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Michael Oakeshott

Literary Culture and British Conservative Thought

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About the author

Robert Grant (1945) is honorary professorial research fellow at Glasgow University, his research interests are modernism, aesthetics, Shakespeare, political philosophy. His main works include: *The Politics of Sex and Other Essays* (2000), *Imagining the real*. (2003), Oakeshott on the nature and place of aesthetic experience: a critique. (2005), In: *The Intellectual Legacy of Michael Oakeshott*. Imprint Academic, Exeter, pp. 293-305, High culture, low politics. (2007), In: *Political Philosophy*. Series: Royal Institute of Philosophy (Supple). Cambridge University Press, pp. 189-212. He is currently writing Oakeshott's official biography and assembling his own third and fourth collections of essays.

Abstract

Michael Oakeshott: Literary Culture and British Conservative Thought

Culture signifies those 'spiritual' things which, by eluding worldly considerations, free us from our servitude to them. It is not Oakeshott's word for what is meant, but, like the word Philistinism for its opposite, it will do well enough. We may use it to cover all that Oakeshott promotes as being of intrinsic rather than instrumental value: nature, spirit, contemplation, art and literature, the aesthetic generally, liberal education, self-cultivation, conversation, friendship and love, including sexual love.

Robert Grant: Michael Oakeshott: Literary Culture and British Conservative Thought

Before I come to Oakeshott and conservatism, it may be asked just what literature, and literary culture, have to do with political thought of any kind. For it is a commonplace in literary criticism, at least of the old-fashioned humanist variety, that politics and literature don't mix. Or, to be more specific, politics and *good* literature don't mix. As the English Romantic poet Keats wrote, 'we hate poetry that has a palpable design on us.' To paraphrase, we do not like literature that thrusts a message at us, and in particular that does so, as preachers will, by simplifying – that is, falsifying – the complexities of social and political life. Literature, though understood by its readers to be fiction, aims at truth; not literal truth, but at a convincing depiction of human reality either as we already know it to be, or as literature reveals it to be. And it can do this no matter how many counterfactuals it asks us to accept. What we ask is not that literature be true to fact, but that it be true to life, that it should (as we say) *ring* true: so that, even in fantastic settings such as fairy tales or science fiction, people are portrayed as behaving and feeling in ways which, given those settings, would be plausible.

Now politics, or rather *bad* politics, does have a 'palpable design' on us. It is not unlike advertising, which persuades us to buy a product, often with a promise of enhanced social status. Part of its appeal may look ethical – if you act and think like this, it says, you will be a good person, or at least feel like one – but its appeal is not to rightness or justice for their own sakes, but to what the appearance of them can do for you. This is why so much politics depends on sentimentality: think, feel and vote like us, says the activist, and you will be redeemed simultaneously from guilt and self-doubt, and enrolled in a cosy, closed community of the like-minded. And some politics are more prone to this kind of self-regarding evangelism than others. Nobody but a fool, surely, ever congratulated himself on being a classical liberal or a conservative, because those political outlooks accept our fallen condition and do not promise earthly redemption. The most they can offer is that, living under their rule, everyone might, through his own efforts, stand a chance of being happier or freer.

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Your moral status is yours alone to achieve, and cannot be conferred by any political loyalties (though it can certainly be compromised by some).

Redemptive political ideologies are often criticized (for example, by Eric Voegelin) for being essentially religious, if not in content, then at least in character. In Voegelin's jargon, they try to 'immanentize the eschaton'; more simply, to bring about heaven on earth (an enterprise, as has often been observed, which usually ends up making the earth a hell). In usurping the role of religion, they also pander to the religious motive of hope and the religious need for certainty. And religion too, like politics, can be disruptive when it is (so to speak) smuggled into a work of literature, so that we feel that the imaginative and dramatic pleasure we took in what seemed a secular narrative has been exploited in order to thrust a religious message at us. People, usually atheists, have objected to C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, a powerful serial fable aimed at children, on the grounds of its hidden Christian message, though to any educated adult its allegorical purpose is clear almost from the start. By contrast nobody, believer or not, objects to the dramatized theology of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, because it does not pretend to be anything other than it is. And this is true of all great religious literature. Because this is art and not life, we do not have to accept the belief in order to be imaginatively engaged by it. We have merely to entertain it, imagine it to be true for the purposes of the story, rather than, like some readers, actively (but independently) believe it to be true in real life. Factual or counterfactual, for the purposes of aesthetic appreciation or enjoyment, it doesn't matter which we take it to be. All we need is to empathize with it (and empathy is one of the most valuable and humanizing lessons that literature, and art generally, can provide). We need not be religious to be moved by Verdi's *Requiem* or Wagner's *Parsifal*, any more than their authors were. Neither was a believer, but both could imagine, and communicate, what belief was like.

