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MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ON HISTORY, PRACTICE AND POLITICAL THEORY

Thomas W. Smith*

For Michael Oakeshott, as for Hobbes, doubt is the prime mover. Oakeshott's searching scepticism has made him one of the least ideologically-fettered and most original political thinkers of the twentieth century. One scholar calls him 'perhaps the greatest British political philosopher since John Stuart Mill — perhaps since Burke'. Another contends that he 'provides us with what is perhaps the most sophisticated and satisfying statement of liberalism to date'.¹ Oakeshott is most probably *sui generis*. Strictly speaking he is an (English) Hegelian idealist, although his ideas have been bandied about as neo-Burkean, neo-Humean, and in some sense Thatcherite (the *Times* of London notes that 'more than anybody else [Oakeshott] articulated the real philosophical foundations of Mrs Thatcher's policies'), and he is frequently teamed with Friedrich Hayek and Karl Popper in favouring a *laissez-faire* relationship between the state and civil society.² What is perhaps most distinctive about Oakeshott is his

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¹ John Casey, 'Philosopher of Practice', in *The Achievement of Michael Oakeshott*, ed. Jesse Norman (London, 1993), p. 58; Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven, 1990), p. 2. Full-length treatments of Oakeshott besides Franco's include Robert Grant, *Oakeshott* (London, 1990); and W.H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (London, 1966). Also of interest is Robert Devigne's *Recasting Conservatism: Oakeshott, Strauss, and the Response to Postmodernism* (New Haven, 1994). Two collections of Oakeshott's lectures, most now in print for the first time, were published recently by Yale University Press. See *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven, 1993); and *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, ed. Shirley Robin Letwin (New Haven, 1993). *The Achievement of Michael Oakeshott* includes a new bibliography, prepared by John Liddington, of works by and about Oakeshott.

² The *Times* of London (22 December 1990). For balanced explorations of Oakeshott's conservative stripe see, in addition to the manuscripts cited above, Jeremy Rayner, 'The Legend of Oakeshott's Conservatism: Skeptical Philosophy and Limited Politics', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 18 (1985), pp. 313–38. Rayner situates Oakeshott's thought in the Humean tradition of 'speculative moderation'. See also Charles Covell, *The Redefinition of Conservatism* (London, 1986), pp. 93–143; Anthony

liberating sense of philosophy. He maintains that philosophy should be ‘contemplative’ or ‘conversational’ rather than ‘didactic’, that philosophy is neither procrustean knowledge nor the handmaiden for any particular agenda; free from the abstractions of ‘practical’ discourse and ideological spin, the philosopher engages the whole universe of ideas.³

This essay examines the relationship between Oakeshott’s political thought and a seemingly distinct realm of discourse — history — a ‘mode’ of experience that intrigued Oakeshott throughout his life. In history Oakeshott found a coherent and highly-developed discipline whose precise logic served perhaps as something of a foil for his more wandering pronouncements regarding the ‘boundless and bottomless sea’ of political activity. His famous commentary on ‘rationalism’ in politics, for instance, is a chiefly negative task, but in exploring the historian’s craft, he debunks positivism and at the same time ennobles creative thought. Ideas about history were never far from Oakeshott’s mind. They anchor his defining work, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), whose history section R.G. Collingwood praised as ‘the high-water mark of English thought upon history’, indeed, as ‘the most penetrating analysis of historical thought ever written’;⁴ and although *On Human Conduct* (1975) is widely considered Oakeshott’s capping statement on civil association, Oakeshott’s writings about history, including his final book, *On History* (1983), may represent his clearest delineation of idealist epistemology.⁵

Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection: The Religious and Secular Tradition of Conservative Thought in England from Hooker to Oakeshott* (London, 1978), pp. 90–6; and Patrick Riley, ‘Michael Oakeshott, Philosopher of Individuality’, *The Review of Politics*, 54 (1992), pp. 649–64. Says Riley, ‘it was not [Oakeshott’s] (nonexistent) relation to “Mrs. Thatcher’s policies” that mattered to him, but his hoped-for relation to Aristotle, Cicero, Hobbes and Hegel’ (*ibid.*, p. 651).

³ See Dante Germino’s *Beyond Ideology: The Revival of Political Theory* (New York, 1967), which credits Oakeshott, along with Hannah Arendt, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, with restoring rigour and breadth to contemporary political philosophy.

⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), p. 159; R.G. Collingwood, *The Cambridge Review*, 55 (1934), p. 250. In addition to *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge, 1990), Oakeshott’s works devoted to history include: ‘History and the Social Sciences’, in *The Social Sciences: Their Relations in Theory and in Teaching* (London, 1936), pp. 71–81; and ‘The Activity of Being an Historian’ (1955), included in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (New York, 1962), pp. 137–67, which are faithful to the idea of history-as-experience. *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, 1975) is a touchstone for practical attitudes towards the past, while *On History and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1983) subtly explores the logic of historical events, contingency and change.

⁵ Treatments of Oakeshott’s theory of history include W.H. Walsh, ‘The Practical and Historical Past’, and William H. Dray, ‘Michael Oakeshott’s Theory of History’, in *Politics and Experience: Essays Presented to Professor Michael Oakeshott on the Occasion of His Retirement*, ed. Preston King and B.C. Parekh (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 5–18 and 19–42 respectively; Nathan Rotenstreich, *Philosophy, History and Politics: Studies in*

This essay first describes the tension in British idealism between philosophical experience and categorical knowledge. It then scrutinizes the postulates that underpin modal history, as well as Oakeshott's claims regarding a non-historical 'practical' approach to the past. I suggest that while Oakeshott's categorical precepts are meant to ensure the integrity of historical understanding, his standards are too strictly posed. He would strike from historical discourse the past's moral dimensions and contemporary implications. The final section of the paper is devoted to two of Oakeshott's own excursions into the past as they relate to his traditionalist political thought: his 'historical' survey of theories of modern European politics in *On Human Conduct*, and his mythical reading of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. These suggest a traditionalist preference in Oakeshott, rooted in idealist philosophy, for a broad practical understanding of the past over the narrow coherence of history.

I

Idealist Philosophy and Modal Experience

Oakeshott says he is conscious of having learned most from Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) and from F.H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* (1893). From Hegel he draws the irreducible unity of philosophy. In Bradley, and to a lesser degree in others of the 'British idealists', including T.H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet, Oakeshott finds the framework for modal epistemology.⁶

In the idealist scheme, philosophy is the broadest of inquiries, an open-ended experience unblinkered by intellectual discipline and unfettered by practical demands. It is, says Oakeshott, 'experience without reservation or arrest, experience which is critical throughout, unhindered and undistracted by what is subsidiary, partial or abstract'.⁷ The philosopher must renounce procrustean neatness; even the tendency to reduce philosophy to its 'branches' is misguided. By limiting the compass of 'political' philosophy, for instance, to ques-

Contemporary English Philosophy of History (The Hague, 1976), pp. 111–31; and Preston King, 'Michael Oakeshott and Historical Particularism', in *The History of Ideas*, ed. Preston King (London, 1983), pp. 96–132. David Boucher's work on Oakeshott is consistently engaging. See D. Boucher, 'The Creation of the Past: British Idealism and Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy of History', *History and Theory*, 23 (1984), pp. 193–214; D. Boucher, 'Politics in a Different Mode: An Appreciation of Michael Oakeshott, 1901–1990', *History of Political Thought*, 12 (1991), pp. 717–28; and D. Boucher, 'Human Conduct, History, and Social Science in the Works of R.G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott', *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, 24 (1993), pp. 697–717.

