Of Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* we should at once be skeptical; How does he come to be speaking English, or is Marlow translating for our benefit from the Scythian tongue? (RP, p. 519)

Oakeshott then brings forth objections to the ideas that poetry somehow represents “the truth,” or is seeing things “as they really are,” or is capable of providing “information or instruction” (RP, p. 524). These are all facets of the practical world. For Oakeshott, the Poet says “In contemplation I have made these images, read them in their own character, and seek in them only delight”

(RP, p. 523). A poetic experience does not represent an experience so that we can then learn from it, "it is the experience and the only one there is."

Thus Oakeshott separates the aesthetic experience from other modes of understanding by stating the Poetic detachment from the world of symbols. The aesthetic is non-symbolic in that the image is all there is. This notion of the Poetic as a separate voice is not unique to Oakeshott, but is in fact part of a tradition peculiar to modern Western civilization. Oakeshott acknowledges this, describing the move of poetic imagining from "the authority of practical (particularly religious) imagining":

Properly speaking, it (the separation) never took place in ancient Greece; a glimpse of it is to be found among the Romans; and subsequently in Europe it has been slowly and uncertainly achieved. Here, not many centuries ago, what we may recognize as "works of art" were recognized primarily as the servants of practical activity. The office was understood to be decorative and illustrative, the embellishment of the kingly majesty, of religious observance, and of the merchant's way of life.

Oakeshott is in fact working in what he would describe as a tradition. As Podoksik (2002) describes, the notion of a non-practical, purely sensory Poetic tradition is a specifically Western notion, "generated on European soil by European writers" (p. 728). When writing "*The Voice of Poetry*" Podoksik writes, aestheticism was an influential and fashionable view, with both E.M. Forster and the critic Lionel Trilling siding with the view that Poetry is an autonomous viewpoint. In the 1950s, the New Criticism movement was prevalent, suggesting that art criticism from within was the only valid criticism, and furthermore the era of the Cold War was an ideal backdrop to the promoting of artistic freedom as a counterpoint to the stifling Communist ideology.

In support of his own viewpoint, Oakeshott himself cites Schiller (RP, footnote to p. 534). In his *Letters on the Aesthetic World*, Schiller (1967) describes play as the higher condition to which humans can aspire to, when we give up our rational, practical concerns. The contrast he draws is between playing and "being in earnest." "With the good and the useful," wrote Schiller, man is merely in earnest; but with the beautiful he plays" (in Scruton, 2006, p. 24).

As Scruton describes, the phrase "being in earnest" is ironic. Fulfillment does not come through purpose, but only when purpose is set aside. The paradigm of fulfillment is the aesthetic experience, not the Aristotelian

contemplation but the “disinterested contemplation of appearances, the self conscious alertness to the presented meaning of things” (p. 24).

Oakeshott is also following the thoughts on the aesthetic of Walter Pater.⁵ Writing in 1915, on aesthetic poetry, Pater (1915) believes:

The “aesthetic” poetry is neither a mere reproduction of Greek or medieval poetry, nor only an idealisation of modern life and sentiment. The atmosphere on which its effect depends belongs to no simple form of poetry, no actual form of life. Greek poetry, medieval or modern poetry, projects, above the realities of its time, a world in which the forms of things are transfigured. Of that transfigured world this new poetry takes possession, and sublimates beyond it another still fainter and more spectral, which is literally an artificial or “earthly paradise.” It is a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal. Like some strange second flowering after date, it renews on a more delicate type the poetry of a past age, but must not be confounded with it. The secret of the enjoyment of it is that inversion of homesickness known to some, that incurable thirst for the sense of escape, which no actual form of life satisfies, no poetry even, if it be merely simple and spontaneous. (www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world)

There is, however, only so far that Oakeshott can push this notion of detachment, of other worldliness that he seems to ascribe to Poetry. If it does indeed begin and end with its own image, then how does it fit in to the world of the practical, as indeed it must? Oakeshott describes Poetry, Science, and History etc as distinct voices in a conversation which nevertheless must be comprehensible to the other voices. A voice “in order to participate in the conversation ... must not only speak in its own idiom, it must also be capable of being understood” (RP, p. 535).

Acknowledging this possible problem, admitting that “there would appear to be little or no possibility of common understanding between the voice of poetry and the other voices” (RP, p. 534). Oakeshott tries to extricate himself from this possible conflict by suggesting that “we may ... find in practical activity itself intimations of contemplative imagining capable of responding to

⁵ Walter Pater is chosen after noting a footnote in Corey, E. (2006) p. 97 in which she notes that “Walter Pater was born in 1839 near London and died in Oxford in 1894. He was a famous nineteenth century essayist and critic, and is most remembered for his work on aesthetics. According to Timothy Fuller, Oakeshott was recognized for outstanding scholarship while an undergraduate at Cambridge, and he chose as his prize Pater’s complete works.

the voice of poetry" (RP, p. 536). This is a necessary codicil for Oakeshott. He is suggesting on the one hand that Poetry is a joining for one brief moment of form and content, without attachment to the practical world of activity. If this is the case, it is difficult to understand how this voice is heard by the practical voices. A further problem here is that Oakeshott is again championing the anti-rationalist position, and seems to promote the non-reflective mode of thought over the reflective thought (PFPS). A metaphor of conversation cannot prefer one voice over another, nor can it accept a voice that apparently is speaking a different language.

Oakeshott's way out of this impasse is to suggest that there are some aspects in the rational world that are not necessarily as rational as we may imagine. There are relationships, he suggests, which do not involve rejection of what we either do not like, or find irrational or imperfect. The examples he gives are love and friendship. A friend, he believes, "is somebody who evokes interest, delight, unreasoning loyalty, and who (almost) engages contemplative imagination. The relationship of friends is dramatic, not utilitarian" (RP, p. 537).

Loving, to Oakeshott, is not "doing good ... it is emancipated from having to approve or disapprove ... what is communicated and enjoyed ... is the uniqueness of self." Furthermore, "moral goodness" offers a release from the "deadliness of doing," and "possibly" intimates poetry. It is here then that Oakeshott can link his ideas of Poetry with living in the world, and it is here that Oakeshott is at his most informative and unpredictable. By linking the Poetic with relationships, with an attitude towards others in the world, Oakeshott is restating his views given a few years earlier in his essay "On Being Conservative" (1991, p. 407).⁶ Indeed he repeats *verbatim* the phrase that a friendship is dramatic not utilitarian (p. 417).⁷

It is this attitude to living that I would like to return to as the basis of this chapter. To characterize Oakeshott as right wing, political commentator, Thatcherite economists et al. is to "miss the man's style," and to do this is to "have missed three-quarters of the meaning of his actions and utterances" (VLL, p. 56). The reward for reading Oakeshott is to glimpse another way of

⁶ First given as a lecture in 1956.

⁷ The identical phrase also appears in *The Voice of Poetry* p. 537.

living and thinking, outside of the relentless roles of employee and consumer, of producer and manufacturer.

His works after this *On Being Conservative*, including *The Voice of Poetry*, *On Human Conduct*, and his last book *On History* all comment on this view of life that celebrates the immediate, that relishes in the present, that lauds “play,” that runs against the ideas that education should be a preparation for work, that leisure is simply “not being at work,” that life is the accumulation of “things.”

This attitude towards life Oakeshott terms “conservative,” but it is a conservatism that belies the stereotypical picture. His is an aesthetic conservatism, grounded not in past practices or current fads, but in the enjoyment now of the things in life that delight, or that demand contemplation. In this conservatism, there is “a propensity to use and to enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or to look for something else ... there is no mere idolizing of what is past and gone. What is esteemed is the present: and it is esteemed not on account of its connections with a remote antiquity, nor because it is recognized to be more admirable than any possible alternative, but on account of its familiarity” (1991, p. 408).

This would seem to be a rejection of the liberal arts, and of custom and tradition, and would therefore be an odd definition of conservatism. Familiarity however with Oakeshott’s ideas on Poetry and the aesthetic allows us to understand this viewpoint. What Oakeshott stresses in this essay is acceptance of the present, not the rationalist striving for a future at the expense of the enjoyment of today.

The conservative outlook, for Oakeshott, consists of preferring “the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, present laughter to utopian bliss.” Life, he suggests, should be lived at the level on one’s own means, equal to one’s own fortune. This inclination “to enjoy what is present and available is the opposite of ignorance and apathy and it breeds attachment and loyalty” (1991, p. 409). “Attachment and loyalty” are for Oakeshott important, implying a recognition of an inherited tradition and culture contemporaneous with an enjoyment of the present. The conservative does not fear but embraces change, as long as the change is gradual, and does not replace that which is of value with the dross or the kitsch, or the faddish.

Oakeshott is not here proposing a life of contemplation. Another reward for the reader is the acknowledgement by Oakeshott of the tensions of modern life, and his willingness to confront this along with the delights of the aesthetic:

The human condition is but rarely recognized as one of totally unrelieved agony, "a city of dreadful night"; but its commonly felt dissonances are disease, urgent wants unsatisfied, the pain of disappointed expectations, the suffering of frustrated purposes, the imposition of hostile circumstances, the sorrow of unwanted partings, burdens, ills, disasters, calamities of all sorts, and death itself, the emblem here of all such sufferings. (OHC, p. 82)

Nevertheless Oakeshott offers us the opportunity of the conservative disposition, which is according to Worthington (1995) "an attempt, if not to stay the on-going stream, at least to slow it down" (pp. 105-119).