Most political and religious beliefs involve dogma, that is, articles of doctrine which must be accepted as axioms if the whole belief-system is to make sense. And it is usually these which seem most out of place when obtruded into a work of literature. Another old-fashioned, but useful, critical concept is the distinction, in a work of literature, between telling and showing, showing (or dramatizing) invariably being regarded as the superior means of getting the message across, if indeed the work contains anything simple enough to be called a message.

Roughly speaking, dogma is equivalent to telling rather than showing. When we are told things, we accept them (if we do) on the authority, or according to the trustworthiness, of the teller. When we are shown them, they carry their own credentials, that is, we accept them

a self-evident. The difference is that between belief and knowledge(or proof). And I fully accept that in politics and (more especially) religion dogma may be necessary, though many religions, notably those of China, Japan, and ancient Greece and Rome, are not dogmatic or doctrinal at all, but practical. And because, there, belief is something you do or enact, not a set of propositions, a creed, to which you subscribe – that is, because it asserts nothing– it is not vulnerable to refutation. In fact, with a religion of this type one needs to be initiated, as with a skill or practical accomplishment, rather than persuaded or argued into it, as with a creed or a philosophy. Even doctrinal religions depend overwhelmingly, not on doctrine, but on cultural immersion. As Pascal pointed out, where reasoning fails to convince, masses and holy water – that is to say, practice and ritual – may succeed.

This, by the mere doing, is how many things are learned, and skills acquired. And morality, or the art of living well, is one of them. We enter the palace of virtue, said Aristotle, through the courtyard of habit. (Even that dry reasoner John Stuart Mill half-concurs when he observes that an instinct, which one might suppose ineradicable, can be ‘starved by disuse’.) A morality defined and enforced by precepts and prohibitions alone, such as might be needed to discipline a potentially idolatrous tribe of former slaves migrating to a new homeland (for example, the Children of Israel), will be crude, angular, discordant, discontinuous, not to say often cruel and stupid in its application. Most real-life occasions for moral discrimination will slip through its gaps and be lost to both understanding and action. The Law of Moses captures little of what Henry James or Proust would have considered morally significant. And appealing wider than the Law of Moses, to the Bible as a whole as a supposed primer of morality, is little improvement. As the Victorian poet, critic and educationist Matthew Arnold said, in relation to the English Nonconformists’ reliance on minute knowledge of the Bible as a sufficient guide to life, ‘No man, who knows nothing else, knows even his Bible.’ I venture to add that neither the Sermon on the Mount, nor even Kant’s categorical imperatives, can cover every moral contingency.

The fact is, that in the things that matter (including religion), tabular precepts and prescriptions, and the diligent observance of them, are not enough. Those tell, rather than show. Life is always more complex and nuanced than the theories or principles which are supposed to explain and to guide it. There is no calculus or box-ticking schedule of conditions which can tell us what to do in absolutely any ethical predicament, though there have been attempts to devise one. The stupidest, perhaps, is utilitarianism, a bean-counting philosophy entirely appropriate to Napoleon’s so-called ‘nation of shopkeepers’, the English, who invented it. In fact, it is not even clear that Bentham’s principle of utility is an ethical

principle at all. For nothing tells me why I should maximize utility for anyone but myself, even though I benefit by others' doing so.

How then, apart from imitation, repetition and example, do we learn moral behaviour, and its analogues in politics and religion? We learn it from stories and imaginative performances of all kinds, which furnish us with a richer, more complex and more varied diet of examples than everyday existence can provide. At the most basic level there is gossip, not necessarily malicious, about real-life acquaintances and their problems, to which the participants are always ready to supply judgments, answers and solutions. Then there are agony columns in the newspapers, in which the columnist offers diagnoses of, and solutions to, predicaments which might as well be fictional as real, for it makes little difference to the reader, to whom the persons involved are unknown. Then there are television soap operas, understood by all except the very stupidest viewers to be fiction, but which are still eagerly discussed around the office water cooler as though the characters were real people. Astonishingly, there are even agony columns in popular magazines which specialize in advice to soap opera characters, something which on reflection is not quite as silly as it seems.

And then there is literature. Some of it will consist of fictional narratives, and some of fictional utterances (for example, lyric poems, in which the speaker is not necessarily the poet speaking to us directly, but is rather the author presenting us with a thought or experience for our contemplation, whether or not it was ever his own). Such dramatizations of possible experience embody, or imply, more complex analyses of correspondingly complex life-situations than could ever be comprehended under a set of precepts or principles.