⁶ Standard works on the British idealists are Peter P. Nicholson, *The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists* (Cambridge, 1990); and A.J.M. Milne, *The Social Philosophy of English Idealism* (London, 1962).

⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 3.

tions of power or authority or the efficient regime, we place beyond the political pale discourse involving, say, justice, beauty or transcendence. Similarly, politics are diminished when practised exclusively in rationalist terms or described solely in scientific ones. According to Oakeshott, the problem with rationalist politics is less that it coronates technical knowledge, i.e. the rote learning of the *philosophe*, than that it tolerates no other authority. This 'sovereignty of technique' closes off realms of experience and narrows our sense of what politics may comprise. As Oakeshott writes in his famous introduction to *Leviathan*, political philosophy is not merely the consideration of life's conventional 'political' facets, but is 'the relation of political life, and the values and purposes pertaining to it, to the entire conception of the world that belongs to a civilization'. He continues:

The whole impetus of the enterprise is the perception that what really exists is a single world of ideas, which comes to us divided by the abstracting forces of circumstance; is the perception that our political ideas and what we may call the rest of our ideas are not in fact two independent worlds, and that though they may come to us as separate text and context, the *meaning* lies, as it always must lie, in a unity in which the separate existence of text and context is resolved.⁸

Oakeshott concedes that philosophy is a precarious enterprise. Philosophers nearly always entertain secret ambitions that preclude philosophy, though we must learn not to trail after thinkers on these 'holiday excursions'. Nor can the philosopher practically justify his craft. In terms of utility, philosophy is an outcast, 'useless to men of business and troublesome to men of pleasure . . . A philosophy which pretended to offer something practically useful would be a philosophy living beyond its means'.⁹ Oakeshott vigorously defends the autonomy of philosophical as well as abstracted experience, although in the end, practice is given precedence. Life, it seems, can be conducted only at the expense of philosophy; the everyday world of experience is achieved through wilfully blinkered thoughts and deeds. 'It is not the clear-sighted, not those who are fashioned for thought and the arduous of thought, who can lead the world', he writes. 'Great achievements are accomplished in the mental fog of practical

⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*, edited with an introduction by Michael Oakeshott (Oxford, 1947), p. ix.

⁹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 355. Another idealist, John M.E. McTaggart, notes: 'philosophy can give us very little, if any guidance in action . . . Why should a Hegelian citizen be surprised that his belief as to the organic nature of the Absolute does not help him in deciding how to vote? Would a Hegelian engineer be reasonable in expecting that his belief that all matter is spirit should help him in planning a bridge?', *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology* (Cambridge, 1901), p. 196.

experience. What is furthest from our needs is that philosophers should be kings.’¹⁰

Modality is perhaps as Bradley has observed, ‘not an alluring theme’.¹¹ Nevertheless, following Green’s notion that to make experience intelligible requires some sort of intellectual organization, ‘modes’ or ‘arrests’ of experience are the currency of epistemological idealism even though this fragmentation of experience clashes with philosophy. The idealist aims to take a jumble of ideas and trim and shape it into a coherent and self-contained ‘world of ideas’. Theoretically the number of potential arrests is endless. (In *Experience and Its Modes* Oakeshott describes the modal logic of history, science and ‘practice’; he would later propose a ‘poetic’ voice of experience.) Not every abstraction of experience achieves the logic and coherence required of a category of knowledge, however. A mode is authentic so far as it offers ‘an autonomous manner of understanding, specifiable in terms of exact conditions, which is logically incapable of denying or confirming the conclusions of any other mode of understanding, or indeed of making any relevant utterance in respect of it’.¹² By precisely describing a mode’s governing logic, idealists seek above all to avoid the problem of *ignoratio elenchi*, the irrelevance engendered when argument or inference passes from one mode of discourse to another. (Gilbert Ryle calls this a ‘category mistake’.) Modalists would argue, for example, that countering science with poetry does not advance understanding. This is how modes and thus knowledge are mixed and muddled, and avoiding this confusion of thought is exactly Oakeshott’s task in respect of history.

Although the British idealists stray from Hegel in this strictly modal epistemology, they do build on the master’s contention, in the *Phenomenology*, that immediate consciousness is transmuted into knowledge through universal categories and precepts. Although by rejecting a transcendent metaphysics British idealists are closer to Kant’s critical philosophy than to Hegel’s dialectical and teleological assumptions about history. In their focus on the ‘egocentric predicament’ raised by the self-centredness of knowledge, the idealists are in any event preceded by a long line of sceptics, despite their ‘empiricist’ label, in theories of knowledge. Locke’s ‘historical plain method’, Berkeley’s perception-based understanding of material things, and Hume’s scepticism of a priori knowledge would all shepherd the idealists in a solipsistic direction. No doubt this tradition has left a trail of sceptical sediment. As H.J. Paton notes, British idealism has meant ‘Hegelianism modified by Anglo-Saxon caution’.¹³

¹⁰ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, pp. 320–1.

¹¹ Cited in Joseph Lee Auspitz, ‘Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990)’, in *The Achievement of Michael Oakeshott*, ed. Norman, pp. 1–25, p. 10.

¹² Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 2.

¹³ H.J. Paton, ‘Fifty Years of Philosophy’, in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, ed. H.D. Lewis (London, 1956), pp. 337–54, p. 341.

If the idealists are leery of the World-Spirit, this scepticism only fuels their epistemological project. For while idealism turns on the creative life of the mind, idealists are dubious of all else. As Diderot writes in his *Lettre sur les Aveugles* (1749): ‘On appelle Idéalistes ces Philosophes qui, n’ayant conscience que de leur existence et des sensations qui se succèdent au dedans d’eux-mêmes, n’admettent pas autre chose . . .’¹⁴ Oakeshott traces this centrality of experience, like so much else in his philosophy, to Hobbes. Understanding must begin with experience, Hobbes states in the *Leviathan*, ‘for there is no conception in a man’s mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense’.¹⁵ In *Appearance and Reality* Bradley similarly describes the extent of individual experience:

We perceive, on reflection, that to be real, or even barely to exist, must be to fall within sentience. Sentient experience, in short, is reality . . . Find any piece of existence, take up anything that any one could possibly call a fact, or could in any sense assert to have being, and then judge if it does not consist in sentient experience. Try to discover any sense in which you can still continue to speak of it, when all perception and feeling have been removed; or point out any fragment of its matter, any aspect of its being, which is not derived from and is not still relative to this source. When the experiment is made strictly, I cannot myself conceive of nothing else than the experienced.¹⁶

Things do not, then, in Cartesian fashion, exist independent of perception, at least it is impossible to discern the character of things apart from how they are apprehended. Knowledge is not merely given, discoverable with increased effort or superior training. ‘We begin’, writes Oakeshott, ‘with a world of ideas; a given is neither a collection, nor a series of ideas, but a complex, significant whole . . . the given in experience is given always to be transformed.’¹⁷ In fact, it is in this context, in *Experience and Its Modes*, that Oakeshott first condemns that ‘most barren “rationalism”’ as he describes the fallacies that experience is simply given rather than filtered through ideas, and that judgment is merely analysis or classification. This is simplistic intelligence, he says quoting Hegel, with its narrowing ‘passwords of “Either-Or”’.¹⁸

The Hegelianism filtering through Oxford and Edinburgh (and Glasgow and St Andrews) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries dealt predominantly with questions of moral and political philosophy. David Boucher argues on Collingwood’s authority that the early British idealists were not very historically-minded, indeed, Collingwood found them ‘quite out of touch with history’.¹⁹ Green was occupied with political and moral modes of discourse and

¹⁴ Denis Diderot, *Lettre sur les Aveugles* (Geneva, 1963), p. 35.