He continues:

A delight in familiarity strengthens the image of self, which, in turn, allows a greater or fuller capacity for delight. The "city of dreadful night" comes about when it is realized that we as living beings who seek identity are confronted with inevitable change. Life shows herself to us only as a creature of constant transfiguration and it is for us, who wish to live, to establish some principle of identity.

OAKESHOTT'S VIEWS ON THE MISTAKEN BELIEFS ABOUT POETRY

The significance of Oakeshott and his views on aesthetics then is his offering to us a point of view within which to enjoy this inevitably transient life; an experience that is non instrumental, non practical, non rational. Poetry, to Oakeshott, is generally mistaken on four main points, false beliefs that "die hard." Firstly, the notion that the poetic images are "in some sense true, or representations of the truth," secondly that the poetic imagination is a superior activity which "things are seen as they really are," thirdly that the poetic experience must spring from an actual experience of the artist and that fourthly "all poetic imaging is an attempt to make images which have a special quality named "beauty" (RP, 521).

To the first false notion, that the poetic image represents some version of truth, Oakeshott quotes lines from Yeats' "O sea-starved hungry sea," and further cites figures in literature, dance, music and art to make the point that in

these there is no "truth," nor attempt at truth. The world of images is "not a world whose constituents are properly to be qualified by such epithets as "erroneous, veracious, or mistaken" (RP, p. 522). He concedes that the notion of "poetic truth" does have within it the idea that at least the poetic is distinguished from the practical, scientific and historical. "It (the idea of the poetic truth) belongs to the view that to charge a poetic image with practical impossibility, scientific solecism, or historical anachronism is as much out of the nature of things as to accuse a cabbage of theft" (RP, p. 521).

To the second falsehood regarding the Poetic, that the images are a view of reality, "things as they really are," Oakeshott argues that this view is to mistake the poetic image for something akin to the Platonic idea of the "permanent essence" of the phenomenal world. This, to Oakeshott, is to make two possible errors. Firstly, to suppose a truth outside of one's own experience, to separate the self from the self's interpretation of images, is to create a dichotomy where non exists. Secondly, and central to his views on the poetic image, to look for "things as they really are" posits an instrumental value to Poetry, a search for the meaning of things, an inquiry into the truth about the real world. Oakeshott denies this to be the case. "As I understand it, the poet is not saying anything at all about things," he maintains. The poet says "but in contemplation I have made these images, read them in their own character, and seek in them only delight." In short, according to Oakeshott, "when you know what things are really like you can make no poems" (RP, p. 523).

Thirdly, Oakeshott denies the necessity of the poet having felt an emotional experience and subsequently transposing it into Poetry before passing it on to the rest of us. This to Oakeshott is to dress Poetry in the mantle of "communication," or "expression," and both for him have the overtones of practicality rather than contemplation. Criticizing in particular Wordsworth's idea of "emotion recollected in tranquility," Oakeshott claims that there should be no distinction "between the image generated and the experience contemplated" (RP, p. 525).⁸ A poet, he claims, does one thing only, he imagines poetically (RP, p. 525).

⁸ In the footnote here Oakeshott says of memories "what can be contemplated here is not an actual and recognized memory, but an abstraction—a memory not identified as fact, and one divorced from space and time. Poetry is not the daughter of memory but its stepdaughter.

A further support of this viewpoint in Oakeshott's opinion is the impossibility of discerning the emotion behind for example Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, or Wren's *St. Paul's Cathedral*. Furthermore, citing Keats's *Ode to Melancholy*, Oakeshott stresses that the poem could clearly be written by someone who never experienced melancholy, nor he claims is the poem designed to make the reader feel melancholic, nor does the poem ever attempt to show us what melancholy really is. We should not be misled by titles, which are not part of the poem, but should pay attention to the image only, as "poets always know poems by their first lines, and in composition never begin with a subject but always with an image" (RP, p. 526).

This idea of the first line, the beginnings of the image, has echoes throughout the works of Oakeshott. He speaks of the importance of recognizing a man's style before understanding content, he mentions here the importance of the first lines, and in an early-unpublished essay cited in Corey (2006) he says that:

The key words to life are always small words, easily passed over in a hasty reading; and yet if we fail to recognize them the whole vast drama is well nigh meaningless. At the beginning of the play the key note is struck, and if we are not waiting with minds alert we shall miss this first intimation. (p. 166)

For Oakeshott, attention to the details of the present is always the preferred attitude.

The fourth misunderstanding about the aesthetic experience is in a misconception of the notion of "beauty." Oakeshott believes that there is a predilection for people to believe that the Poet is striving for a thing of beauty. Oakeshott does not deny such a thing as beauty exists, but rather narrows the definition. "Beauty," he says, "is not a word like 'truth'; it behaves in a different manner." The word is acceptable so long as it remains "in the vocabulary of the aesthetics ... it is used to describe a poetic image we are compelled to admire ... on the pre eminent delight it plants in the contemplative spectator" (RP, p. 527).

POETRY AND THE WORLD OF PRACTICE

The poetic experience then is to Oakeshott the one mode in which we can achieve a unity of form and content, the mode in which we can, if only briefly, escape the demands of practice. The realm of practice is a world of transactions, of goal setting, or achieving ends, of satisfying wants and going on to define further wants to satisfy in a never ending cycle. Practice is lived almost exclusively in the future, with a view today to work for a better tomorrow. The “deadliness of doing” stems from this incessant chasing of wants.

Oakeshott does not decry the world of practice. He is very much a realist who recognizes not the futility and barrenness of practice, but rather its necessary inherent contradictions, those of for example faith and skepticism, and of civil and enterprise associations. In Poetry, in play, in friendship and in love however humans have the unique ability to step, if only briefly, outside of the practical and into a place of delight and imagination, living completely in the present. Poetry is non purposeful.⁹ It is not the world of fact and non-fact; it is simply to Oakeshott the most compete and satisfactory form of human experience.

This view is nevertheless unsatisfactory. There would seem to be a connection between for example literature and practice, poetry and morality. If the voice of poetry is a distinct voice in the conversation of mankind, then it would seem reasonable to assume that this voice has to be learned to be understood. Education, for Oakeshott, is “an initiation into a civilization, we may regard it as beginning to learn our way about a material, emotional, moral and intellectual inheritance, as a learning to recognize the varieties of human utterance and to participate in the conversation they compose” (RP, pp. 187-188). It would seem to follow therefore that it is not reasonable simply to assume that poetry will “delight.” All of Oakeshott’s poetic references belong to the accepted Western literary canon, which seems to imply that the aesthetic is situated here or hereabouts. Is then a familiarity with these works, a liberal education perhaps, a precursor of this recognizing of the Poetic?

⁹ See Candreva, D. (2002) “*Oakeshott’s Defense of a Pointless Activity*” Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association and retrieved from www.michael-oakeshott-association.com for a comparison of Oakeshott and Poetry to Plato, Aristotle, the Romantics Schiller, Shelley and Coleridge, and Hegel.

Oakeshott, although consistent in his insistence on the separation of the Poetic mode from practice, does I think allow for a connection between Art and Morality, which in turn means the world of practice. (Morality must presuppose action; a non-act is neither moral nor immoral.) In this connection, "intimation," it is possible to assign to education a purposeful role whilst accepting Oakeshott's separation of two modes. He states that if one possesses "an ear ready for the voice of poetry," then this is to be "disposed to choose delight rather than pleasure or virtue or knowledge, a disposition which will *reflect itself in practical life in an affection for its intimation of poetry* (RP, p. 540, my italics). "Poetry," he says in the very last lines of *The Voice of Poetry* "is a sort of truancy, a dream within the dream of life, a wild flower planted among our wheat."

In the next chapter I wish to explore the idea of this "dream," this "collective dream of civilization"¹⁰ and attempt to connect the aesthetic with the moral life, and thereby a liberal education with a poetic aspect and the intimation of the practical. Oakeshott does not altogether deny the educative or instructive role of poetry, and further allows for "myth" as a vehicle to human self-understanding. I will explore this further in Chapter Five.

¹⁰ Oakeshott, M. *Listener* 37 Republished as *Leviathan: A Myth* in Oakeshott, (1975) *Hobbes on Civil Association* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Chapter 5

Morality and the Corruption of Consciousness

I have attempted in the previous chapters firstly to state the case for an over use of rationalist thinking in post secondary education, and subsequently to examine the writings of Michael Oakeshott in the belief that an alternative voice to that of the rationalist may be worth hearing. The preceding chapter laid out Oakeshott's view of the aesthetic, and the possibility this holds for an escape, albeit briefly, from the roles of consumers and producers. In this chapter I attempt to extract from Oakeshott his opinions on the moral life, to discover what a non-instrumentalist has to say about the *telos* of living.

Those hoping for a blueprint from Oakeshott, a how-to, or a guide on living well will of course be disappointed. His role as he sees it is to discuss or to explain the current political and social situations. He tries to find the correct answers to the correct questions and to highlight problems, but very rarely to propose solutions. As his friend and colleague Kenneth Minogue (2002) wrote, "he transgressed the rhetorical conventions of his time (by going against) the widespread demand that any account of a problem should lead to a concrete cure. His inaugural lecture on political education provoked just a storm. If our culture is rationalist, and that's bad, what should we do about it?" (p. 67).