The first thoroughgoing systematic philosophy we possess, that of Plato, is presented exclusively in dialogue, that is, as dramatic fiction, and not as straightforward authorial assertion. Sometimes, of course, we know what we are meant to conclude (namely, that Socrates is right), but many dialogues are left inconclusive, because the issue concerned is unresolved or even irresolvable. The territory has been marked out and its pitfalls mapped, and that is what counts. If we exchange dramatic dialogue for a mixture of dialogue, description and action around a common theme or themes, we have what looks very like a novel or other fictional narrative. The form may be fictional, but the conclusions, or more likely the ethical approaches, will be applicable to analogous situations in real life. They will be nothing so simple as precepts, otherwise they could have been offered as precepts in the first place, without the labour of dramatization. In other words, and amongst much else, what our reading has done is to educate our moral sense and our emotional responses by exercising them, as if in a gymnasium, on imaginary objects.

I do not say that this is literature's sole function, but literature, even when science fiction or fairy tales, is a kind of rehearsal for life. And since religion and politics are part of life, literature can be a rehearsal for them too. In 1728 the English author William Law published a book called *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. It was a great influence on the nascent Evangelical movement and (later) on William Wilberforce, the pioneering anti-slavery campaigner. To be sure, the book is full of moral reasoning and moral precepts; but it is more especially notable for its dramatic and novelistic skill, the minute psychological insight with which it illustrates moral and religious questions through the interactions and reflections of imagined characters, in a manner with which no reasoning or precepts alone could compete in convincingness. As for politics, I am inclined to think there is more political wisdom to be found in the works of Shakespeare, particularly in his English histories and Roman plays, than anywhere else, including the classic political philosophers. And that may be because of, rather than despite, the fact that no one has ever pinned down exactly what Shakespeare's politics were. As Goethe, Coleridge, Brecht and doubtless many others have noted, his political sympathies, though predominantly what we should call conservative, seem nevertheless to extend in every direction. But then, the philosophy of conservatism, such as it is, has usually claimed, by contrast with radical doctrines, to work for the benefit of all. Whether we believe this claim or not, it has certainly constituted part of conservatism's appeal.

This brings me back to where we started. Literature, or written fiction, can obviously be used to promote any political cause or vision. Generally speaking, literature used for such a purpose, rather than allowed to develop according to its own inner tendency, is not going to be much good *as literature*, even if what it promotes is good. But that, to the crusader, will not matter, since what counts is not the merits of the literature in itself, but the merits, and the success, of the crusade. Such literature will be what the English idealist philosopher Collingwood (a major influence on Oakeshott) called 'magical art', that is, an art designed to achieve certain non-artistic purposes, and thus one whose value is largely instrumental. The question now is, whether what we generally call *good* or *classic* literature has any implicit political leanings.

In his book of 1922, *Socialism*, the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises remarks that in the 19th century it was "second- and third-rate writers (...) who introduced as literary figures the bloodsucking capitalist entrepreneur and the noble proletarian. To them the rich man is in the wrong because he is rich, and the poor man in the right because he is poor." "Social art is tendentious art," he goes on, "all social literature has a thesis to demonstrate. It

is ever the same thesis: Capitalism is an evil, Socialism is salvation.” “They all follow Marx’s example,” he continues, “in avoiding detailed exposition of the socialist social order they praise (...) the logic of their argument is inadequate and (...) the conclusions are driven home by an appeal to the emotions rather than to reason (...) Fiction is a favoured vehicle for this kind of procedure, as there is little fear that anyone will try to refute its assertions in detail by logical criticism. It is not the custom to inquire into the accuracy of particular remarks in novels and plays. Even if it were, the author could still find a way out by denying responsibility for the particular words put into the mouth of a hero. The conclusions forced home by character-drawing cannot be invalidated by logic.”

It is to these inferior writers that Mises attributes the overwhelming prejudice among the educated classes of his time in favour of socialism. On the other hand, he says, “the really great poets and novelists of the period were not social-political propagandist writers”. Let us expand on that. The greatest literature of the immediately pre-Modernist period – the period of realism and naturalism, of George Eliot, Henry James, Marcel Proust, Robert Musil, Thomas Mann – is no more obviously socialist than Shakespeare. Nor, on the other side, is it especially supportive of capitalism. Its pervasive, all-seeing irony tends to immunize it against firm ideological commitments. It takes rich people and poor people just as they are, sometimes good, sometimes bad, but mostly, like the rest of us, something in between. Though often humorous, it avoids gross caricature, preferring to investigate characters, their doings, and the implied social issues with an infinitely nuanced variety of examples, which is one reason why such works tend to be so very long, and also why they habitually refrain from any firm, let alone dogmatic, moral conclusions. It is the truths revealed in the course of the analysis that matter, not any single, absolute certainty to which they might be thought to point.