¹⁵ Oakeshott, Introduction to *Leviathan*, pp. xxiii, 7.

¹⁶ F.H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 127–8.

¹⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

stands apart in any event for his theistic idealism. For his part, Bosanquet actively maligned historical discourse. In his 1911 Gifford Lectures he called history ‘a tissue of mere conjunctions’, a series of events rather than thought, knowledge or experience. Even then history was a ‘hybrid form of experience, incapable of any considerable degree of “being or trueness”’ — a characterization that would preclude history being a legitimate, autonomous mode of discourse.²⁰ Many Oakeshottian themes *vis-à-vis* history do appear, albeit in inchoate form, in Bradley’s pioneering *Presuppositions of Critical History* (1874), which is probably the first systematic English writing on the notion of history as present construct. Oakeshott appropriates wholesale Bradley’s description of experience-centred history (‘a series of projections of present consciousness in the form of a story of past events’), based on inference rather than ‘the past’ itself. The core Bradleyan distinction between ‘critical history’ and ‘history’ is also paralleled closely in Oakeshott’s forms of ‘history’ and ‘practice’.²¹

Oakeshott would of course find himself on the wrong side of the tectonic shift from idealism to realism in early twentieth-century philosophy. Although Bradley and Bosanquet had dominated the British study of philosophy from the 1880s to the 1920s, it fell to a younger generation of idealists to fend off attacks on idealism designed chiefly by G.E. Moore and his convert Bertrand Russell. Hailing advances in logic and hoping to bring British philosophy into the mainstream of European thought, the ‘new realism’ was positivist in nature and literalist in its approach to texts. Most importantly, it held up science as a world of inquiry philosophy might emulate. Moore’s influential ‘Refutation of Idealism’ (1903), directed mainly at Bradley, purports to describe ‘how utterly unfounded is the assumption that “*esse is percipi*”’.²² He charges that the radical solipsism of idealist theory renders it untenable as an epistemological system, that idealism fails to distinguish between the act of sensation and the object of sensation. For Moore, the inference that nothing exists outside sentient experience is simply fallacious — we are in fact surrounded by these (real) distinctions. As he puts it in a later piece, ‘unicorns are thought of . . . lions are hunted’.²³

¹⁹ See Boucher, ‘The Creation of the Past’, pp. 194–5.

²⁰ B. Bosanquet, *The Principle of Individuality and Value* (London, 1927), pp. 78–9.

²¹ F.H. Bradley, *The Presuppositions of Critical History* (Chicago, 1968), p. 84. See also W.H. Walsh, ‘Bradley and Critical History’, in *The Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*, ed. Anthony Manser and Guy Stock (Oxford, 1984), p. 34.

²² G.E. Moore, ‘The Refutation of Idealism’, *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy* (New Series), 12 (1903), pp. 433–53, p. 451.

²³ G.E. Moore, ‘The Conception of Reality’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (New Series), 18 (1917–18), pp. 101–20, p. 118.

Experience and Its Modes was published in 1933. 'What seems to be required', Oakeshott offered, 'is not so much an apology for Idealism as a restatement of its first principles.'²⁴ At the time *Experience and Its Modes* was coolly received, and although the book would later be hailed as a classic of British Hegelianism, Oakeshott's idealist writings never attracted the attention Collingwood's work enjoyed. Still, Oakeshott's standing seems secure alongside idealism's far-flung adherents and allies in relation to the nature and validity of historical understanding. If anything, Oakeshott stands out for the rigour of his theory. Croce and Collingwood are part of this intellectual milieu, but so are figures such as the historical anthropologist, Arthur Lovejoy, who defended in experiential terms the legitimacy of history, arguing that if the 'presentcentric predicament' invalidates history, it invalidates all knowledge;²⁵ and Carl Becker, who held that 'there are two histories: the actual series of events that once occurred; and the ideal series that we affirm and hold in memory'.²⁶ There are echoes of the tradition in Louis Mink's description of history as 'a specialized habit of understanding which converts congeries of events into concatenations', and in his defence of the alembic of the historian's mind against the strictures of scientific method.²⁷

II

The Logic of History

Andrew Sullivan of *The New Republic* suggests that, 'Of [Oakeshott's] intellectual achievements, the most unchallenged is his theory of history, which ranks perhaps with Vico's in its originality and scope.'²⁸ Oakeshott's ideas about history can be vexing, however. 'The "historical" past', he suggests, 'is a complicated world, without unity of feeling or clear outline: in it events have no over-all pattern or purpose, lead nowhere, point to no favoured condition of the world and support no practical conclusions.'²⁹ This scepticism too often is met with bewilderment and despair. Bernard Crick, for one, judges Oakeshott's epistemology so fastidious as to suggest that Oakeshott, like a 'gentlemanly anti-Christ', offers an impossibly barren vision of history and politics. As Crick sees it, in Oakeshott, 'the anarchical Tory becomes a lonely nihilist'.³⁰

²⁴ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, pp. 6–7.

²⁵ Arthur O. Lovejoy, 'Present Standpoints and Past History', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 36 (1939), pp. 477–89, p. 488.

²⁶ Carl L. Becker, 'Everyman his own Historian', *The American Historical Review*, 37 (1932), pp. 221–36, p. 222.

²⁷ Louis O. Mink, 'The Autonomy of Historical Understanding', *History and Theory*, 5 (1966), pp. 24–47, p. 47.

²⁸ *The New Republic* (6 May 1991), p. 42.

²⁹ Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', p. 166.

³⁰ Bernard Crick, 'The World of Michael Oakeshott: Or The Lonely Nihilist', *Encounter*, 20 (1963), pp. 65–74, p. 74; cf. Bernard Crick, 'The Ambiguity of Michael Oakeshott', *The Cambridge Review*, 112 (1991), pp. 120–4.

Oakeshott's conception of history is perhaps more a matter of modesty than of nihilism. For Oakeshott, 'history' as it is commonly conceived is an ambiguous word, embodying two distinct ideas. First, there is the 'notional grand total' of the life of humanity, or the 'passage of somehow related occurrences' within this human story.³¹ This is a past comprised of actual historical events and peopled by real historical actors; it is they, not historians, who make history. Oakeshott argues that because it envisions history as a positive array of 'facts' to be mastered, this is not a properly historical attitude towards the past. The past as an actual 'series' of historical events or as a causal lineup of historical actors is unknowable in any strict sense. Oakeshott subscribes to a second conception of history as the 'ideate', spoken or written understanding of that past. As he puts it: 'History is the historian's experience. It is "made" by nobody save the historian; to write history is the only way of making it.'³²

Although historians continue to debate whether their craft is an art or a science, legend, myth and story have yielded (post-modernist critiques aside) to 'realism' in historiography, i.e. that the burden of historiography resides in its correspondence to actual past events. Especially since the advent of Rankean 'critical method', historical positivists have claimed that non-judgmental style and sophisticated archival method yield history, as Ranke put it, 'as it really was' (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). To Oakeshott, though, it is absurd to suggest, as Lord Acton did of Ranke, that one may 'banish himself from his books'. Such positivist presumption would mean the death of modal history. As Oakeshott puts it:

To pursue 'what really happened', as distinct from simply 'what the evidence obliges us to believe', is to pursue a phantom. And the shortest way of disposing of history altogether is to suppose that what is known in history is a fixed, finished and independent past. A form of experience wedded to this purpose is infatuated with the impossible and joined with the contradictory.³³

History, then, is created rather than retrieved, revived or re-presented. The historian shapes a rudimentary collections of ideas about the past into an intelli-

³¹ Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 1.

³² Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 99. This denial of an objectively recoverable past is hardly peculiar to Oakeshott, although his doctrine is more thoroughgoing than most. Michael Howard, for example, insists that 'History is what historians write and historians are part of the process they are writing about. We may seek for what Jakob Burckhardt described as the "Archimedean point outside events" which will enable us to make truly dispassionate judgements and evaluations, but we know we cannot find it . . . We know that our work, if it survives at all, will be read as evidence of our own *mentalité* and the thought-processes of our own time rather than for anything we say about the times about which we write, however careful our scholarship and cautious our conclusions.' See Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven, 1991), p. 11.

³³ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 108.

gible idiom. It is a transformative process: the truly historical past has *not* survived. The contrast here with Oakeshott's Hegelian colleague Collingwood is telling, as the two are marching in different idealist directions. Collingwood insists that 'all history is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind', that the historian's archival discoveries pique an imaginative revisitation of the past, notably of the self-understanding of bygone actors.³⁴ Oakeshott holds that such sympathy with historical figures is not proper history. The historian must do more than simply grasp the past in its own terms. He must understand 'men and events more profoundly than when they were understood when they lived and happened'.³⁵ History is a novelty, not a re-enactment or re-creation of anything, and the unearthing of the past that Collingwood urges is, Oakeshott declares, a non-historical exhumation, 'a piece of obscene necromancy'.³⁶

In Oakeshott's view, historical experience cannot be bounded by law or process. Only with procrustean chopping and fitting do historical events conform to rigid patterns. This leads him, in his early work, to describe a rigorously particularistic historical past, based more or less on the dictum, 'Pour savoir les choses, il fait savoir le détail'.³⁷ This is a very different task from that of Spengler, Gibbon, Wells, Toynbee or Fukuyama, whose models would engulf the particulars of the past. The Oakeshottian historian seeks no sweeping themes, no grand historical designs. He rejects general 'lessons' of history in favour of greater and more complete historical detail. As a 'meaning and direction' philosophy of history this approach is wholly unreassuring. 'We shall not find unity in history', he contends, 'unless we have first constructed history on a principle of unity'.³⁸ Oakeshott insists that the uniqueness of past events, their *differentia specifica*, disallows historical 'editorials' based on notions of accident or anomaly. The hard winter of 1812 that wrecked Napoleon's expedition to Russia; the storm that dispersed the Spanish Armada: to the Oakeshottian historian these are not fortune or mischance. To view them as 'accidents' of history is to imply a broader historical plot or trajectory which Napoleon or the Armada failed to fulfil.

³⁴ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 215.

³⁵ Michael Oakeshott, 'Mr. Carr's First Volume', *The Cambridge Review*, 4 (1950–1), pp. 344–52, p. 350.

³⁶ Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', p. 166. Oakeshott criticizes the implication of Collingwood's 'historicism' that every category of knowledge is transmuted into historical knowledge. In revisiting the work of past philosophers according to Collingwood's method, for instance, their philosophical inquiry would be recast as present historical knowledge. In principle, at least, Oakeshott maintains a strict categorical distinction between the two. See Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 42–3.

³⁷ See King, 'Michael Oakeshott and Historical Particularism'.

³⁸ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 142.

Oakeshott shares certain affinities with post-modern views of conventional history as replete with ideology and prejudice.³⁹ Both see the futility of regarding the past as a body of knowledge to be fathomed; both are vigorously anti-Whiggish; both question the possibility of objectivity; both, after all, are based on a continental hermeneutics rather than a quest for positive facts. Oakeshott might agree that history is 'hopelessly modern', but not because it is 'logo-centric' and thus anachronistic. (The modern vision associated with the term 'poverty', for example, does not adequately represent, say, medieval poverty.) Even critical theorists who would salvage historical discourse conceive of history differently from Oakeshott. Hans-Georg Gadamer's pragmatism, for instance, openly acknowledges the impossibility of a privileged standpoint *vis-à-vis* history, conceding that the historian's own prejudice and historicity are insurmountable. Although Gadamer believes that 'we stand at the end of our reflections', he nevertheless invites the historian to 'think historically', to rehabilitate tradition and interpretative prejudice, long viewed as barriers to comprehension, and to remake them into vehicles of understanding.⁴⁰ The problem, however, is still posed as one of historical 'explanation' and correspondence between past and present. Oakeshott, meanwhile, holds that history is *necessarily* a manner of present understanding, that the historian does not somehow distort or fail to capture the past, rather he confers a novel coherence upon it.

While Oakeshott is clear in *Experience and its Modes* that particular devotion to the past may make history a worthy arrest of experience, the book is strongest on what history is *not*: namely practice, ideology, or a pillar in one's chosen teleological edifice. Paradoxically, the early Oakeshott maintains a stern Hegelianism while at the same time justifying the historian's craft against practical encroachments. He suggests that beneath a mask of objectivity the researcher merely shapes and fits experience to his pre-existing premises: 'Discovery without judgment is impossible'; 'No historian ever began with a blank consciousness, an isolated idea or a genuinely universal doubt, for none of these is a possible state of mind. He begins always with a system of postulates (largely unexamined) which define the limits of his thought, and with a specific view of the course of events, a view consonant with his postulates.'⁴¹ The historian may then be less critical and creative than he supposes. When Gibbon grandly proclaims, 'I have described the triumph of barbarism and of religion',

³⁹ See Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions* (Princeton, 1992), pp. 62–76; and Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988).

⁴⁰ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), p. 18; and H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975), pp. 264–5.

⁴¹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, pp. 94, 97.

to Oakeshott he has merely fulfilled categories of his own construction. Oakeshott maintains this approach in 'The Activity of Being an Historian' (1955), while at the same time adopting a more forgiving view of practice. In *On History*, however, Oakeshott presents his clearest statement of an affirmative 'distinctive logical character' of historical inquiry.

The logic framed in *On History* is not exactly formulaic. Oakeshott describes broad premises that undergird the historian's creation, 'theoretical postulates' that qualify and distinguish historical engagement. What is the historical past? What comprises a historical event or historical relationship between or among events? How does one identify historical change? Oakeshott's first principle is unchanged: history demands single-minded engagement with the evidence. Historical experience is sparked exclusively by *res gestae*, that is, performances or exploits (generally utterances or artifacts) from bygone times which have survived more or less intact to this day. The Gospel according to St Mark, the score of *Figaro*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Fountains Abbey, a parish register of marriages: these are the historian's evidence. The historian 'understands' the past via these artifacts alone, not by hearsay or intuition or any perceived non-historical need, and even a 'partisan' or 'corrupt' survival of the past is a *res gestae*; indeed, its 'defects' may prove important. While these footprints of the past provoke and sustain historical inquiry, they are not in themselves 'historical'. The record never simply speaks for itself. It is the historian's responsibility to surmise the relationship between one survival and another, and history emerges only when this critical inquiry achieves a new depth of understanding. Ultimately, historical questions centre on what Oakeshott terms an object's 'conditionality', that which constitutes its character. Is it unique? Is it authentic? Is it what it purports to be?

