

Elizabeth Corey
Baylor University

Beauty and Michael Oakeshott

Philadelphia Society Regional Meeting,
Cincinnati, Ohio, October 8, 2011

Oakeshott is not usually thought of as a theorist of art or aesthetics, and indeed he wasn't; he was primarily a philosopher of politics. He is perhaps most well-known for his essays, collected in the volume *Rationalism in Politics*, where he launched a critique of "Rationalism." He described this as a cast of mind and an attitude toward politics that valued abstract knowledge—rules—as more important than the lived experience of a tradition. The Rationalist would rather tear down institutions and build them up anew than reform what already exists. On the analogy of architecture, such a person infinitely prefers new construction to renovation of an old house. Oakeshott would have seen our current president as a quintessential example of the Rationalist: the young, relatively inexperienced reformer who is full of bright ideas and anxious to impose them on all of us, despite the fact that conditions are often not favorable for such changes. The Rationalist thinks that compromise of any sort is a violation of principles; one must remain ideologically pure.

The Oakeshott most of us know, if we know him at all, thus usually appears as a trenchant critic of modern politics, a somewhat unorthodox British conservative who has never quite been assimilated into the American scene.

And yet, in his book *Rationalism in Politics*, there is an unusual little piece called "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind." Many people pass by this essay, because it is philosophically quite difficult—they prefer to read about rationalism or conservatism—and besides, what does art really have to do with politics anyway? On my view, the answer is "quite a lot": the ideas set out in this essay form the core of Oakeshott's thought—they stand behind his critique of Rationalism and structure his reflections on the conservative disposition, thoughts which appear in a wonderful essay entitled "On Being Conservative."

Before I turn to "The Voice of Poetry," essay, however, a few words about "modes" are in order. In 1933 the young Oakeshott published a quite difficult book of philosophy entitled *Experience and Its Modes*. There he described modes as various well-defined ways of looking at the whole of experience, and in this first book the modes consisted of science, history and practice.

In the scientific mode, everything is as it appears to the scientist in terms of number, quantity and force, not as it is in the world of ordinary daily experience. As scientists, we

see the world in its quantitative character. Here “Water” is not something that we might drink but the chemical compound H₂O; a breeze is not “refreshing” but is measurable in terms of its height, duration and speed.

In the historical mode, history is an independent world of ideas that should not be simply assimilated as a source of “lessons” for contemporary politics. It is an intellectual endeavor all its own, “what the historian is *compelled* to think by the pattern of the [historical] evidence”—not a collection of lessons for present political activity.

Oakeshott thought “practice” was the most dominant mode, or way of approaching all of life. Practice includes everyday human interaction; and also politics, morality and religion. It is the world we live in; the world of desire and aversion—of, to borrow Hobbes’s formulation, the perpetual and restless desire for power after power; in another phrase of Oakeshott’s, the “deadliness of doing.” Indeed, most of us live almost the entirety of our lives in the practical mode—caring about how we will pay our bills, raise our children, “make a contribution” to the world around us. This is the realm of moral conduct—not just moral conduct in times of crisis (what *ought* we to do in a difficult situation?)—but moral conduct *per se*—all the interactions we have with others. The practical mode encompasses nearly all our daily activities, and the essential character of practice consists in the achievement of some desired change. Even the conservative attempt to *resist* change is a practical activity, for to conserve and protect is still to concern ourselves with what ought to be.

To return now to “The Voice of Poetry”—these modes—science, history and practice—form the backdrop against which the essay must be understood. In “The Voice of Poetry” Oakeshott is defining a NEW mode—one which he had not seen clearly as a young man in 1933, and this is the mode of aesthetics or poetry (I shall use the words interchangeably).