A realist literature, then, cannot easily be made to support this or that social order in the abstract (and in the realist period no large-scale socialist experiments had yet been tried, so that socialism was by definition abstract, being then a mere ideal). However, it may be thought compatible with a conservative outlook, if we define that closely enough. This means not confusing it with any particular bundle of policies that have chanced to call themselves conservative.

Conservatism bases itself in things as they are, even where it finds the existing order wanting. It wishes to preserve, not these or those economic arrangements, but a particular spontaneous culture, as it has come to be, and concerns itself with economic and political measures only so far as they bear on that priority. And it recognizes that sometimes a thing

can only be preserved if changes are made in the apparatus of law and government. Similarly, it does not propose to keep things as they are for ever, for society, even as it retains its identity, is always in a state of flux, and rigidity is a feature rather of the utopias it distrusts. The point is, to manage the flux so as to inhibit any centrifugal tendencies within it whilst encouraging whatever seems to be developing in a beneficial direction. Of course, the conservative assumes that the society to be conserved is, in fact, worth conserving, and that people in general want it conserved. If they do, then the work of maintenance can proceed with as much consent and as little coercion as possible. It was a solecism to call those who wished to preserve the communist system conservatives, though in a purely formal sense they were. For communism was not a spontaneous order, but one born of coercion, and conservatives are always inclined to favour that which has grown by itself, albeit under minimal but necessary legal and social constraints.

Conservatism is particularist and context-specific. Its concern is always with *this* society and *these* values. Therefore it is as various as the societies in which it appears. It is not a programme for export, not a universally-applicable set of prescriptions like those of American neo-conservatism. That could be more accurately described as missionary liberalism, and its consequences can be seen in Iraq. There is no way to describe the ideal conservative society, let alone reduce it to a set of formulae, because, first, no society is ideal; secondly, the only one we know is this one, our own (whatever it may be); and thirdly, the only sure way to know it intimately, and how to change it if necessary, is to live in it. Butan almost equally good way of knowing it, and of discovering things about it we might not have known from our individual experience, is through its literature.

This is why the great Edmund Burke, the father of modern conservatism, which began as a reaction to the dogma-driven doctrine of the French Revolution and its horrific results, insisted, in his own phrase, on ‘winding himself into’ whatever subject he wished to treat. He reviewed it, after tireless research, not only in minute detail but also in every possible light, the poetic and imaginative as well as the practical. As the English historian Macaulay observed, when Burke turned his attention to India and its misgovernment, he became an honorary Hindu; when to the miseries of the oppressed in his native Ireland, an honorary Roman Catholic; when to the grievances of the American colonists, an honorary American. This is the kind of empathy, and the kind of detail, to which great literature compels us, and which eludes even the greatest generalizing political philosophy. In a virtual sense, we *become* the society depicted; we live in it and feel for its inhabitants, whatever their internal differences and dissensions, just as we do for our own real-life society. In this respect the

conservative outlook differs greatly from its rivals liberalism and socialism. Liberals, and particularly socialists, tend to view society diagrammatically, from the outside, in terms of tables, maps, distributions, graphs and pie-charts. They then try to arrange these quantitative figures into what in their eyes are aesthetically and morally pleasing patterns, forgetting that each stands for a myriad qualitatively different individuals, each with his own ambitions, preferences and goals, which he does not wish to see manipulated simply to gratify some superior spectator's sense of fitness.

Following the Victorian thinker John Grote (like Collingwood, a major influence on Oakeshott), philosophers conventionally distinguish two different kinds of knowledge, knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. It should be clear by now that in my view liberalism, and especially socialism, offer us at best knowledge by description of existing society. But when it comes to its own favoured society, socialism offers us no knowledge at all, and no description except what we find in mediaevalizing romances by William Morris and the like, and in what von Mises calls the 'sickly fantasies' of such as Fourier and Godwin. For these last two dreamers, once private property is abolished, carnivorous animals will turn vegetarian, lions will offer themselves to be ridden like horses, and man may even become immortal.

By contrast, conservatism offers, or at least presupposes, something like knowledge by acquaintance. It has principles, but they remain in the background, and almost all are flexible or defeasible according to circumstances. Conservatives have been by turns oligarchic or democratic, free-traders or protectionists, imperialists or 'little Englanders', Keynesians or monetarists, planners or free-marketeers, as occasion has seemed to demand. Not implausibly, this has seen them accused of inconsistency and lack of principle, charges against which they have defended themselves simply by adopting the title of pragmatists. But there is a genuine principle and an overriding goal underlying all the twists and turns of conservative policy, and it is by no means a dishonourable one, namely the avoidance of civil discord and the furtherance of civil peace, via the pursuit of national interest, cohesion, and consensus.