A reading of several texts however can reward by extracting what is certainly Oakeshott's preferences in the way a human life should unfold. I will be looking in particular at his 1947 writing on *Leviathan: A Myth*, an essay on the Hobbes classic work, his two essays both entitled "*The Tower of Babel*" written in 1948 and 1979 respectively, and at *On Human Conduct*, published in 1975.

Despite Oakeshott's insistence, discussed in the previous chapter, that the aesthetic cannot be instructive or educational, there is a tenuous connection in his writings between the Poetic and the instructive. He speaks in his works of the non-instrumental relationships of friendships and love as being close to the aesthetic, and in an earlier work states that "the genius of the poet and the artist ... is to create and recreate the values of their society" (cited in Worthington, 2005, p. 61). The aesthetic can define the moral self, and is not simply a fleeting delight. This is admittedly an earlier piece, written in the late 1930s, and could reflect the less well defined thoughts of Oakeshott. He did however expand this theme in the later "*Leviathan: A Myth.*" The theme of this essay is "philosophical literature," and Oakeshott explains this dualism as follows:

now and again, by some odd misunderstanding of its character, a true masterpiece of literature gets hidden away in this vast library of fugitive and functional writings. And there it remains, lost to all except a few professional readers, who themselves (as like as not) understand it only professionally. Something of this sort has happened to the book called *Leviathan*, written in the seventeenth century by Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan* has passed for a book of philosophy and a book about politics, and consequently it has been supposed to interest only the few who concern themselves with such things. But I believe it to be a work of art in the proper sense, one of the masterpieces of the literature of our language and civilization. (HCA, 2000, <http://oll.libertyfund.org>)

According to Oakeshott, "we are apt to think of a civilization as something solid and external, but at bottom it is a collective dream," all of the members of the civilization are part of this "collective dream," and "the office of literature in a civilization is not to break the dream, but perpetually to recall it, to recreate it in each generation, and even to make more articulate the dream-powers of a people." The artist's genius does not lie in the fact that he is more awake than the rest of us, seeing a reality that the rest do not, but in the fact that the artist:

dreams more profoundly; his genius is to dream that he is dreaming. And it is this that distinguishes him from the scientist, whose perverse genius is to dream that he is awake. The project of science, as I understand it, is to solve the mystery, to wake us from our dream, to destroy the myth; and were this project fully achieved, not only should we find ourselves awake in a profound darkness, but a dreadful insomnia would settle upon mankind, not less intolerable for being only a nightmare. (HCA, 2000, <http://oll.libertyfund.org>)

This then is Oakeshott's vision of the triumph of rationalism, to be "awake in a profound darkness." The alternative he sees as "poetry," the "gift of imagination." This poetry offers "new perceptions, and emotions hitherto unfelt," and the "till-now settled fact dissolves once more into infinite possibility, and we become aware that the myth (which is the substance of the dream) has acquired a new quality, without our needing to detect the precise character of the change" (HCA, 2000, <http://oll.libertyfund.org>).

MYTH AND ITS IMPORTANCE

The myth that Oakeshott is referring to is the myth that he believes has never been displaced from western civilization, that being the story of the creation of Eden, Man's fall through the sin of Pride, and the promise nevertheless of eternal salvation. This myth of "pride and sensuality" he contends is not destroyed by *Leviathan*, but rather has one part of the myth illuminated, that being the smallness of Man. Oakeshott contrasts Milton's epic poems stressing Pride and Strength, and argues that the genius of Hobbes is to show us a portion of the myth that has been understated. Timely, Oakeshott believes, as it came about just prior to the advent of the idea that the certainty of science could destroy the myth.

Oakeshott is not anti science, nor is he anti rational. He says of the myth of creation, "It is myth, not science. It is a perception of mystery, not a pretended solution" (HCA, 2000, <http://oll.libertyfund.org>). But with style, Oakeshott bridges the two worlds of the rational and the poetic as he writes:

what makes *Leviathan* a masterpiece of philosophical literature is the profound logic of Hobbes's imagination, his power as an artist. Hobbes recalls us to our mortality with a deliberate conviction, with a subtle and sustained argument. He, with a sure and steady irony, does what Swift could do with only an intermittent brilliance, and what the literature of Existentialism is doing today with an exaggerated display of emotion and a false suggestion of novelty.

Myth then is distinct from Poetry. Whereas Poetry is a "gift of the imagination," an "expansion of our faculty of dreaming," myth is an "increase of knowledge; it will prompt and it will instruct. In it we shall be reminded of

the common dream that binds the generations together." Myth is the "imaginative interpretation of human existence, the perception (not the solution) of the mystery of human life" (HCA, 2000, <http://oll.libertyfund.org>).

The instructive, the educative component of literature and art then is in the interpretation of the myths of our cultures. Myths have a source that can be traced back, a history. Poetry has neither. Myths address the personal, the cultural and the moral, whereas Poetry simply "delights." "A proper story," Oakeshott (1999) writes, "is the expression of some unchanging human predicament" (p. 179).¹ "It is concerned with the conduct and the relations of human beings; and with perfection and imperfection" (p. 180).

The myth then is concerned with morality, and to understand Oakeshott's views on rationality, on education, and particularly on liberal education it is necessary to comprehend his views on Morality. He nowhere in his writings dictates what is the "telos" of life, or what is a life well lived, but he clearly offers us his preference and it is this preference that I wish to examine, in particular his discussion of the myth of the Tower of Babel and how this idea of morality translates into action as described in *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism* (PFPS).

MYTH AND THE TOWER OF BABEL

Oakeshott details the well-known myth of the Tower of Babel as follows (OH, p. 180), stressing that the story appears in various forms in almost all civilizations. The leader Nimrod, a charismatic figure who lived "without deference to his elders, a law unto himself" (p. 184) was nevertheless nervous about the power and unpredictability of God. He was insecure in that he was aware the God had once brought destruction on the earth in the time of Noah, and may of course do it again.

Nimrod's radical solution was to call on his followers to go into the countryside and build a city where they could do as they pleased with impunity, a city to be named Babel, the city of Freedom. Ever the rationalist,

¹ This essay should not be confused with the piece of the same name published in *Rationalism in Politics*.

Nimrod included in this city a tower so tall that no flood could swamp it, no lightning destroy it. Further, this tower could then be used to gain access to Heaven itself so that the people could invade, overrun and plunder God's dwelling thereby making themselves both exceedingly wealthy and safe from the hostility of both God and Nature (OH, p. 185). God eventually ends the project by "confounding the tongues" of Nimrod and his followers, so that the empire is destroyed "in a flood of meaningless words."

Oakeshott goes on then to give what he considers a more contemporary version of the tale. (This fits well with his comments on *Leviathan* that the myths of our civilization can be amended subtly and fruitfully without destroying the whole.) In this revised version, Babel is a modern city whose inhabitants are "fickle" and there is an endless "proliferation of wants and satisfactions" (OH, p. 191). Art has degenerated into crude entertainment, and the Babelians are generally "self absorbed" and "self indulgent," easily seduced by "novelty." The people are devoted to affluence, and this modern tale is a tale of "the nemesis of greed."

Nimrod, the leader, was used to having his every whim catered to and expected his people to provide this devotion and indulgence when he ascended to power. The people however also wished that their own individual wants and desires be catered to and so tension existed in the country. As a solution, Nimrod sought to put in practice a plan that would satisfy everyone. God had in heaven all that everyone could ever want or hope for, so the tactic would be to build a tower from which they could launch an assault on God's dwelling place. They would overrun Heaven, and plunder its boundless wealth, thereby guaranteeing that all the wants of the Babelians be constantly satisfied.

Despite the reluctance of the people to work hard, the prospect of an end to their collective feeling of deprivation, a purpose in life, an ideal to strive for motivated the population to begin work on the tower. Immediately unforeseen consequences began to appear. Individuals ousted from their place of work or home went uncompensated as the new "social purpose" trumped their claims. As the tower was to benefit all, then private concerns gave way to public considerations. A new communal identity was formed to replace what was previously a collection of individuals.

The trappings of the civilization began to take on the all-consuming identity of the tower. Toys, garden gnomes, bumper stickers, restaurant menus, even the names of children began to incorporate the tower as an emblem. More seriously, the focus of the education system changed. What was previously an Art institute became a vocational college, with Tower Studies and Industrial Design the subjects of the curriculum. The change, it was said, was necessary as the building of the tower demanded new skills to enable the population to adapt to the current endeavour.

As time went on, the building of the tower impoverished all. Financially and spiritually, Babel was bankrupt. The media reported only on the progress of the tower, conduct was recognized only as good or bad as it related to the building of the edifice, and words such as justice and injustice were rendered meaningless unless they had the adjective "social." Language itself, concerned as it was only with the tower, became "impoverished" (OH, p. 199). New religions and orthodoxies are formed around the idea of the Tower, and history rewritten so that the past could accommodate the present. In schools, "research" flourished, whereby an endless stream of facts and figures around both the Tower itself and its social implications were generated, and the results then further researched.