The most important shift in Oakeshott's logic of history occurs at the level of 'historical' relationships between events, as he abandons his earlier particularism in favour of a contingent view. Oakeshott's early work demands a discontinuous view of events, one marked by what he calls 'situational immobility', whereby any discussion of historical causes or consequences is banished. 'Liberalism felled the Berlin Wall' or 'democracies are pacific' are not, then, historical statements. Oakeshott claims in *Experience and Its Modes* that 'the relation *between* events is always other events'. The implication is that historical understanding requires no 'theory', but rather lies in 'a greater and more complete detail . . . a world of events in which no *lacuna* is tolerated'.⁴² In *On History*, by contrast, he sees 'historical' situations properly defined in terms of 'circumstantially and significantly related historical events'.⁴³ Does there

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴³ Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 62.

exist, as he puts it in *On Human Conduct*, a ‘contingent touching’ of ‘goings-on’?⁴⁴

This compromise between happenstance and strict causality is pretty much the extent of Oakeshott’s view of historical causality. Throughout his work he maintains a healthy leeriness of sharply-drawn causal ties, such as those deduced according to Carl Hempel’s ‘covering model’ of historical explanation, where interpretations are derived from general assumptions that appear to ‘cover’ it and similar cases.⁴⁵ Climate, geography or national character, for example, can never be sole historical causes. Likewise, to say that an event is due solely to ‘economic causes’ ‘is not bad history; it is not history at all’.⁴⁶ History is not a branch of scientific ‘discovery’; nor can we ‘know’ history with any scientific rigor. To do so would rest on generalization and assertions of strict causality (necessary and sufficient) between historical events. Oakeshott insists that strict causality is relevant only to concrete knowledge. It is a standard of science not of history, and attempting to bridge this ‘unresolvable categorical distinction’ is to engage in a ‘pretentious muddle’.⁴⁷

Finally, Oakeshott returns to a familiar theme: that historical change and continuity be judged only insofar as supported by the evidence, not in terms of any imposed contrivance of teleology, evolution or development. ‘Teleological history’, he writes, ‘is, in principle, a self-contradiction, and where it has been attempted it is usually a self-confessed botch’.⁴⁸ In order to preserve the integrity of his story, the teleologist-historian must either ignore as ‘non-events’ whatever does not fit within his straightjacket plot, or he must sculpt events to make them fit. Oakeshott does sanction historical periodization, although he discourages us from overburdening these conceptualizations — ‘the Carolingian Empire’, ‘the Protestant Reformation’, ‘European Liberalism’, etc. — with categorical finality. Here Oakeshott cleaves to the view expressed in *Experience and Its Modes*, that only the ‘flimsiest partition’ distinguishes one historical event from another, that ‘there is nothing solid or absolute in their character’.⁴⁹ We should not, therefore, confuse the historian’s ‘tentative, multi-form historical identities’ with the ‘stark, monolithic products’ of facile classifications and ideological constructions.⁵⁰

Oakeshott defines history constructed within these strictures as an ‘argued invitation to imagine the intricacies and the coherence of a condition of human

⁴⁴ Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, pp. 103–5.

⁴⁵ See Carl G. Hempel, ‘The Function of General Laws in History’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 39 (1942), pp. 35–48.

⁴⁶ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 128.

⁴⁷ Oakeshott, *On History*, pp. 75–6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁴⁹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 122.

⁵⁰ Oakeshott, *On History*, pp. 117–18.

circumstance which has not survived'.⁵¹ History remains a very modest construct, with historical truth tied to the *res gestae* and centred on the coherence of the story. When the historian is successful, i.e. when past events are understood independent of subsequent events or contemporary desires, the past exhibits at most 'a peculiarly tentative and intermediate kind of intelligibility'.⁵² The image of historical construction that Oakeshott evokes in *On History* is that of a country 'dry wall', a fabrication of no premeditated design whose stones are held together not by mortar, but by their roughly interlocking shapes. If the wall should totter or rifts appear, these eccentricities are recognized not as defects but as characteristics of history.

III Practice and Ideology

Oakeshott once observed that history as it is commonly practised is 'a field in which we exercise our moral and political opinions, like whippets in a meadow on a Sunday afternoon'.⁵³ To 'use' history in this way, he says, is to engage in the non-historical abstractions of practice, myth and, ultimately, ideology. Each impinges on a critical and constructive historical experience.

Oakeshott's distinction between historical and practical attitudes towards the past is well known. According to Oakeshott, a gallery of interpretative errors are rooted in practice:

Wherever the past is merely that which preceded the present, that from which the present has grown, wherever the significance of the past lies in the fact that it has been influential in deciding the present and future fortunes of man, wherever the present is sought in the past, and wherever the past is regarded as merely a refuge from the present — the past involved is a practical, and not an historical past.⁵⁴

Oakeshott in this sense extends Herbert Butterfield's exposé of the 'Whig' interpretation of history, that form of anachronism born of a present-pointing teleology. As Butterfield says: 'The study of the past with one eye, so to speak, upon the present is the source of all sins and sophistries in history.'⁵⁵ Like the 'Whig' historian, Oakeshott's 'practitioner' taints the past with present politics and other purposes foreign to history. Supposing effects, he leaps backward to supposed causes.

It would seem the practical past is everywhere. A few examples from Oakeshott illustrate how practice, in the form of non-historical benchmarks — value-placing, the backward-looking search for origins, disallowing the contin-

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁵² Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', p. 159.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁵⁴ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 103.

⁵⁵ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931), p. 31.

gent, strict causality, statement over inference, ‘explaining’ rather than ‘understanding’ — creeps into would-be historical investigation: ‘King John was a bad king’; ‘The death of William the Conqueror was accidental’; ‘He dissipated his resources in a series of useless wars’; ‘The loss of markets for British goods on the Continent was the most serious consequence of the Napoleonic Wars’; ‘The effect of the Boer War was to make clear the necessity for radical reform in the British Army’; ‘The Pope’s intervention changed the course of events’.⁵⁶ To Oakeshott none of these statements is historical. Each is freighted with contemporary values and rests on causal connections that evidence of the past cannot unequivocally support. Specifically, these assertions suffer the fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi*, of mixed modes of discourse. Confusing historical and non-historical criteria, they argue past objections and attach certainty to contentious claims. Perhaps King John’s goodness was more private; an arms merchant never met a useless war; a Spaniard might imagine other ‘most serious’ consequences of the Napoleonic Wars; to say that papal influence swayed the course of events is to presuppose knowledge about the future.

As Butterfield does with ‘Whiggism’, Oakeshott draws a close connection between practice and ideology. Oakeshott considers as ideology any sort of pre-meditated political concept or moral abstraction that supplies in advance of political activity a formulated *telos* to be pursued. Oakeshott recognizes that there may be waystations, or intermediate goals, in political life, but any ultimate ‘appointed destination’ of political action deadens thought and practice. Oakeshott is vigilant against shabby politics, but his ideological threshold is astonishingly low. Not only are Marxism and Racial Purity ‘ideological’, but so too are Freedom, Equality, Happiness, the Principles of 1789, Liberalism, Democracy, the Atlantic Charter, and a raft of other political abstractions and, at a stretch, institutions.⁵⁷ Most importantly, though, Oakeshott’s rejection of ideology should be understood as scepticism, as he puts it, of ‘the pursuit of perfection as the crow flies’.⁵⁸ Recall that Oakeshott thinks of political philosophy in the broadest of terms. Political philosophy is the view of political life from the standpoint of the totality of experience, and is, ultimately, ‘the consideration of the relation between politics and eternity’. Authentic political thought, Oakeshott proposes, offers something less than salvation, for ‘politics is contributory to the fulfillment of an end which it cannot itself bring about’.⁵⁹

One’s conception of the past, certainly, plays into this nexus between politics and eternity, as the ‘path’ of history is hijacked to suit a particular project. Ideological history, says Oakeshott, is a staple of two chief causes: politics and reli-

⁵⁶ Oakeshott, ‘The Activity of Being an Historian’, p. 148.

⁵⁷ See Oakeshott, ‘Political Education’ (1951), in *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 111–36, p. 116.

⁵⁸ See Oakeshott, ‘The Tower of Babel’ (1948), in *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 59–79, p. 59. Especially helpful here is Germino, *Beyond Ideology*, pp. 131–9.