Like Burke's, Oakeshott's political thought rests upon a conception of practical rather than theoretical knowledge as being the only appropriate mode of understanding a society, and thus of governing it by consent. In socio-political matters, Oakeshott adheres to the 'knowledge by acquaintance' paradigm. I am possibly out of line with most Oakeshottians in preferring his 'middle-period' writings – those which, beginning from 1947, appeared in his 1962 collection of essays called *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* – to his later, more theory-laden works, *On History and Other Essays* and *On Human Conduct*. But in so doing I

think I am faithful to his spirit. *Rationalism in Politics* is among other things a work of literature, in which Oakeshott's considerable imaginative and poetic resources, like Burke's, are deployed to help us grasp our society in its innermost distinctiveness, what the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins would have called its 'inscape' and the mediaeval thinker Duns Scotus its *haecceitas* or 'thisness', its uniqueness and particularity (something, of course, which it shares with each of its members). And once we have understood how our own individuality, being a gift of history and tradition, depends upon our society's individuality, then we are seriously motivated to protect that society against those things which threaten it, which Oakeshott characterizes with equal vividness.

But all this about Oakeshott is well enough known. I and others have written about it extensively and increasingly so since his death in 1990, so I shall not pursue it here. What has only recently been coming to light is Oakeshott's private life and how it bears, as it does, in its curious antithetical way, on his public philosophy. So far no one but me has written about it. His private life is documented in a vast hoard of letters in the Oakeshott archive at the London School of Economics. Most of these are letters to rather than from him, so we often have to guess from them what his side of the correspondence was like. There are also three large batches of correspondence independently discovered by me in the last 7 or 8 years, one of them now being in my possession. On top of that, the LSE holds twenty-one notebooks which Oakeshott kept from the age of 19 over a period of 70 years, and in which, as he told me truly, 'you will find almost nothing about politics'. And finally, there is an additional series of notebooks dated between 1928 and 1934, not yet in the public domain, and composing what is in effect a journal both detailing his love life and registering it as part of an ongoing erotic project, parallel, as it were, to his public philosophy (which at that date was only just getting off the ground: his first book, *Experience and its Modes*, appeared in 1933). While still of the greatest interest, this journal is chastely economical of sexual detail, and is thus about as unpornographic as anything describable as erotic could be. It is entirely about the philosophy and phenomenology of erotic love, besides incorporating a blow-by-blow account of his failed first marriage and his uniformly disastrous infatuations with other young women. (He more than made up for those deprivations later, as well as embarking on an even more catastrophic second marriage.)

Oakeshott's literary culture and interests bore heavily on his erotic life, particularly at this time (in his late 20s and early 30s). He called himself an Edwardian, and he did not just mean chronologically. He was born in 1901, the year Queen Victoria died and her son Edward VII came to the throne. Edward died in 1910, but people in Britain usually think of

the Edwardian period as lasting, as in spirit and ethos it did, till at least 1913, the year before the world-transforming shock of the Great War. That pre-war interval after the old Queen's death is often characterized as what the English call an Indian summer; a calm, leisured, lazy period of peace and growing prosperity, and such it was. At the same time it saw the emergence of novel and disturbing things: the beginnings of Modernism, music that didn't sound like music, pictures that didn't look like their subjects; the Labour Party; terrorist outrages, especially abroad (one of which was to spark off the War); the Freudian psychology, supposedly revealing that we were 'really' driven by motives which we concealed even from ourselves, and that childhood was not as innocent as we had thought; researches into sexual behaviour, especially sexual deviance; books and plays and paintings on that theme; motoring; aeroplanes; poison gas; the New Woman; so-called 'free love'; and nudism, a practice which decades later famously got Oakeshott into trouble with the police.

This was the period of the pioneer sexologist Havelock Ellis, and of the writer and sexual prophet D.H. Lawrence, whose landmark novel, *Sons and Lovers*, about a young man whose love affairs are hampered by his mother-fixation, appeared in 1913. Much of the reaction against Victorian puritanism and propriety had in fact begun half a century before, in America, with the poet Walt Whitman's unashamed celebration of the human body. In his poem 'I Sing the Body Electric' (*Leaves of Grass*, 1855) Whitman lists at considerable length many body parts both male and female and concludes by saying "Oh now I say these are the soul!" Similar sentiments are to be found in his English disciple Edward Carpenter, and also, half a century earlier than Whitman, in the visionary Romantic poet and artist William Blake, whom Oakeshott thought the greatest English poet. They can be traced back even further to a mediaeval antinomian heresy, the Brethren of the Free Spirit, which resurfaced in the 17th century English radical religious sect known as the Ranters. The Ranters had 'immanentized the eschaton' by claiming that they had attained, by God's grace, prelapsarian innocence, and therefore could not sin. From that there followed their claim to complete sexual freedom. Oakeshott marked some quotations from and about the Ranters to this effect in his copy of Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.