Poetry here was not just written verse; it was all art, music, literature, natural beauty—indeed, Oakeshott thought the entire world could be viewed aesthetically *if one were disposed to do so*. In the mode of “poetry” or “aesthetics,” practical considerations are put aside in favor of enjoying and contemplating what is presently before one’s eyes. Unfortunately, the “voice” of poetry is often eclipsed by the other voices, which tend to dominate the “conversation of mankind,” in Oakeshott’s famous phrase. Though this metaphor of conversation has been much abused in recent years, for Oakeshott it was a way of recognizing the real diversity of human experience. The scientific “voice” has something distinct to say, as does the historical voice; so does the practical. But all of these can be somewhat overbearing. Poetry, however, was the most easily shut out of the conversation, since it was (and is) thought least necessary for getting along in the world. In fact, Oakeshott thought it was actually the voice most necessary for a fulfilling and rich human life.

To illustrate Oakeshott's idea of the poetic with an example: an ancient manuscript will be seen by the historian as a piece of source material, to be used as evidence for his research; the scientist will want to subject it to chemical analysis; and the practical person will want to know what price it will bring in the marketplace. But in the aesthetic mode, the manuscript is valued as an image complete in itself; something to be admired and contemplated—as Oakeshott puts it, "delighted in." It is not to be "used" at all.

For Oakeshott it is not only art objects that may be viewed aesthetically. The view out one's back door, the habitual expression of a friend, the look of the sky in winter – all of these images are potentially aesthetic. To state the point quite radically, his implication is that anything in life may be approached from an aesthetic perspective. Here is the challenge Oakeshott saw—are we able to step away from our practical concerns for a moment and focus on the poetic aspects of life? Can we enjoy the beauty of the present? He thought that some kind of disposition like this was crucial not only for a satisfying life but also, and especially, for being authentically *conservative*.

A conservative attitude, Oakeshott maintained, requires that one 'be equal to one's own fortune ... live at the level of one's own means ... [and] be content with the want of greater perfection which belongs alike to oneself and one's circumstances'.¹ Such an attitude is, in Christian terms, the antithesis of pride – a rejection of all grand projects that he so aptly symbolized in his retelling of the Tower of Babel story. The portrait of the conservative disposition that emerges in 'On Being Conservative' is particularly notable for its aesthetic overtones. There conservatism appears as a remarkably countercultural moral orientation. It is a propensity above all to *enjoy* rather than to seek. Friendship, the most conservative of all relationships, is 'dramatic, not utilitarian' and the friend is someone 'who excites contemplation'.² This conservative disposition rests not on reverence for the past; rather 'what is esteemed is the present' and happiness consists in *enjoying* 'what is available' and *delighting in* what is present.³ Oakeshott's pronounced emphasis on living in the present, on enjoyment, and on the contemplative disposition all describe the essence of the aesthetic consciousness. And here it is called 'conservatism'.

I said at the beginning that Oakeshott's focus on aesthetics was crucial to his overall philosophical outlook, and here is how. His aversion to Rationalism in politics stemmed from the Rationalist's *inability* to rest content with the present, or indeed with anything at all; everything is always in need of improvement. Rationalists feel compelled to talk of change, of progress, of a better state of affairs that always lies just ahead. Thus Rationalist politics (and Rationalism in anything else, such as education or religion) are in essence anti-aesthetic. If a poetic view, for Oakeshott, requires graceful acceptance of what one is given, Rationalism presses always forward in a Pelagian striving for some future state of perfection. Oakeshott, though not a traditional Christian, would have shared CS Lewis's view on this situation. Here is

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

² *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 168; italics mine.

Lewis: "A more Christian attitude, which can be attained at any age, is that of leaving [the future] in God's hands. We may as well, for God will certainly retain it whether we leave it to Him or not. Never, in peace or war, commit your virtue or your happiness to the future. Happy work is best done by the man who takes his long-term plans somewhat lightly and works from moment to moment 'as to the Lord.' It is only our *daily* bread that we are encouraged to ask for. The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or any grace received."

Aesthetic experience for Oakeshott was thus not some mere embellishment, a leisure activity engaged in so that one might return to work refreshed. To listen for the "voice of poetry" was rather to cultivate a certain detachment from all the mundane things that ordinarily, and unavoidably, concern human beings. The problem with seeing the world only in the terms of ordinary practical and moral life is that it tempts us toward inordinate worldliness. By worldliness Oakeshott meant the tendency to find one's good in reputation, money or material possessions, or political activity, or achievement, as opposed to making something of *oneself as a person* and enjoying the beauty that is available to be observed, if we will only look.