As the last remnants of "light hearted fun" (OH, p. 203) disappeared, and the resources of the country were depleted, unemployment rose. Only a few could work on the tower at one time. The civilians, though receiving the bare minimum for sustenance, had sold themselves to the machines. Nimrod himself, habitually visiting and climbing the Tower, became a distant and distracted figure.

The time came when the population began to fear that Nimrod, who was spending more and more time in the Tower, was in fact in collusion with God to cheat the citizens out of the rewards for which they had sacrificed so much. *En masse*, the population began to climb the Tower thinking that now was finally the time of reward and satisfaction. The whole construction collapsed, killing the entire citizenry. Their stairway to paradise had become their collective grave.

Fittingly, for Oakeshott, it is the Poet who has the last word. An inscription found in the rubble many centuries later reads:

Those who in fields of Elysian would dwell
Do but extend the boundaries of hell. (OH, p. 210)

Oakeshott is, of course, careful to tell us that the inscription “foreboded nothing; it was not a premonition of disaster,” simply a comment on the engagement itself. The Arts cannot predict, nor can they instruct, they can only give delight in a moment of contemplation. The myth itself however can inform, enlighten and educate.

THE RATIONALIST AND THE INABILITY TO CREATE AN AUTHENTIC SELF

The myth of the Tower of Babel is Oakeshott’s vehicle for describing a moral character that is wholly rationalist. The citizens are dissatisfied with the present, and wish only for a better future. They see the way things are, believe they know how things “ought” to be, and strive for this overarching project. The individual is overthrown; the aims of the community are paramount. They are always hungry, always greedy. The practical life subsumes them. The space of the individual to create self-understanding does not exist; the only space is public space.

Oakeshott would characterize this as overlooking the poetic dimension of the moral life. Seeing morality as “the reflective application of a moral criterion” has the “radical defect of its extreme-its denial of the poetic character of all human activity” (RP, p. 479). Worthington (2005) notes that Oakeshott’s argument is that “the shortcomings of a morality conceived in terms of the reflective application of ideals is symptomatic of a community that has become collectively deluded concerning what it is” (p. 64). Oakeshott refers to this state as a “corrupt consciousness” (p. 64) a phrase which Worthington notes owes its origins to R.G.Collingwood in *Principles of Art*. Writing of a community that does not know its own heart, Collingwood argues that “The remedy is the poem itself. Art is the community’s medicine for the worst disease of the mind, the corruption of consciousness” (p. 64).

This corruption occurs when a society loses its way of life, when individuals lose the ability or will to create their own self. Worthington (2005) again quotes Collingwood:

Every utterance and every gesture that each one of us makes is a work of art. It is important to each one of us that, in making them, however much he deceives others, he should not deceive himself. If he deceives himself in this matter, he has sown in himself a seed in which, unless he root up again, may grow into any kind of wickedness, any kind of mental disease, any kind of stupidity and folly and insanity. (p. 64)

Oakeshott in the earlier 1948 version of "The Tower of Babel," reprinted in *Rationalism in Politics*, offers not the story itself but a discussion of two forms of morality in contemporary Western civilization. The one is "*a habit of affection and behaviour*; not a habit of reflective *thought* but a habit of *affection and conduct*" (RP, p. 467). The situations faced in normal life are not met by applying a set of rules of behaviour, nor by conduct expressing a moral ideal, but "by acting in accordance with a certain habit of behaviour." It is the "unreflective following of a tradition of conduct in which we have been brought up."

This form of morality based on custom and tradition, Oakeshott maintains, gives stability both to the individual and society. Tradition is not rigid; custom is adaptable and susceptible to the nuance of the situation. There is no system, and consequently change is never large or sudden. Some parts may alter, but the whole does not so much notice these ripples. (This aversion to large and sudden changes has echoes here of Oakeshott's writings on the nature of his own conservatism.) Nothing is fixed, and a traditional way of behaviour has a history of continuous change. It is the "unselfconscious exploitation of the genius of the tradition of moral conduct" (RP, p. 471). "There is a freedom and inventiveness at the heart of every traditional way of life, and deviation may be an expression of that freedom, springing from a sensitiveness to the tradition itself and remaining faithful to the traditional form" (RP, p. 473).

EDUCATION AND THE MORALITY OF HABIT

The other form of moral life Oakeshott considers is that activity determined not by a habit of behaviour but by "the reflective application of a moral criterion. It appears in two common varieties; as the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals, and as the reflective observance of moral rules." This moral life, Corey (2006) notes, "calls for significant intellectual gifts ... for the difficulties in this kind of morality exist on two levels: first there is the problem of apprehending true and

correct principles to begin with. One must arrive at these through reason, and be able to defend them by means of argument" (p. 181). Secondly, the actor has to know how to apply the principles to his own actions, to know "at each moment what he is doing and why" (RP, p. 475). Conduct is undertaken with a vision of perfection in mind, the society always sure of what it "ought to think." In this moral life, the pursuit of one ideal is often at the expense of another. Every ideal has its opposite, that opposite often is equally desirable. Each moral eccentric is viewed not as an aberration but as a leader and moral guide. Life is in short seen as a series of problems to be addressed, with plans and rules in place to move us from "ought" to "is."

Both forms of morality have to be learned, but each requires a different type of education. In the morality of habit and affection, habits of conduct are acquired "by living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner ... in the same way we acquire our native language ... it is carried on in practice and observation without pause in every moment of our waking life, and perhaps even in our dreams. It is not compulsory, it is inevitable (RP, p. 469).

Oakeshott's idea of the purpose of education is "making oneself at home in the natural and physical world," and this sort of education teaching the morality of habit "gives the power to act appropriately and without hesitation, doubt or difficulty, but does not give the ability to explain our actions in abstract terms, or defend them as emanations of moral principles." It has been successful if the person acts not out of duty or rule following, but out of sense of acting in accordance with his essence, with his self esteem. To act immorally is not simply to break a law, but to diminish oneself.

The education into a moral life spent in pursuit of ideals and rules requires a different, more deliberate type of education. The student needs to understand the rules, needs to comprehend the motivation behind the rules and must also be able to use reason and logic to defend the rules. It is an education imposed systematically from the outside, to be internalized deliberately.

It is worth discussing here why Oakeshott clearly prefers the moral life of tradition to that of a rule-based morality. In *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott clearly locates morality in the world or practice, the world of "goings on." In this world, people act in relation to each other to satisfy their wants and needs. It is the world of self-realization, self-disclosure and self-reenactment. Isaacs

(2006) explains that “for Oakeshott, then, moral conduct is a form of knowledge that is learnt as a consequence of practice. It is a form of knowledge that is incapable of being ‘written down,’ is hard to articulate and, in the end, provides no sure guide to right conduct” (p. 135).

For Oakeshott, there are two types of knowledge, the technical (whose rules can be learned) and the practical, acquired in practice. Morality is of the latter type; it is imprecise and can only be learned through interaction with others. It is never settled, as it involves conduct between others, relationships and transactions with others, with feelings of individuals which hold meaning for those individuals. If morality is reduced to a system of rules it ceases to become morality.

Morality therefore is a practice without an extrinsic purpose (OHC, p. 62). It is nevertheless bound up with conduct, and is present in almost everything we do.² Oakeshott likens it to a vernacular language “in being an instrument of understanding and a medium of intercourse, in having a vocabulary and a syntax of its own, and in being spoken well or ill” (OHC, p. 62). Like any language, it can be spoken or written well or badly, in the service of honour or disgrace, with creativity or cliché. But like the rules of grammar, the rules of morality offer a guide but not a prescription. Oakeshott accepts the necessity for rules, commands, and moral principles but “in the end they are not ‘commands to be obeyed’ but ‘relatively precise considerations’ to be adhered to. They are ‘used’ in conduct, not ‘applied’ to conduct. Their consideration in moral conduct is part of deliberation, not demonstration” (Isaacs, 2006, p. 137).

EDUCATION AND THE AUTHENTIC SELF

There are two parts to moral conduct, the self-disclosure (that being the choosing of a course of action) and self-enactment (OHC, p. 71), the latter being the motive behind the action. For Oakeshott they are inseparable. Learning to act morally as an act of habit means knowing the both the moral rules and the moral sentiment, knowing how to act in good faith not by means of an ideology

² Practice here is not the same concept as Oakeshott has described in previous works. Practice here is used to denote more an idea of traditional relationships.

or set of ideals but by being true to oneself. The moral life is one, for Oakeshott, that is full of creativity and self-understanding, it is to possess judgement, it is “to acquire an appropriate connoisseurship” (RP, p. 29).

The moral life advanced by Oakeshott is one wherein the self, within a tradition and within “the conversation of mankind” acts out of habit and with spontaneity as the self moves through this life. Our “practical imagining” (RP, p. 502) fills our world with both attractive and non attractive images, and our moral life should be one that allows us pass through the world with ease and self confidence. We not only can control our aversions and desires, but we can also genuinely recognize others as individuals who have similar needs and wants; they are ends themselves and not means to our own ends. We can and do obtain our wants from other people, but accept that we owe them compensation for anything obtained.

Citing Hobbes, Oakeshott says that a person achieves this moral attitude if “when weighing the actions of other men with his own, they seem too heavy, to put them in the other part of the balance, and his own in their place, that his own passions and self love, may add nothing to the weight.”³ So the self in moral activity is ideally a member of a community of actors, all observing the same traditions, and all accepting or rejecting actions within that community. Fully to participate in this community is to learn the language of behaviour, and to recognize and correctly interpret the images, shapes and objects around you.