The main thrust of this tradition, of course, was that the Christian, and especially Victorian, denial of the body and its so-called animal appetites was wrong, repressive, and effectively perverted. In fact, it was society's repressive indoctrination that had crushed the natural human sexual instinct and forced it into the distorted shapes of loveless, bestial lust on the one hand, and bodiless spiritual love on the other. I say nothing about this diagnosis, except that it seems quite plausible, but the important things in this context are two: first, that

Oakeshott clearly believed it and read many books, including works of literature, in which it is either illustrated or taken for granted; and secondly, that at first sight, being the very epitome of ‘progressive’ thought, it consorts extremely ill with Oakeshott’s ‘conservative’ public philosophy. Oakeshott never published anything in support of his ‘progressive’ preoccupations, though in daily and professional life he made little attempt to conceal them. In middle age Oakeshott busily set about seducing almost every young woman he met, ranging from his son’s girlfriend to his graduate students’ wives. These attempts enjoyed both considerable success and remarkable impunity. In the 1950s he seems seldom to have been sleeping with fewer than three women at once.

Oakeshott’s reading was wide and miscellaneous. It was by no means all exclusively in this progressive vein, though all of it seems more or less compatible with it. Much of it we know from his published work; he admired, and specifically refers to, St Augustine, Rabelais, Montaigne, Cervantes, Elizabethan drama, Hobbes, Traherne, Blake and other Romantics, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Rilke, Conrad, Yeats and Lawrence. In philosophy he favoured Spinoza, Hegel, Grote and Bradley, and was also drawn to Chinese Taoism. More about his tastes can be learnt from his notebooks and letters, as also from conversations he held with several of my informants. There is much in his letters about the Dorset novelists Thomas Hardy and the Powys brothers. He knew the Powyses, was a close friend particularly of Llewelyn Powys, and would send Hardy’s novels to his friends as presents. (He bought a cottage in Dorset, and lived there in retirement.) Fervently religious as a young man, Oakeshott was familiar with the Christian classics; even as his scepticism grew he retained his affection for the medieval mystics, and in later life, so I learned from John Gray, took much interest in all mysticisms, nature mysticism, sexual mysticism and the full-blown Russian theological kind. He cultivated what Gray called ‘extreme’ thinkers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. He told me that he admired Valéry, Faulkner and (as I had guessed) Virginia Woolf, and told Noel O’Sullivan of his liking for Willa Cather, Karen Blixen, Camus, the French Decadents, and the preposterous self-styled ‘Baron Corvo’. He had chosen, as his College prize for examination success at Cambridge, the complete works of the Victorian aesthete Walter Pater, who in some ways may be considered a precursor of the Bloomsbury Group.

Where does all this lead, and what if anything does it tell us about Oakeshott’s thought, either his public, ‘conservative’ thinking, or his private, ‘progressive’ ideology? And, if we are still to consider him as a unitary consciousness rather than two separate people (which is surely impossible), how if at all are those two sides of him to be reconciled and brought together in a single explanation?

The answer is, with the greatest difficulty, and I cannot do much more here than lay out some evidence. Oakeshott seems to have believed, with St Augustine, Spinoza and Kant, not to mention various mystics, that we inhabit what appear to be two planes of existence, though in reality there is only what there is, a single whole, even though it is normally imperceptible as such. To the normal eye there is immediately present only the practical world of getting and spending, wanting and seeking, success and failure. We inhabit it most of the time, because our physical survival, and thus our psychic subsistence, depends on it. But there is another world too, which can be glimpsed in and through it, in moments of transcendence, contemplation and leisure. This 'otherworld', like Augustine's City of God, is not a future state, attainable after death, but is accessible here and now, co-spatial and co-temporal with our everyday world. It is, in fact, our everyday world, but seen in its completeness, with its suppressed or missing details restored, and in so different a light as to be utterly transformed. The more we seek to enter it, the further it recedes, because our striving binds us ever more closely into the everyday world of never-ending desires and satisfactions, thus preventing our escape. The otherworld is available to us only through grace, in moments of blessed inadvertence.

Obviously none of this world-picture is verifiable, but Oakeshott's philosophical idealism in any case partially relativizes the notion of truth, in that there are different, non-competing kinds of truth, since the world is never more than a world of thought, and there is no mind-independent 'physical' reality against which truth-claims can be measured. As we move about the world under the pressure of different interests, we see it from different angles, and diffracted thereby into various partial perspectives. For example, scientific truth is different from practical truth, and both again from historical truth. And Oakeshott has his own kind of scepticism, since 'appearances' are all we have, and since the worlds of appearance are multiple, each in turn must make us sceptical about the claims to authority of the others. We cannot break out of appearances to any truly 'objective' reality, and must therefore doubt all claims by others, even scientists, to have done so. The analogy here to Oakeshott's political scepticism, his distrust of overarching political schemes, central planning, 'scientific' politics, even the so-called 'social sciences', should be obvious. The only reality, and the only absolute truths, are mental, namely what we perceive; and they amount only to the sum of appearances, once those have been fully unfolded, their contradictions resolved, and their diversity finally apprehended as a unity. This, however, is a task for philosophy, and of little importance to the conduct of life.