⁵⁹ Oakeshott, Introduction to *Leviathan*, p. lxiv.

gion. 'In practical experience the past is designed to justify, to make valid practical beliefs about the present and the future, about the world in general [as opposed to the Oakeshottian world in particular]'; it does so by viewing the past as a 'storehouse of political wisdom, as the authority for a body of religious beliefs'.⁶⁰ Likewise Oakeshott defines patriotism as 'love of the [practical] past', as practice encapsulates collective *amour-propre*, appropriating the past and elevating our place in it.⁶¹ In both instances, would-be historical experience is bent into ideology. The interpretation of events bears directly upon — even accords with or fuels the pursuit of — present interests and aspirations. Moreover, this practice lends one's ideology a bogus 'historical' cachet:

A record reputed to be a mine of prophetic utterances may be consulted at random, after the manner of the *sortes Vergilianae*; and here the yield is not advice but an alleged unavoidable destiny and the courage to accept it. The Old Testament, its character as the recorded past of the ancient Hebrew people ignored and belief in its alleged divine authorship suspended, has long been known as an unequalled collection of exemplars of human character and situation and a rich vocabulary of verbal and situational images, of parables and analogies, in terms of which to understand, express and respond to current situations. And it was in 'Livy', a well-known collection of *legenda*, lying upon his table in Sant'Andrea in Percussina, and not at all in 'Roman history', that Machiavelli found the exemplars of human conduct which he used so effectively to identify current situations, to express his reading of what was afoot in his time, to predict what was likely to come of it and to counsel and admonish the rulers of his day.⁶²

Oakeshott sees 'historians' of this ilk as 'vulgar rag-pickers', as relics of the past are 'transformed from being resonant, ambiguous circumstantial survivals from bygone human life into emblematic actions and utterances . . . entirely divorced from their circumstances'.⁶³

In *The Idea of History* (1946) Collingwood praises Oakeshott for having 'entirely vindicate[d] the autonomy of historical thought', and for restoring the historian as 'master of his own house'.⁶⁴ Assuming this is the case, in what condition does Oakeshott leave the historical domain? Oakeshott's philosophy of history represents a vigorous defence of integrity in historical interpretation, one built around the belief that the historian has never 'mastered' the past, but has at best made it intelligible in the present. Rather than sink into nihilism, Oakeshott elevates the history half of the history-practice dichotomy, aiming at the 'emancipation [of the past] from the primordial and once almost exclusive

⁶⁰ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 105.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁶² Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 39.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 155.

practical attitude of mankind'.⁶⁵ It is a defence of modesty in assigning causality and of provisionality in understanding; it is a vigorous stance against 'Whiggism' in interpretation, and against the moral and causal colouring of the past; it is a stubborn attempt to expose the historian's submerged or unacknowledged biases.

Throughout his work Oakeshott clings — fastidiously even — to the categorical distinction of history, the *difference* of historical experience. The absolutism of Oakeshott's thought here is somewhat unsettling. Strict standards allow no relativist play in his history, and he is perhaps too quick to see in the practical past that 'fatal tendency to moderation, compromise and abstraction',⁶⁶ and although Oakeshott aims to rescue history from exploitation, his acutely modal salvation would seem to diminish any prospect for broad historical understanding. There is, after all, a vague exclusivity in this description of history. Oakeshott is not disdainful of practice — he promotes traditionalist practice as the authentic ground for political conduct. But history is an aloof craft, and Oakeshott seems content to salvage it for historians alone. 'Who are we to forbid [the practical idiom]?', he asks, 'we recognize that the practical past (including moral judgments about past conduct) is not the enemy of mankind, but only the enemy of "the historian".'⁶⁷ Here, recalling Nietzsche, Oakeshott offers the musing metaphor of history as the historian's beloved mistress:

The 'historian' adores the past; but the world today has perhaps less place for those who love the past than ever before. Indeed, it is determined not to allow events to remove themselves securely into the past; it is determined to keep them alive by a process of artificial respiration or (if need be) to recall them from the dead so that they may deliver their messages. For it wishes only to learn from the past and it constructs a 'living past' which repeats with spurious authority the utterances put into its mouth. But to the 'historian' this is a piece of obscene necromancy: the past he adores is dead. The world has neither love nor respect for what is dead, wishing only to recall it to life again. It deals with the past as with a man, expecting it to talk sense and have something apposite to its plebeian 'causes' and engagements. But for the 'historian', for whom the past is dead and irreproachable, the past is feminine. He loves it as a mistress of whom he never tires and whom he never expects to talk sense.⁶⁸

One is never quite sure how to read Oakeshott. His style is patient and reiterative, yet he clearly enjoys to provoke. The irony of Oakeshott's ethics in

⁶⁵ Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', p. 156.

⁶⁶ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 110.

⁶⁷ Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', p. 165.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166. For a view critical of Oakeshott on this point see Gertrude Himmelfarb, 'Supposing History is a Woman — What Then?', *The American Scholar*, 53 (1984), pp. 494–505.

the historical mode is especially roiling, since he would completely unburden the historian of any moral concerns. 'The categories of "right" and "wrong", "good" and "bad", "justice" and "injustice" etc. relate to the organization and understanding of the world in respect of its relationship to ourselves', he writes. 'To inquire into the moral value of past conduct is to relapse into a practical attitude toward the past.'⁶⁹ It is historical, apparently, to understand that Henry VIII beheaded his wives at his convenience; it is not historical, apparently, to find this practice distasteful.

Is history really such ethically arid terrain? Need the historian's love of the past be blind? Oakeshott, it must be said, is a profound moral theorist, who argues for a discretion in ethical decisions that is based on traditional 'intimations' of right conduct — but this is all in the realm of practice. In regard to history, he upholds complete detachment from the moral sense, precisely the 'amoralism and passivism' that Pieter Geyl finds so abhorrent in a historicism that admits no external standards.⁷⁰ Oakeshott has written that a 'historical masterpiece' is one that 'releases us from the burden of history as the intellectual and moral preface to the contemporary world'.⁷¹ Yet it seems naïvely inhuman to banish from historical discourse, say, Hugh Trevor-Roper's idea that 'History is not merely what happened: it is what happened in the context of what might have happened'; or Hayden White's contention that 'The contemporary historian has to establish the value of the study of the past, not as an end in itself, but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time'.⁷² No serious historiographic theory today denies the impact of presentism on historical inquiry. The issue is not whether the historian can remain disengaged from non-historical interests, but the extent to which these extracurricular engagements colour his history. Because he fashions history after an ideal categorical template, Oakeshott poses the problem too strictly. In place of a pure 'historical' distillate of experience, what is perhaps needed is history in tandem with practice, where the historian engages the past fairly and makes plain his biases, but without suppressing the moral dimensions and contemporary implications of the craft.

Oakeshott believes that the greatest need of humanity is 'freedom from the distraction of illusion', and his defence of history against the abuses of practice

⁶⁹ Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', pp. 144, 164.

⁷⁰ In his essay, 'Ranke in the Light of the Catastrophe', Geyl considers the perils of a 'value-free' approach wedded to a belief in the primacy of the state. See *Debates with Historians* (New York, 1958), pp. 9–29.

⁷¹ *Cambridge Journal* (1948), pp. 766–7; cited in Dray, 'Michael Oakeshott's Theory of History', p. 33.