There is then no shortcut to a moral understanding, and this is what I believe is Oakeshott’s main argument. Rules and commands give certainty, and are easily assimilated, but they stifle the creativity which should dominate a human life. The Babelians forsook individuality for a short cut, both literally and figuratively. The population wanted a quick route to heaven, and they further accepted an imposed purpose and structure on their practices. They had considerable skill, for the tower they built was enormous in height, but they lacked judgement, and it is within this balance of skill and judgement that a human life is conducted.

Morality is formed because of actions, and does not precede actions. It is the child of behaviour, not the parent. And so it is reasonable to sympathize

³ *Leviathan* Chapter 15 cited in VOP p. 502.

with the Babelians who wanted to act naturally, to act well, as they had no vehicle, no community of like actors within which to practice this immediacy of morality. Oakeshott clearly recognizes this and in *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism* (PFPS) posits what he considers to be the eponymous types of political arrangements. Details of these two forms of society I discussed in Chapter Two, but I will briefly revisit the issue.

The politics of faith seeks perfection in mankind and believes government to be the means for achieving this comprehensive revision of the human condition. As Heath (1998) summarizes “Whether it is utopian or seeks only steady improvement in a single direction, the style of faith assumes that human power alone can achieve the end state; thus it not only seeks but welcomes power, allotting to government an omnicompetence that moves far beyond the amelioration of conflict or the maintenance of a legal framework for peaceful interaction.” Indeed, the government of faith becomes the very means for arriving at truth, and it demands of its citizens not just obedience or submission but enthusiasm, affection, and love. An example would be a state at war, “the paradigm case of a situation in which the variety of ‘admitted goods’ in a society is reduced to one; a state at war is a paradigm case of *telocracy*” (Oakeshott, 2006, p. 496).

Not to be identified with either anarchy or the “night watchman state,” the style of skepticism, grounded in a prudent doubt about our capacity to achieve perfection, assigns to government a specific and limited function: establishing and maintaining a system of rights and duties that, by preventing conflict, allows individuals to fulfill their aims and desires. Here the government exercises “authority” rather than “power,” the former being granted by the populous whilst the latter is exercised over the citizens. This arrangement is for Oakeshott a “*nomocracy*,” a belief in which it is understood that rights are “to be numerous and to be opportunities of which subjects may or may not avail themselves; and it understands ‘duties’ as numerous and as concerned with the relations between subjects and only in exceptional circumstances the relation between subjects and their government” (PFPS, p. 485).

Oakeshott shows throughout his writings a preference for a certain life style, and for a certain form of political arrangement. From his discussion of aesthetics and morality, and his discourses on the politics of skepticism and the

civil association, he looks to human flourishing as spontaneous self-expression and self-determination. A human life for him should be spent in the present, Poetically, with no overarching purpose but to learn day by day to understand the images around us, and to learn to join in the conversation of mankind. To see Man as the measure, not merely the measurer, of all things. His main theme is the fundamental error that humans make, an error about the nature of a life. Too much importance is placed on the undertaking of projects and schemes, too much effort expended in creating a better future at the expense of today's enjoyment, to finding "cribs" to obtaining happiness. The practical life is of course essential, without this he says human life would cease. His main preoccupation is however to stress the importance of wonder, imagination, self discovery, delight, play, love, friendship, conversation, philosophy and of course liberal learning.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE MORAL SELF AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

It is to liberal learning that I wish to return, to look at why Oakeshott preferred this kind of education to others, and to amplify his voice in the conversation around the future of this type of instruction. Oakeshott's comments and writings on liberal education I discussed in Chapter Three, and I would like now, having a better appreciation and understand of Oakeshott's main works in total, to express what I see as his overriding reason for promoting the liberal arts, that being the idea that a human life, to flourish, must be free. This freedom is the ability to come to know oneself without having an external identity imposed. We live all of us within a tradition. Engel (2007) writes that to Oakeshott

Human identity is reflective of social context and social context exists only as a series of meanings learned over time by human constructed tradition. The self and the environment, for Oakeshott, exist only as reflections of one another, and thus, freedom exist in the maintenance of this relationship. To impose an ideological aim or a direction to history, especially in terms of natural or biologic inclination is to abolish freedom. (p. 335)

Freedom then is located in the learned ability to recognize oneself and the environment as mutually constructed, and the desire to explore the possibilities

within this space. Our freedom lies in the learned ability to understand our web of meanings and our traditions and culture. We don't learn "freedom," but we can learn the language of social meaning. This language is grounded in our traditions, which is for Oakeshott not a static entity but an evolving concept. "A tradition of behaviour is not a fixed and inflexible manner of doing things; it is a flow of sympathy" (RP, p. 59). This tradition of behaviour, whilst difficult to "get to know," is nonetheless a "possible object of knowledge" (i.e., teachable) as "all its parts do not change at the same time...its principle is one of continuity; authority is diffused between past, present and imminent; between the old, the new and what is to come ... nothing is arbitrary" (RP, p. 61).

Tradition therefore not only can be learned, it must be learned if we are to exercise our freedom to create our own identity. We can only do this if we know our traditions and how to respond to them, fully and fluently to join in the conversation. The legitimate question then is "Why should a liberal education fit this description?" It is to Oakeshott "learning to look, to listen, to think, to feel, to imagine, to believe, to understand, to choose and to wish ... it is learning to recognize oneself in the only way in which this is possible; namely, by seeing oneself in the mirror of an inheritance of human understandings and activities and thus oneself" (VLL, pp. 66-67).

Oakeshott's view of liberal education then is a resistance to what Dunne (1975) described as "the lure of technique." It has no set ends, but at the same time in Iris Murdoch's (1992) words teaches us to "get things right" (p. 179). It has no end, but it has a purpose, that being the transformation of desire. As MacIntyre says:

It is a serious mistake for students to approach the study of the liberal arts thinking that they already know what their studies should lead to; to what ends they should be a means. For to think that is to suppose that they could prior to those studies have made adequately informed and intelligent decisions about what for them constitutes a choice worthy way of life. (cited in Sullivan, 2001, p. 14)

This would fit with Oakeshott's view of liberal education as a contributor not to an end dictated by economic or political considerations, but to the individual self-discovery. This self-discovery leads to another of Oakeshott's main constituents of a good life, spontaneity. He stresses the importance of this in our ability to react to the world with immediacy, he emphasizes again

spontaneity in both the work of the artist and the audience, in which neither the creation nor the delight need be mediated by thought, and in the actions of the citizens in a civil association, and further in the politics of skepticism.

In Oakeshottian terms, a liberal education permits the students to discover identity by learning about traditions and the students' place in that tradition. This tradition, for Oakeshott, should be one of mutual acceptance and respect, each striving to make a life for themselves by accepting others rather than simply competing in an adversarial fashion for limited goods and resources. There is no predetermined aim or outcome for the Oakeshottian liberal arts, but clearly there is the hope, or aspiration that the self-enactment will engender the moral character that can accommodate the freedoms of a civil association, and not succumb to the enticement of the financial, or dictatorial, or the kitsch. There is no assumption that people will behave either well or badly, and in Oakeshott's civil association there is minimal government and consequently the populous is less rule bound. The hope is however that people will be habituated to act in accordance with the traditions in which they find themselves.

Oakeshott, arguing as he does for freedom and spontaneity in a world lacking a *telos*, a *summum bonum*, has been described as a nihilist. Bernard Crick (1963) composed an entire piece for *Encounter* in which he characterized Oakeshott as a "skeptical, polemical, paradoxical, gay and bitter spirit," unmistakably a Tory as well as a "lonely nihilist" (p. 65). He is also seen as an "elitist."⁴ Richard Crossman, then Labour Party Member of Parliament in the UK, described Oakeshott as a "cavalier iconoclast" who was determined to destroy the "School (LSE) dedicated by the Webbs to the scientific study of the improvement of human society." He was a "Conservative" whose views led ultimately to "relativism" (cited in O'Sullivan, 2003, p. 1).

He was, I think, something much more simple than this. It is not to say that his thoughts are simplistic; they are indeed complex, sometimes convoluted, and often seemingly contradictory. At bottom I feel he saw the human condition as one in which we are alone in a world of meanings and

⁴ See for example Bennet, J. (2001, Spring). Liberal Learning as Conversation in *Liberal Education* 87(2). Retrieved from <http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-sp01/le-sp01bennett.cfm>

contradictions, of limitless wants and ultimately of course death. He saw life as an adventure, to be enjoyed as much as possible in the moment. It seems difficult to imagine a life lived in this fashion, but Oakeshott's urging I think is to remember that life should be enjoyed. Many things remind us of labour, and duty, and trials and tribulations. Oakeshott is perfectly aware of this. He reminds us though not to forget the aesthetic and the Poetic.