It is important, though, to escape the constraints of the everyday world. They cripple the spirit, and obscure the realities revealed to us through it. Those who have never escaped, and see no need to do so, are materialists or Philistines (not Oakeshott's word, but a familiar and serviceable one). In its deepest sense, 'society' stands for the whole way of life which conservatism seeks to preserve. But the Philistines' world is 'society' in its dullest, shallowest, most conformist and repressive sense, as satirized by writers such as Stendhal, Flaubert and E.M. Forster (notably in his novel of 1910, *Howards End*). Set against it is culture, those imaginative products, personalities and relationships which exist, not instrumentally, to serve some worldly purpose or appetite, but in their own right, as ends and values in themselves.

Culture signifies those 'spiritual' things which, by eluding worldly considerations, free us from our servitude to them. It is not Oakeshott's word for what is meant, but, like the word Philistinism for its opposite, it will do well enough. We may use it to cover all that Oakeshott promotes as being of intrinsic rather than instrumental value: nature, spirit, contemplation, art and literature, the aesthetic generally, liberal education, self-cultivation, conversation, friendship and love, including sexual love.

According to Oakeshott, this comprehensive conception of culture (most of it, by the way, implicit in the German term *Bildung*) is what his friend and mentor John Cowper Powys meant by it. It is also what Powys's brother Llewelyn dramatized in his novel of 1930, *Apples Be Ripe*. Oakeshott was particularly close to Llewelyn, kept up with his widow Alyse Gregory, and read aloud to him, at his request, the fourth book of Hobbes's *Leviathan* when he was dying. (That book, 'On the Kingdom of Darkness', attacks the churches' abuse of scripture and spiritual authority in order to bolster their worldly power.) I have recently been reading the Powyses, and believe that they illuminate Oakeshott's outlook to a considerable extent, since they not only echo it but also appear substantially to have influenced it.

Here is how Oakeshott, reviewing John Cowper Powys's *The Meaning of Culture* in 1930, summarizes Powys's central notion. Culture entails the nurture, says Oakeshott, of "an integrated self whose purpose is not to remember, adopt or assimilate, but to live a life contemporary with itself. The past and future are nothing (...) except in so far as they come alive in the present. The sense of mortality (...) leads, neither to feverish activity, nor to a desire for a 'classic' permanence, but to a determination to find an altogether extemporary satisfaction in life. What is valued is not the fruit of experience, but the flower – something we know only in a present enjoyment (...) Death is not outrun; it is denied, dismissed. This notion opposes Culture to Despotism." Behind it, Oakeshott says, "lies an improvident desire

for freedom”, and likens it to the thought of the sceptic Montaigne, a lifelong favourite of both himself and Powys. But for all its libertarian implications, culture is not a gesture of outward or political rebellion, doubtless because the powers ranged against it are too strong. Like Epicurus (whom Oakeshott cites), it is quietist, and (we might add) may usefully employ the dissimulation (*ketman*) by which the persecuted Sufis of Persia concealed their true beliefs, a dissident strategy more recently made famous by Czesław Miłosz in *The Captive Mind*. “Where it is confronted with opposition,” says Oakeshott of Powys’s ‘culture’, “it can afford to use the weapon of ironical submission,” for it can sustain no irreparable defeat so long as it refuses to compete with ‘the world’

In Oakeshott’s notebooks about this time we frequently encounter the yearning for what he calls a ‘contemporary’ life, that is, to live in the present, freed from the burden of the past and future. And freed also, we should note, from the responsibilities they entail, and from the pressures also of the ‘worldly’ present, which are often those of past and future. (Oakeshott at this time was recently, but unhappily, married, and estranged from his adoring wife, though he went on to have a son by her and not very long afterwards to abandon them both.) It is very hard to reconcile these libertarian longings with the conservative emphasis on socio-cultural continuity, and on the importance of both past and future, that we find in Oakeshott’s public philosophy, and more obviously still in Burke’s.