⁷² Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'History and Imagination', in *History and Imagination: Essays in Honor of H.R. Trevor-Roper*, ed. H. Lloyd-Jones, et al. (London, 1981), pp. 356–69, p. 364; Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), p. 41.

and ideology is a laudable step in this direction.⁷³ But history is a narrow and exclusive mode in Oakeshott's hands, and the purism and guardedness of his theory — even if we appreciate a certain irony in his work — make for a view of history that is perhaps cripplingly modest. One wonders if a historians' guild that adopted Oakeshott's standards could have any members at all, or if it did, whether historical discussion among them would even be possible. After all, the radical individualism of idealist history presents a fundamental problem: taken seriously, this logic would have the historian creating not so much worlds of ideas as sovereign spheres of knowledge, bounded by individual thought. Oakeshott's method is so thoroughly self-referential that any 'conversation' conducted in the historical idiom may yield more babble and misunderstanding than coherent discourse. Lost would be the prospect for any sort of solidaristic or consensual history, what Abraham Lincoln appealed to as the 'mystic chords of memory'. For this we must turn to practice.

IV

History, Practice and Political Theory — From *Leviathan* to the Modern State

The practical attitude towards the past is at the heart of Oakeshott's political thought. This is clear across Oakeshott's writings on politics, although here I focus briefly on his survey of theories of the modern European state, and on his mythical understanding of Hobbes. Oakeshott insists that politics be understood and exercised in terms of what he calls 'practice', i.e. the cumulative deposit of experience across generations and within persistent patterns of conduct. Whether a mere protocol or a formal institution, practice denotes, or at least 'intimates', civil obligations and duties and thereby qualifies human conduct. Thus even as Oakeshott argues in *On Human Conduct*, his leading statement on civil association, that the 'theoretical understanding of a substantive action or utterance is . . . in principle, a "historical" understanding', he means not that theory should conform to the logic of history, but rather that theory should be worldly, concrete, an extension of practice.⁷⁴ It is a doctrine, Oakeshott concedes, that 'deprives us of a model laid up in heaven', but at least it steers us away from the 'morass' of relativism.⁷⁵

Oakeshott's traditionalism differs from nostalgia. He argues that practice is inevitably imbedded in a society merely by virtue of that society's past circumstances. Hence he describes modern states, quaintly perhaps, as 'hereditary co-operative groups, many of them of ancient lineage, all of them aware of a past, a present, and a future'.⁷⁶ This thread of 'historical' continuity carries

⁷³ Oakeshott, Introduction to *Leviathan*, p. lxvi.

⁷⁴ Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 107.

⁷⁵ Oakeshott, 'Political Education', p. 127.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

practice with it; and, as Oakeshott notes in *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* (1939), the value of a regime depends upon this foundation, not 'upon the intellectual competence of its apologists'.⁷⁷ Practice is thus seen as the authentic ground for human conduct, more meaningful than political propaganda or transformative schemes. This of course is a very different stance from that of the political 'rationalist', for whom, Oakeshott says, the past is significant only as an encumbrance in his striving to 'live each day as if it were his first'. Under a rationalist regime, society loses its 'rhythm and continuity', and 'all sense of what Burke called the partnership between the present and the past is lost'.⁷⁸

In *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott adopts a largely Ciceronian conception of *civitas*. Oakeshott sees the authentic 'civil condition' as a moral disposition stemming from traditions, practices and laws that have arisen from life '*inter homines*'. *Respublica* is said to reside not in policy and management or in political strategies and tactics, but in 'a manifold of rules and rule-like prescriptions to be subscribed to in all the enterprises and adventures in which the self-chosen satisfactions of agents may be sought'.⁷⁹ This is his theoretical stance. In the book's culminating essay, 'On the Character of a Modern European State', Oakeshott wields the historical idiom, tracing the image of the state as portrayed by theorists from Marsilius of Padua to Hegel. Oakeshott's guiding premise is that this image has been ambiguously conceived, generally in terms of either 'enterprise association' or 'civil association'. He sees these competing visions of the state as a vestige of the medieval principles of *universitas*: of the instrumental state, an essentially 'teleocratic' grouping aimed at satisfying specific wants (say, wealth and well-being); and of *societas*, representing the 'many-in-one' of a 'nation' comprised of 'civil associates' cemented by their common acknowledgement of civil (rather than instrumental) law.

By virtually any standard but Oakeshott's own, this extended essay is a brilliant work in the history of ideas. Oakeshott's command of the evidence is staggering, his interpretative construction gifted and coherent. He sees the persistent idea of *societas*, and with it the freedom of 'self-enactment', 'float[ing] on a rising tide', as fief and duchy give way to state sovereignty and consistent civil law. There are flashes of this disposition in Pico della Mirandola and in the *Don Quixote*; it burns with 'a hard gem-like flame' in the *Essais* of Montaigne and in Charron's *De la sagesse* ('Augustine come again to confound both Gnostics and Pelagians'); it sweeps through Rabelais, Pascal, Madison, Paine, de Tocqueville, Acton and others.⁸⁰ Oakeshott christens this 'historical'

⁷⁷ Oakeshott, *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* (Cambridge, 1944), p. xv.

⁷⁸ Oakeshott, 'Rationalism in Politics' (1947), in *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 1–36, pp. 3, 23.

⁷⁹ Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, pp. 147–8.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 240–1.

idea ‘*civitas peregrina*’, ‘an association, not of pilgrims travelling to a common destination, but of adventurers each responding as best he can to the ordeal of consciousness . . . each the inheritor of the imaginative achievements (moral and intellectual) of those who have gone before’.⁸¹

According to the precepts of Oakeshott’s historical mode, however, this is practice: it is a backward-looking search for origins, a developmentalist narrative whose purpose, stated at the outset, is to derive the moral relationships that ground the civil constitution of modern European states. Does Oakeshott’s practical aim subvert his inquiry? Apparently not, but then that is not the standard he sets for history. In any event, it is unlikely that Clio is offended. Oakeshott clearly holds the past in great regard, even while attentive to the impact of that past upon the present. This is utterly reasonable, and alone would seem to undermine Oakeshott’s insistence on the historian’s exclusive concern with the past. This saga does perhaps buttress Oakeshott’s scepticism of ‘applied’ politics to the extent that it describes liberalism (ambiguities and all) not as a principle arising *ex nihilo*, but as a ‘contingent human disposition’ flowing from the peculiar conditions of the European past. ‘What the evidence obliges us to believe’ is, as Oakeshott says, that the ambivalence between nomocracy and teleocracy has deep roots. Rightly, Oakeshott’s affinity for the former is presented as a practical preference, not as a historical conclusion.

Oakeshott’s reading of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* is reminiscent of Aristotle’s contention, in *Poetics*, that ‘Poetry is more philosophical and of a higher value than history’. This view of the *Leviathan* rests on a magisterial expression of practice, one that brings a suppleness and coherence to what Oakeshott calls ‘the greatest, perhaps the sole, masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language’.⁸² To wit: *Leviathan* is a political myth. It is an artful contrivance, an example of what Oakeshott terms the ‘message-bearing survivals’ of legend, saga and myth.⁸³ In a brief essay, ‘*Leviathan: A Myth*’ (1947), Oakeshott offers a seductive characterization of this philosophy:

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁸² Oakeshott, Introduction to *Leviathan*, p. viii. Four of Oakeshott’s essays on Hobbes, including his introduction to *Leviathan*, have been collected in Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Berkeley, 1975). To these could be added the early ‘Thomas Hobbes’, *Scrutiny*, 1 (1932–3), pp. 114–31. For discussions of the Hobbesian roots of Oakeshott’s vision of society, see J.L. Auspitz, ‘Individuality, Civility and Theory: The Philosophical Imagination of Michael Oakeshott’, *Political Theory*, 4 (1976), pp. 261–94; Bruce P. Frohnen, ‘Oakeshott’s Hobbesian Myth: Pride, Character and the Limits of Reason’, *The Western Political Quarterly*, 43 (1990), pp. 789–809; and Paul Franco, ‘Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist’, *Political Theory*, 18 (1990), pp. 411–36.