A further criticism of Oakeshott, suggested in Corey (2006, p. 302) is that he appears to believe in a religious aspect to life and yet posits a way of life that seemingly does not require a god. Corey suggests that for Oakeshott there is no need to posit a life beyond this one. She quotes Santayana as one who may capture this:

To double the world (*that is to posit a natural and supernatural world*) would unspiritualize the spiritual sphere; to double the truth would make both truths halting and false. There is only one world, the natural world, and only one truth about it; but this world has a spiritual life possible in it, which looks not to another world but to the beauty and perfection that this world suggests, approaches, and misses. (p. 303)

The benefit of reading Oakeshott, of including his voice in the conversation regarding the importance of a liberal education, lies in his reaffirmation of a human life as worthwhile in itself. He stresses not conflict but conversation; he advances freedom, imagination, joy, play, and delight as aspects that we should have in our lives if we are to live a life worth living. He stresses presentness over the search for a better tomorrow, and the Poetic over production. His work suggests a spiritual side to our lives, but this is not described. There is, he suggests, no general purpose in life but this is not the whole story. We are the writers of our own lives, and no general purpose can or should be imposed on us. There is no *telos*, but this is no reason to abandon any search for a life in which we learn to appreciate what we are. It does not matter that there may be nothing after this life.

The most appropriate Oakeshottian observation was I believe made by the twentieth-century Basque philosopher Miguel de Unamuno; "Man is perishing that may be, but if it is nothingness that awaits then let us live so that it will be an unjust fate" (cited in Worthington, 2005, p. 65).

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In Michael Oakeshott's (1989) opinion, "not to detect a man's style is to have missed three quarters of his meanings and utterances" (p. 56). It seems appropriate therefore to discuss Oakeshott's style, to add text to context. Of the man himself, two examples I think suffice to convey his overall lightness of thought and his almost whimsical view of life. Oakeshott declined an offer from the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the Order of Companion of Honour, and was reported to have commented on the news that the Beatles had been given the order of MBE "Perfectly appropriate. Honours go to those that want them" (cited in Franco, 2004, p. 1). Neither elitist nor dandy, he is perhaps best understood as an iconoclast who does not fit into any easy categorization. A second example is a snippet of a conversation reported by Noel O'Sullivan (2002):

Is it possible to pinpoint the secret of Oakeshott's positive outlook? I think the key to it is contained in a brief conversation I once had with him late in his life. I asked him a large question, which was what he thought of human beings. He pondered for a moment, and then said that he thought the main thing about them is that they are like cats. I asked him if he meant domestic cats, and he nodded but didn't say anything else. So I said, You mean that they sit in front of the door and expect someone to open it for them? It was his answer to this that sticks in my mind. He said, Exactly, they take themselves very seriously. (http://www.michael-oakeshott-association.com/pdfs/conf01_commem_osullivan)

This latter notion of mankind taking themselves too seriously reverberates throughout Oakeshott's writings, and is evidenced both in his rejection of the rationalist mind set, and his embracing of the notions of "play" and "delight." He rejects all claims to absolute knowledge, and is disdainful of those who believe that they can, by careful planning, secure a better tomorrow

for us all. He has what O'Sullivan (2002) terms "a sense of piety" (p. 3) a respect for all those aspects of the human condition not of our own making. Rather than reject impiously everything that is not made and shaped by man, "like Swift he admires the bee rather than the spider; whereas the bee gathers the pollen from which its honey comes from flowers whose existence is quite independent of it, the spider spins its web from its own innards."

Nor is Oakeshott particularly enamoured by those who have a "cause" to pursue, an ideal to promote. He would of course accept that working for cures of diseases, or for the poor and homeless, or for the advancement of architecture is honourable work. Nevertheless he argues that to believe this to be one's life mission is wrong. Could any such idea, he writes (1993), "be more empty and futile" than to measure a life by its contribution to "something thought more permanent than itself—a race, a people, an art, a science or a profession?" (p. 32). He writes in *On Human Conduct* that this is the attempt to bring about the "iniquity of oblivion eclipsed by posthumous glory" (OHC, p. 84). Permanence belongs only to ourselves, and the moral and civil character we fashion for ourselves.

Of Oakeshott's style of writing, authors such as Corey (2004) Podikisik (2002) and Franco (2004) have noted his debt to Plato (the notion of conversation is obvious here) to Aristotle (and the connections to the idea of phronesis) and in particular to Augustine. Corey (2006, p. 13) in particular stresses the importance of Augustine to Oakeshott, in both style and substance. Citing Augustine's allegorical two cities of god and man, Corey draws a parallel between the Augustinian ("the one consists of those who live by human standards, the other of those who live according to God's will")¹ and the Oakeshottian "worldly" and "religious" man as ideal moral types (cited in Corey, 2006, p. 35) that permeate his writings.

The comparison between Oakeshott and Augustine is useful only partially. For Oakeshott, we each hold dual citizenship in these cities. From a stylistic viewpoint it is interesting in that it is the first example of Oakeshott's use of contrast to illuminate his ideas, a technique he uses throughout his work. So

¹ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson New York: Penguin 1972 p. 595.

he has the dichotomies of “work” and “play”² “faith” and “skepticism”³ “habitual” and “reflective” morality,⁴ “instructing” and “imparting,” “education” and “socialization,”⁵ “civil” and “enterprise” associations⁶ among many others. A reading of Oakeshott should recognize in this style a man who accepts the reality that we live almost wholly in the world of practice, and assumes that the satisfying of wants and desires is a natural (and desirable) way of being, but further assumes the dual citizenship mentioned previously. We are not one thing or the other. The joy of reading Oakeshott is that he writes mainly of those moments between the necessities of life, when purpose, consumption and production are absent.

Nevertheless, easy as it is to be seduced by the elegance of the writing, the wit, and the literary style⁷ of Oakeshott, one of the questions addressed is the effectiveness of his opus in offering some voice in support of the liberal arts. Others in this debate have suggested a more concrete argument. Rabuzzi (2001) is among many who proclaim that “the liberal arts are crucial for business success because what we offer is unique and apposite for rapidly changing, hyperlinked, globalized markets.” He endorses the argument of James O. Freedman (1997), Michael Useem (1995) and Michael S. McPherson (1998) that a liberal education may be the most practical training people can receive today.

Oakeshott’s contribution to this conversation is much more complex, and encompasses not simply a view of liberal education as a tool of socialization but rather a necessary ingredient in firstly an introduction into our world of meaning, and secondly a path (without final destination) to a kind of freedom. The first step requires work, Shakespeare’s image of the “whining

² Oakeshott, M. *Work and Play*, *First Things* 54 (1995) p. 29-33.

³ Oakeshott, M. *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* (1952) Timothy Fuller (Ed.) (New Haven and London: Yale University Press) 1996.

⁴ Oakeshott, M. *The Tower of Babel* in *On History and Other Essays* forward by Timothy Fuller Liberty Fund Indianapolis 1999.

⁵ Oakeshott, M. *The Voice of Liberal Learning* Yale University (1965).

⁶ Oakeshott, M. *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* (1952) Timothy Fuller (Ed.) (New Haven and London: Yale University Press) 1996.

⁷ Oakeshott does not follow the usual pattern of academic writing, in that he will often change his mind without explanation, borrow ideas and phrases from others without acknowledgement, and use citations very sparingly.

schoolboy, with his satchel and shining morning face, creeping like a snail unwillingly to school”⁸ is still recognizable. But as Keeney (2005) comments:

The point of schooling is not to pass from one level to another, or to obtain a credential: it is the much more serious point that children come to better understand their human inheritance, and learn to conceive new ways of understanding their world. Education is thus a pursuit by which we acquire and maintain a human identity. As an active process, the educative process necessarily involves more than the mere handing over of the products of earlier generations in formulaic fashion, or the passing on of a stock of ready-made ideas, sentiments and opinions. It must be an active process of understanding, or learning. (p. 6)

Beyond this point, a liberal education would add a voice to the conversation around the question Oakeshott considers throughout his writings; is there beyond the realm of practice something more enduring, more valuable than the satisfaction of wants? Man has always sought the nature of the good. Each civilization, each generation, has sought ideals with which to guide its moral, political and economic life. Deneen (2010) describes well the role of the liberal arts in this search for freedom from the unending satisfying of wants, from the arbitrariness of the despot, from the Faustian bargain of modern science:

To be free-liberal is an art in itself, something that is learned not by nature or instinct, but by refinement and education. At the center of the liberal arts are the humanities, education in how to be a human being. Each new generation is encouraged to consult the great works of our tradition, the vast epics, the classic tragedies and comedies, the reflections of philosophers and theologians, the revealed Word of God, those countless books that seek to teach us what it is to be human, and above all how to use our liberty well. (p. 61)

It is this using liberty well that I believe is the first essential Oakeshott theme to be tied to a liberal education. We are free, says Oakeshott, because as human agents we are free to choose our situations, and our response to situations. As Podoksik (2003) explains, for Oakeshott “There is no separate faculty such as free will, existing even if there is no freedom of action. Every human action is a free action, and it is free because it is never the only possible action. There is always an awareness of the presence of choice to do *this* or *that*. Every action is always seen as a result of free choice.” The better choice,

⁸ William Shakespeare. *As You Like It* Act 7 Scene 2. (Originally published 1623.)

Oakeshott would argue, is made by those given the opportunity to explore the options and alternatives, the opportunity offered during the “interval” of a liberal education.