In both Oakeshott and the Powyses the same names, ideas, preoccupations and situations recur. Anyone familiar with Oakeshott will ‘click’ with John Cowper Powys’s praise of courtesy, his conviction that all human beings are of ‘deep and startling interest’, his concepts of self and not-self, his dislike of mere gregariousness and herd-values, his correlative distaste for day-to-day democratic politics and the vulgarity of mass culture, his scepticism about objective truth, his enthusiasm for Chinese thought, his belief in spontaneous virtue (a thing celebrated by Rabelais, and adapted from Augustine), indeed his belief almost that spontaneity *is* virtue, and his related love of Nature (since spontaneity is ‘natural’), and in sum, his thoroughgoing Romanticism.

As for the other Powys, Llewelyn, his novel *Apples Be Ripe* is virtually a primer for Oakeshott’s self-emancipation, and there are parallels between its hero’s life and Oakeshott’s, including the early realization that his marriage has failed. A young woman friend of Mrs Oakeshott wrote as though the book were a mere paean to the Nietzschean egoism with which Oakeshott was toying, but it is not. The hero’s behaviour to his unloved wife is a lot more generous, tender and scrupulous than Oakeshott’s appears to have been. In fact, *Apples Be Ripe* is a good novel, and a genuine ethical challenge. Like so many works of the period and

earlier, going back at least to Ibsen, it is about the so-called ‘sex problem’, a problem which, though easy for us to deride as clichéd, is still none the less real. *Apples Be Ripe* seems to me a lot franker and less overheated than say. D.H. Lawrence, and, commensurately, is more clearly written and much more sparing of physical detail. For both these reasons, its depiction of sexual desire, and indeed of the characters and their behaviour generally, seems to me superior, at once more direct, innocent and realistic, and less buried under obscure symbolism.

Despite these differences between the real-life Oakeshott and Powys’s fictional hero, Oakeshott’s vision and Llewelyn Powys’s have so much in common that one suspects Powys of being a direct, sometimes a near-verbatim, influence on the younger man. Like the 17th century mystic Traherne, cited by Oakeshott in his treatise on Poetry, Powys’s hero Chris, recovering from childhood illness, is ‘staggered, amazed’ by the hitherto unperceived glory of the visible world, ‘the magic and mystery of the planet’, and concludes that it is only ‘the grossness of perception’ on the part of the commonplace world that has allowed it to go unnoticed. Looking at a winter landscape he becomes aware of “an absolute romance existent in, but at the same time outside, reality.” “Every circumstance”, says an enlightened woman friend, should be judged “without preconceptions”, which is just the role accorded to philosophy in *Experience and its Modes*. At University, just as in Oakeshott’s educational writings, “examinations, care of the future, worldly success – these were not what really mattered. It was experience that alone counted (...)” Powys broaches the question of ‘free love’ with commendable fair-mindedness, and does not minimize its difficulties, notably its lack of security. History was Oakeshott’s original subject, of which he was an important theorist. Teaching history to children, Chris would have liked “to lead out their minds, to explain to them that there was no absolute truth, that all was open for exploration”, a sentiment which is almost pure Oakeshott. Oakeshott had a taste for vagabondage and the picaresque. He loved Cervantes, and would always stop to converse with gipsies on country rambles. He read and recommended books about them, and went gipsy-caravanning with a former Army friend in the 1950s. Gipsies feature twice in Powys’s novel. For Chris, when he becomes a casual labourer, life becomes ‘a succession of adventures’, just as it does for Cervantes, for the settled academic Oakeshott, and for the citizens of his *civitas peregrina* in *On Human Conduct*.

With all this laid open, it is still not easy to see how the sexual liberationist, would-be Nietzschean and serial seducer Oakeshott – in this respect considerably less scrupulous and responsible than Chris in the novel – is related to the public, sober, conservative philosopher.

But I have recently made a suggestion elsewhere, which I will repeat. It may be that in a settled, secure society such as Oakeshott's, for all the shocks and changing mores induced by two desperate World Wars, Oakeshott's 'experiments in living' (to use Mill's expression) could be undertaken with minimal scandal or disruption, though Oakeshott himself was little concerned to conceal his activities. He was also less than fully sympathetic to their victims, notably his children (both of whom he abandoned), but also his deserted wives and mistresses. Their suffering was not less because they were willing partners at the outset and had accordingly contracted, in Oakeshott's view, to bear their share of the miseries involved in the inevitable break-ups. And that is to say nothing of the suffering endured by others. Oakeshott broke up at least one marriage.

For all that, however, the ordered society in which he lived, and which he supported so eloquently, did seem, Hobbes-fashion, to guarantee him the privacy and the freedom to behave as he and his partners pleased, and to do so unmolested by the law. And it should be said, further, that in all non-sexual matters he was a most loyal, diligent, conscientious and public-spirited member of society. Since he confined his published writings to the examination and defence of the communal order, the glaring discontinuities between them and his private life and beliefs are still a puzzle, but only for his biographer. His publications stand on their own feet, and demand to be judged, not by his life, but on their merits.