So Oakeshott's conservatism is founded on an essentially "aesthetic" insight. What is equally attractive this conception of conservatism is his recognition of the limits of political activity: i.e., that all of life should not be conducted in the mode of politics. This was a problem in his day, but I think it is even more so in ours. Politics has become for us the litmus test for friendship and association, it has infiltrated university education particularly in the elite schools (but not only there), and it is preached in sermons, at least in the Episcopal church. Oakeshott would have seen this as a flattening of experience, a denial of the "modes" or voices of experience. He wanted to carve out spaces where everything was NOT political, and to find a place—or more accurately, to cultivate a disposition—that could appreciate beauty, wherever it might be found.

Here, in fact, is what Oakeshott, the famous political philosopher, had to say about politics. 'Politics', he writes, 'is a highly specialized and abstracted form of communal activity; it is conducted on the surface of the life of a society and except on rare occasions makes *remarkably small impression* below that surface'.⁴ The rejuvenation of a society comes not from those engaged in politics but from artists, poets and philosophers – people whose distance from 'the world' is not merely accidental but *essential* to their work: the 'emotional and intellectual integrity and insight for which they stand is something foreign to the political world'.⁵ Politics requires not just immersion in the practical world, as one would expect, but even spiritual callousness, an inability to see the subtleties of various positions, and an unwillingness to re-examine one's own positions once they have been formed. A 'limitation of view', Oakeshott writes, 'which appears so clear and practical, but which amounts to little more than a **mental fog**, is inseparable from political activity'.⁶

⁴ M. Oakeshott, 'The Claims of Politics', in *RPML*, p. 93.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Conservatism, then, in this view, depends not upon taking the right political positions on “issues” but in recognizing and conserving the beauty the world has to offer—in engaging as much as possible in those things that are worthwhile in themselves. For Oakeshott these things were friendship, love, aesthetic contemplation, conversation and liberal learning. It is not that he saw no place for taking positions on issues; after all, his most famous essays were polemical attacks on what he saw wrong in modern politics. But to mistake this for the true business of being conservative is a categorical mistake—one which modern conservatives are just as likely to make as modern liberals.

Oakeshott’s work is a curious mix of both positive and critical. He is critical of the inferior and bad, and is unafraid to say so. At the same time, he is positively disposed toward enjoyment—in a memorable phrase, “he sees everything as an occasion.” Often, I think, people incline toward one extreme or the other—toward criticism, battle, and war; and forget what it is that they are defending. It is like some promoters of the “great books” I know: they are wonderful *defenders* of this curriculum, but they do not actually have time or inclination to read the books themselves. Oakeshott’s idea of an aesthetic outlook on the world requires that we cultivate a sort of aesthetic connoisseurship: we must at the same time criticize our modern culture without losing the capacity to enjoy what is there to be enjoyed.

And, above all, we must LEARN what is there to be enjoyed. Oakeshott was a great defender of liberal education, because it is only through liberal learning that we come to recognize the goods that *ought* to be enjoyed—liberal studies reveal much that doesn’t lie upon the present surface of our lives and can only be recovered through study. We are not, in short, wholly confined by our place of birth and circumstances. Oakeshott’s most biting and critical assessments of modernity come in these essays, where he fears that we are moving toward “a dark age of barbaric affluence.” He was not altogether wrong. But in general he didn’t despair; he rather urged a return to the tradition of the West as it has been taught over the centuries.

And he urged a remembrance of the poetic. I’ll end with a few lines from Oakeshott himself. He wrote and never published a short essay entitled “Work and Play.” Distinguishing poetry from the practical life of work, he said that poetry was like play. “The world for the poet is not material to be used for satisfying wants,” Oakeshott wrote, “it is something to be contemplated. Poets allow the world to form itself around them without any urge to make it different from what it is. Poetic imagination is not a preliminary to doing *something*, it is an end in itself. It is not ‘work.’ It is ‘play.’”

Finally, poetry is, as he wrote, elsewhere, “a sort of truancy, a dream within the dream of life, a wildflower planted among our wheat.” As conservatives, we forget poetry at our peril.