The second related theme in Oakeshott is the important notion of “play.” In 1995, he wrote that “The complete character of a human being does not come into view unless we add *Homo Ludens*, man the player, to *Homo Sapiens* (intelligent man), *Homo Faber*, man the maker of things, and *Homo Laborans*, man the worker.” Oakeshott added that it is not *Homo Sapiens*, *Homo Faber* and *Homo Laborans*, but *Homo Ludens*, man engaged in the activities of play, who is the civilized man. The liberal or free element in our society could only be maintained, he believed, if “play” was valued more than “work.”

O’Sullivan writes that Oakeshott believed:

the liberal concept of education, which attaches intrinsic value to the activity of understanding (whether in the form of philosophy, science or history) and to art and poetry, is now under constant threat because it presupposes a civilization based upon the value of play. Although our universities continue to offer a liberal syllabus, this has no secure position in an age dominated by the culture of work, in relation to which the liberal ideal inevitably looks parasitic and inconsequential. Although the liberal educational ideal may survive, what it offers is now often valued only for what it contributes to public entertainment, or to personal recreation and relaxation: to things, that is, which work is assumed to require if it is to be efficiently pursued after a short break from it.

The threat perceived by Oakeshott is the loss of the non-instrumental, a loss of the individual moral being making decisions within his or her tradition, respecting the boundaries and prohibitions of that tradition whilst enjoying within those broad limits the joy of self-enactment and discovery. The reward for the reader of Oakeshott is a sense of being “in the world,” of enjoying the present, of being suspicious of absolutes, of appreciating amongst the days of drudgery the ever present possibility of delight and enjoyment. It is the sense that whilst the passive, “mass man” will be formed by the world, the Oakeshottian citizen will actively make the world for themselves.

Peregrine Worsthorne (1990), who served under Oakeshott in Europe in the Second World War, describes him thus. It is a description I believe that describes the man, and summarizes his politics and philosophy succinctly:

In life and in his works, Oakeshott's style was enchanting. Here was a man who taught my generation how Conservatism could be combined with Bohemianism, convention with eccentricity, orderliness with wild abandon, pleasure with responsibility. (p. 19)

I began this thesis on Michael Oakeshott with a quotation from Milan Kundera about the "lightness" of our being. It is with Kundera, and his relevance to Oakeshott, that I would like to end. Kundera (1996), in his essay "*The depreciated legacy of Cervantes*" speaks of the times after the Modern Era (post Galileo and Descartes) when "the one-sided nature of the European sciences, which reduced the world to a mere object of technical and mathematical investigation and put the concrete world of life, *die Lebenswelt*," beyond the horizon of the technicians. "The rise of the sciences," he writes, "propelled man into the tunnels of the specialized disciplines. The more he advanced in knowledge, the less clearly could he see either the world as a whole or his own self." Kundera, like Oakeshott, does not completely view this as a negative thing, and believed that this movement gave birth to the very thing that investigated this new reality. For Kundera this thing is the novel, but equally it could be said that for Oakeshott it is liberal education.

Accepting the "novel" of Kundera and the liberal arts of Oakeshott as analogous, "*The depreciated legacy of Cervantes*" reveals more parallels between the two authors. Kundera speaks of the four appeals of the novel, those of "play," "dream," "thought" and "time," four themes common to Oakeshott. Oakeshott's "mass man" is echoed in Kundera's fear that culture is "more and more in the hands of the mass media; as agents of the unification of the planet's history, the media amplify and channel the reduction process; they distribute throughout the world the same simplifications and stereotypes easily acceptable by the greatest number, by everyone, by all mankind." For Oakeshott the Rationalist, and for Kundera "the termites of reduction" reduce not only the meaning of the world but also the meaning of works of art. The fear of Kundera that "nothing will be left but the endless babble of graphomaniacs" repeats Oakeshott's view that modern discourse is like "the yap of a dog at the echo of its own bark" (VLL, p. 90).

Neither man is however a pessimist, and this is the reward for reading Kundera, and in particular Oakeshott. Kundera sees Cervantes' Quixote as a heroic figure:

As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men.

The heroism lies in Quixote's willingness to accept that the world is one not of certainty but of discovery, and to face the world "as ambiguity, to be obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths (truths embodied in *imaginary selves* called characters), to have as one's only certainty the *wisdom of uncertainty*, requires no less courage" than those who seek the rational and logical.

This I believe is Oakeshott's stance also. It is a stand against rationalism and the ideological. We are, to Oakeshott, in constant dialogue with the world of meanings that surrounds us. Fully to develop as individuals, we need to adopt an attitude of curiosity, playfulness and humility, supported by a practical wisdom that applies a consistent set of virtues to a confusing world. Of teaching specifically, this dialogue allows the act of teaching to become much more than imparting of "information" to students. As Higgins (2011) writes:

Teaching offers a constant check against the dominance of one voice and against the tendency of the great human questions to become mere academic topics. Teaching forces one to see one's discipline from the eyes of the uninitiated and to ponder how the voice of one's discipline contributes to the conversation. Teaching provides teaches with the opportunity, as Dewey would say, for growing in "childlikeness." (p. 525)

If the Oakeshottian world view is accepted, teaching, as Higgins says, becomes an encounter between the birth of new generational ideas and "the world of fading conventions" (p. 521). Teaching is at "the very site where human cultures preserve themselves and challenge themselves to grow" (p. 521). The practice of teaching is the application of traditions to present concerns. Higgins again writes in very Oakeshott like tones:

Teachers notice the dynamics of cultural life. They notice the resonance of innovation, when an old score is suddenly brought to life by new performers in a manner that preserves the integrity of each. And they notice the tinny sound of these instruments, tradition and natality when they fail to play in tune. (p. 522)

Both teaching and learning become extensions of our individuality, but not our egotism. Oakeshott would deny that teaching is a “calling,” whereby the teacher leads a life of self-denial and sacrifice. Such a life would be a stunted life, completely unsuited to the role of teacher. Further, if we are to grow in understanding then Play is a far better vehicle than work. He, like Aristotle, is not asking the question “how should *I* live,” but “how should *one* live.”

If we are to flourish in our world of ambiguity Oakeshott suggests as the better vehicles liberalism in politics and a liberal education. He urges us to have the courage to create our own unique lives, to accept the difficult, (mortality for example) to work conscientiously, to produce (within reason) and to consume (in moderation) but always to strive to have at the forefront of our existence the non-instrumental; friendship, love and Play. To focus not on the weight of our existence but above all else to wear our lives lightly.

References

- Arendt, H. (1951). *The origins of totalitarianism, by Hannah Arendt*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.
- Arnold, M. (1960). *Culture and anarchy*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Augustine. (1950). *The city of God*. New York: Modern Library.
- Axelrod, P. D. (2002). *Values in conflict: The university, the marketplace and the trials of liberal education*. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Barrow, R. (2005). Education: The frustration. *Prospero*, 11(1), 53.
- Bennet, J. (2001). Liberal learning as conversation. *Liberal Education*, 87(2). Retrieved from www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-sp01/le-sp01bennett.cfm
- Bloom, A. D. (1987). *The closing of the american mind: How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bok, D. C. (2006). *Our underachieving colleges: A candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Boucher, D. (2005). Oakeshott, freedom and republicanism. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 7(1), 81-96.
- Boyd, R. (2004). Michael Oakeshott on civility, civil society and civil association. *Political Studies*, 52(3), 603-622.
- Cahill, T. (2004). *How the Irish saved civilization: The untold story of Ireland's heroic role from the fall of rome to the rise of Medieval Europe*. New York: Rosetta Books.
- Candrea, D. (2002). *Oakeshott's defence of a pointless activity*. Retrieved from www.michael-oakeshott-association.com

- Cannon, J. A. (2002). *The Oxford companion to British history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clough, G. B. (1904). *A short history of education*. London: Palmer.
- Coats, W. J. (1985). Michael Oakeshott as liberal theorist. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 18(4).
- Collingwood, R. G. (1924). *Speculum mentis or, the map of knowledge*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Connor, W. (2001). Liberal arts in the twenty first century. *American academy for liberal learning occasional paper*. Retrieved from www.aale.org
- Corey, E. C. (2006). *Michael Oakeshott on religion, aesthetics, and politics*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Corey, E. C. (2006). The world of Michael Oakeshott. *Modern Age*, (Summer), 262.
- Cornwell, G., & Stoddard, E. (2001). The future of liberal education and the hegemony of market values: Priviledge, practicality, and citizenship. *Liberal Education*, 87, 6-15.
- Crick, B. (1963). The world of Michael Oakeshott or the lonely nihilist. *Encounter*, 20, 65.
- Cromer, A. H. (1993). *Uncommon sense: The heretical nature of science*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Curtis, B. (2005). Against the grain: Michael Oakeshott on the idea of a liberal education. *Journal of Philosophy and the History of Education*, 5.
- Davis, R. (2004). *The unbalancing of Australian universities*. Australia: UOW Publications.
- Deneen, P. (2010). Science and the decline of the liberal arts. *The New Atlantis*, (Fall 2009/Winter 2010), 61.
- Domonkos, L. (1997). History of Higher education. In *International encyclopedia of higher education* (pp. 1-22). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- D'Souza, D. (1991). *Illiberal education: The politics of race and sex on campus*. New New York: Free Press; Toronto: Collier Macmillan Canada.