⁸³ Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 16. See also Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (London, 1972), which includes a section on the idealist theory of myth. Also, though he pursues a vision of history very different from Oakeshott’s particularism, William H. McNeill, a devotee of Toynbee and defender of ‘world history’, argues that historical understanding

We are apt to think of a civilization as something solid and external, but at bottom it is a collective dream. 'In so far as the soul is in the body', says Plotinus, 'it lies in deep sleep'. What a people dreams in this earthly sleep is its civilization. And the substance of this dream is a myth, an imaginative interpretation of human experience, the perception (not the solution) of the mystery of human life.⁸⁴

For Oakeshott *Leviathan* is a political masterpiece because it is a masterly political myth, an accomplishment in the history of political thought, says Oakeshott, shared only with *The Republic*. The mythic reading of Hobbes was made famous in Oakeshott's Introduction to *Leviathan* (1946). It is a statement, peculiarly idealist in scope, on the relationship between political experience and experience *in toto*. As one scholar has noted, '[Oakeshott] always thought that mere political opinions (including his own) were finally worthless, that the only "relevant" political judgments were those which flowed more-or-less irresistibly from powerful general interpretations of the whole of experience . . .'.⁸⁵ In Hobbes's hands politics is no narrow discipline, but is set within the whole web of experience, attuned to entire traditions of thought. Oakeshott discerns in the *Leviathan* 'the still centre of a whirlpool of ideas which has drawn into itself numberless currents of thought, contemporary and historic, and by its centripetal force has shaped and compressed them into a momentary significance before they are flung off again into the future'.⁸⁶ The *Leviathan* myth fuses history ('the ordered register of past experiences'), and prudence ('the power to anticipate experience by means of the recollection of what has gone before', the 'end and crown' of experience). As Hobbes says: 'Of our conceptions of the past, we make a future.'⁸⁷

Leviathan, then, is not 'the private dream of an eccentric or the malicious invention of an outcast', but an inherited myth, even if a shocking one.⁸⁸ Even within the bounds of a new myth Hobbes, like his contemporary Milton, re-embodies the Augustinian myth of the Fall and Salvation of humanity, recalling and recreating the limits of reason and the perils of hubris. Oakeshott's debate with Leo Strauss on this point is instructive.⁸⁹ In Hobbes, Strauss sees the foundation of 'a new moral attitude' representing an essential

must reach the mythical plane in order to make intelligible the 'elastic, inexact character of truth, especially truth about human conduct'. See W.H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1986), p. 7.

⁸⁴ Oakeshott, 'Leviathan: A Myth', in *Hobbes on Civil Association*, pp. 150–4, p. 150.

⁸⁵ See Riley, 'Michael Oakeshott, Philosopher of Individuality', p. 650.

⁸⁶ Oakeshott, Introduction to *Leviathan*, pp. xii–xiii.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. xxiii–iv.

⁸⁸ Oakeshott, 'Leviathan: A Myth', p. 153.

⁸⁹ See Oakeshott's 'Dr. Leo Strauss on Hobbes', *Politica*, 2 (1937), pp. 364–79, pp. 366–7.

rupture with the Aristotelian, Scholastic and Natural Law traditions; as such it is the basis of all modern theories of sovereignty and civil institutions. To Oakeshott, Hobbes's break with the past *is* profound — it is a new myth — but Oakeshott is chary of new myths, or at least is chary of vanquishing old ones, and he thus admires *Leviathan* for its continuity with the past.

This mythic reading of *Leviathan* illumines Hobbes and unifies his philosophy. In *Leviathan* Oakeshott sees 'the transposition of an abstract argument into the world of the imagination'. Hobbes does not offer a 'mechanistic-materialistic politics'; rather, in mythic form we are made aware at a glance of the 'fixed and simple centre of a universe of complex and changing relationships'.⁹⁰ The work is bound together by a sense of the predicament of the human condition. Mere 'political' life is reflected in the *speculum universitatis*:

The coherence of [Hobbes's] philosophy, the system of it, lies not in an architectonic structure, but in a single 'passionate thought' that pervades its parts. The system is not the plan or key of the labyrinth of the philosophy; it is, rather, a guiding clue, like the thread of Ariadne. It is like the music that gives meaning to the movement of dancers, or the law of evidence that gives coherence to the practice of a court. And the thread, the hidden thought, is the continuous application of a doctrine about the nature of philosophy. Hobbes's philosophy is the world reflected in the mirror of the philosophic eye, each image the representation of a fresh object, but each determined by the character of the mirror itself.⁹¹

This is the breadth of understanding Oakeshott longed for. Myth, after all, is 'a drama from which all that is causal, secondary and unresolved is excluded; it has a clear outline, a unity of feeling and in it everything is exact except place and time . . . contingencies have been resolved . . . every component is known and is intelligible in respect of its relation to a favoured present'.⁹² Nothing of this scope resides within the confines of history. Constricted by method and single-mindedness, Oakeshottian history ('always on the verge of passing beyond itself') is enticed by this mythic 'extravagance of the imagination'.⁹³ Indeed, philosophical idealism may well demand such a grasp of the past, where particularism and contingency yield to the quest for the 'Absolute Idea', wherein all that is partial and abstract is transcended. From this perspective, in any case, Oakeshott's support for history fades:

Historical experience . . . is a modification of experience; it is an arrest in experience. History is a world of abstractions. It is a backwater, and, from the standpoint of experience, a mistake . . . My standpoint is that of the totality of experience, and from that standpoint historical experience is a failure and

⁹⁰ Oakeshott, Introduction to *Leviathan*, pp. xviii, xix.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. xix–xx.

⁹² Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', p. 166.

⁹³ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 122.

consequently an absolute failure. And the limited satisfaction to be found in historical experience is unable even to contribute to the ultimate satisfaction looked for in the totality of experience. The world of history, as a formulation of experience, stands in the way of a finally coherent world of ideas.⁹⁴

The final incoherence of the historical mode is that it requires the historian to forswear all other abstraction, however pithy and pointed, however essential to a civilization. Ironically, modality only spurs the splintering of experience that idealists decry. Behind his modal demands, curiously enough, Oakeshott understands this fully: 'There is perhaps something decadent, something even depraved, in an attempt to achieve a completely coherent world of [historical] experience; for such a pursuit requires us to renounce for the time being everything which can be called good and evil, everything which can be valued or rejected as valueless. And no matter how far we go with it, we shall not easily forget the sweet delight which lies in the empty kisses of abstraction'.⁹⁵

In the end, Oakeshott appears to yield — as, I suppose, a fallen historian — to the resolution and unity of a practical, even mythical view of the past. After outlining the historian's modest prospects, he concludes 'The Activity of Being an Historian' thus: 'And if in so new and so delicate an enterprise [i.e. the making of history] he finds himself tempted into making concessions to the idiom of legend, that perhaps is less damaging than other divergencies.'⁹⁶ True, this is not exactly an end-of-essay conversion; nor, exactly, does Oakeshott invite historians to lie down with practitioners. But Oakeshott's idealism does seem to trump his history. He recognizes the failings of a narrowly 'historical' voice of experience and, perhaps, a place for greater solidarity in understanding the past. It is a welcome Oakeshottian twist. Oakeshott's relentless modesty in the historical mode is merely tantalizing. One longs for a little prejudice (à la Burke) and passion, but with Oakeshott the past remains draped in disclaimer and qualification. Myth mirrors experience obliquely; yet the history it reflects offers some semblance of meaning, even truth.

Thomas W. Smith
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⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 148–9.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

⁹⁶ Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', p. 167.