- Dunne, J. (1993). *Back to the rough ground: "phronesis" and "techne" in modern philosophy and in aristotle*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Egan, K. (1983). Educating and socializing: A proper distinction? *Teachers College Record*, 85(1), 27-42.
- Engels, S. (2007). Political education in/as the practice of freedom. *Journal of the Philosophy of Education*, 41(3), 335.
- Francis, R. D. (1986). *Frank H. Underhill: Intellectual provocateur*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Franco, P. (2004). *Michael Oakeshott: An introduction*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Frowe, I. (2007). The politics of faith and the politics of scepticism: Michael Oakeshott, education and extremism. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 55(3), 264-285.
- Fuller, M. B. (1998). *Making sense of MacIntyre*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate.
- Geuna, A. (1996). European universities: An interpretive history. *Merit, Research Memorandum* (2-96-02), 12.
- Gray, J. (1989). *Liberalisms: Essays in political philosophy*. London: Routledge.
- Greenleaf, W. H. (1966). *Oakeshott's philosophical politics*. New York: Barnes & Noble.
- Halévy, E. (1949). *A history of the English people in the nineteenth century*. London: E. Benn.
- Havelock, E. A. (1963). *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge: Belknap Press Harvard University Press.
- Haworth, A. (2004). *Understanding the political philosophers: From ancient to modern times*. London: Routledge.
- Heath, E. (1998). On Oakeshott's politics of faith and scepticism. *The Independant Review. A Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2(No 3. Winter)
- Higgins, C. (2011). The good life of teaching: An ethics of professional practice. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*.

- Isaacs, S. (2006). *The politics and philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*. New York: Routledge.
- Jaeger, W., & Highet, G. (1944). *Paideia: The ideals of Greek culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kant, I. (2009). *An answer to the question: "What is enlightenment?"* London: Penguin Books.
- Keeney, P. (2005). Introduction to Oakeshott. *Prospero*, 11(1), 6.
- Kimball, B. A. (1986). *Orators & philosophers: A history of the idea of liberal education*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Kimball, R. (1990). *Tenured radicals: How politics has corrupted our higher education*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Klibansky, R., Paton, H. J., & Warburg Institute. (1936). *Philosophy and history: Essays presented to ernst cassirer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kronman, A. T. (2007). *Education's end: Why our colleges and universities have given up on the meaning of life*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kundera, M. (1984). *The unbearable lightness of being*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Kundera, M. (1993). *The art of the novel*. Toronto: HarperCollins.
- MacIntyre A. (2009). The very idea of a university: Aristotle, Newman, and us. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 57(4), 347-362.
- MacIntyre, A. C. (1984). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- McCabe, D. (2000). Michael Oakeshott and the idea of liberal education. *Social Theory and Practice*, 26(3), 443.
- McPherson, M. S. (1998). The economic value of a liberal education. *About Campus*, 3(4), 13-17.
- Miles, M. M. (2008). *Art as plunder: The ancient origins of debate about cultural property*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Minogue, K. (2002). Michael Oakeshott as a character. *Society New Brunswick*, 39, 66-70.
- Minogue, K. (2003). *Rationalism revisitee*. Retrieved from www.michael-oakeshott.association.com/pdf/conf03_minogue.pdf

- Mitchell, T. (1999). From Plato to the internet. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 31(2), 16-22.
- Mosely, I. (2006). *Oakeshott's verdict on the modern world*. Retrieved from www.michael-oakeshott-association.com/pdfs/conf06_mosley.pdf
- Murdoch, I. (1993). *Metaphysics as a guide to morals*. New York: Allen Lane, Penguin Press.
- Neill, E. (2010). *Michael Oakeshott*. New York: Continuum.
- Newman, J. H. (1919). *The idea of a university defined and illustrated: [I] In nine discourses delivered to the Catholics of Dublin; [II] In occasional lectures and essays addressed to the members of the Catholic university*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Oakeshott, M. (1921). Shylock the Jew. *Caian*, 30, 61-67.
- Oakeshott, M. (1951). Review of J. C. Powys, *The meaning of culture*. *Cambridge Review*, (30), 367.
- Oakeshott, M. (1975). *Hobbes on civil association*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Oakeshott, M. (1975). *Hobbes on civil association*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Oakeshott, M. (1975). *On human conduct*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.
- Oakeshott, M. (1976). On misunderstanding human conduct: A reply to my critics. *Political Theory*, 4(3), 353-367.
- Oakeshott, M. (1991). *Rationalism in politics and other essays*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Oakeshott, M. (1995). Work and play. *First Things*, 54, 29-33.
- Oakeshott, M. (2004). *What is history? And other essays*. Exeter, England: Imprint Academic.
- Oakeshott, M. J. (1933). *Experience and its modes*. Cambridge, England: The University Press.
- Oakeshott, M. J. (1953). *The social and political doctrines of contemporary Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Oakeshott, M. J., & Fuller, T. (1996). *The politics of faith and the politics of scepticism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Oakeshott, M., & Fuller, T. (1989). *The voice of liberal learning: Michael Oakeshott on education*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Oakeshott, M., & Fuller, T. (1991). *Rationalism in politics and other essays*. Indianapolis: Liberty Press.
- Oakeshott, M., & Letwin, S. R. (1993). *Morality and politics in modern Europe: The Harvard lectures*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Oakeshott, M., Nardin, T., & O'Sullivan, L. (2006). *Lectures in the history of political thought*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- O'Sullivan, L. (2003). *Oakeshott on history*. Exeter, England: Imprint Academic.
- O'Sullivan, N. (2002). Why read Oakeshott? *Society*, 39(3), 71-74.
- Pater, W. (1915). *Aesthetic poetry*. Retrieved from www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world
- Plato, Sterling, R. W., & Scott, W. C. (1996). *The republic*. New York: Norton.
- Podoksik, E. (2003). Oakeshott's theory of freedom as recognized contingency. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 2(1), 57-77.
- Podoksik, E. (2003). *In defence of modernity: Vision and philosophy in Michael Oakeshott*. Exeter, England: Imprint Academic.
- Podoksik, E. (2003). *In defence of modernity: Vision and philosophy in Michael Oakeshott*. Exeter, England: Imprint Academic.
- Press, E., & Washburn, J. (2000, March). Kept university. *The Atlantic Monthly Magazine*, 285(3), 39-54.
- Raaflaub, K. A. (1983). Democracy, oligarchy, and the concept of the "free citizen" in late fifth-century Athens. *Political Theory Political Theory*, 11(4), 517-544.
- Rabuzzi, D. A. (2001). Business needs the humanities. *Liberal Education*, 87, 44-49.
- Rayner, J. (1985). The legend of Oakeshott's conservatism: Sceptical philosophy and limited politics. *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne De Science Politique*, 18(2), 313-338.

- Riley, P. (1992). In appreciation: Michael Oakeshott, philosopher of individuality. *Review of Politics*, 54, 649.
- Robin Barrow. (2005). Education: The frustration. *Prospero*, 11(1).
- Rorty, R. (1991). *Objectivity, relativism, and truth: Philosophical papers I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sagan, C. (1996). *The demon-haunted world: Science as a candle in the dark*. New York: Random House.
- Schiller, F. (1965). *On the aesthetic education of man: In a series of letters*. New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co.
- Scruton, R. (2000). *An intelligent person's guide to modern culture*. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press.
- Scruton, R. (2007). *Culture counts: Faith and feeling in a world besieged*. New York: Encounter Books.
- Searle, J. (1990). The storm over the university. *The New York Review of Books*, (December 6th).
- Shattock, M. (1996). *The creation of a university system*. Oxford, England; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Spitz, D. (1976). A rationalist malgré lui: The perplexities of being Michael Oakeshott. *Political Theory*, 4(3), 335-352.
- Sullivan, R. E., & Erasmus Institute. (2001). *Higher learning & Catholic traditions*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Taylor, C., Gutmann, A., & Taylor, C. (1994). *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Turk, J., & Canadian Association of University Teachers. (2000). *The corporate campus: Commercialization and the dangers to Canada's colleges and universities*. Toronto: J. Lorimer.
- Useem, M. (1995). Corporate restructuring and liberal education. *Liberal Learning*, 81(1).
- von Schiller, F. (1967). *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. E. Wilkinson & L. Willoughby (Trans.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Watson, P. (2001). *The modern mind: An intellectual history of the 20th century*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Watson, P. (2002). *A terrible beauty: The people and ideas that shaped the modern mind: A history*. London: Phoenix.
- Watson, P. (2005). *Ideas: A history of thought and invention, from fire to freud*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Westerman, W. L. (1914). Vocational training in antiquity. *The School Review*, 22(9), 601.
- Wollstonecraft, M., & Poston, C. (1988). *A vindication of the rights of woman: An authoritative text, backgrounds, the Wollstonecraft debate, criticism*. New York: Norton.
- Worsthorne, P. (1990, December 21). Obituary, *Daily Telegraph*, p. 19.
- Worthington, G. (1995). Michael Oakeshott on life: Waiting with godot. *History of Political Thought*, 16(1), 105-119.
- Worthington, G. (2000). Michael Oakeshott and the city of God. *Political Theory*, 28(3), 377-398.
- Worthington, G. (2002). The voice of poetry in Oakeshott's moral philosophy. *The Review of Politics*, 64(2), 285-310.
- Worthington, G. (2005). Poetic experience and the good life in the writings of Michael Oakeshott. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 4(1), 57-66.