

outrage and apocalypse. The outrage is expressed grossly, fantastically, through "Insect People" and "Vegetable People" who collaborate with death, who invite the void. The apocalypse can be icy (whole planets approaching the Absolute Zero) or explosive (the refrain is always, "Minutes to go"). Obscene idealist, satiric and visionary, lacing scientific jargon with poetic hallucination and cutting up and folding his pages cannily, William Burroughs is finally led to deny not only the Word but also the Flesh. His aim is to make man bodiless and language silent. Utopian or nihilist, he demonstrates the passions that feed both in a form which compels literature to move beyond its accepted limits. If his work does not help to create a new human personality, it forces us to reconsider the traditional terms of literature.

IN BURROUGHS, in Beckett, even in Miller, the destructive capabilities are clear; all three authors serve to hasten the end, and silence is a metaphor of their complex rage. We are tempted to ask, what do they offer when all is unsaid and undone? The question assumes polarities of creation and destruction, affirmation and denial, which the modern experience tends to render obsolete. Camus, and Nietzsche before him—and who else before?—knew that

the act of negation is an assertion of value. Men have learned to refuse with honour ever since refusal has required from them, in this era of terror, a monstrous price. The polarities of creation and destruction no longer exclude one another; they exclude the middle. For if silence is holy, and if it brings with it intimations of a whole, new life, silence is also demonic, and it permits old terrors. Outrage and apocalypse are two faces of the same reality; this has been all along my point.

Admitting this final peril, how then can men of good will discern value in the silence which the new literature whispers into our inner ears? The answer depends on whether we can still afford anything but radical solutions. The statement, I know, has sickening echoes; we have heard of radical solutions before which have brought only radical dissolutions. I offer no way out of this perplexity though I claim it is the perplexity we must somehow meet. My hope is that Silence and Love may recover their ancient connection. This is what Norman O. Brown says in *Love's Body*: "The true meanings of words are bodily meanings, carnal knowledge; and the bodily meanings are the unspoken meanings. What is always speaking silently is the body." And again: "The matrix in which the word is sown is silence. Silence is the mother tongue."

## Michael Oakeshott's Politics

*A Conservative Sceptic — By MAURICE CRANSTON*

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT is a political theorist who does not fit into any of the usual categories; he is a traditionalist with few traditional beliefs, an "idealist" who is more sceptical than many positivists, a lover of liberty who repudiates liberalism, an individualist who prefers Hegel to Locke, a philosopher who disapproves of *philosophisme*, a romantic perhaps (if Hume could also be called one), and a marvellous stylist. Oakeshott's voice is unique. But since what he says has often been misunderstood, and sometimes misrepresented, there was evidently room for an informed and sympathetic

commentary such as is now provided by Dr. W. H. Greenleaf in the first of Longmans' new series of "Monographs in Politics."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Greenleaf's stress is on the continuity of Oakeshott's thought, from the earliest epistemological to the latest political writings. Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics*<sup>2</sup> is thus expounded in the light of his *Experience and its Modes*,<sup>3</sup> a book which was published in 1933 when the author was thirty-two. The argument of this early book undoubtedly owes a certain amount to Hegel and to the theory of truth as coherence. In its pages, Oakeshott depicts the philosopher's task as "the perpetual re-establishment of coherence" or the resolution of the inconsistency in any set of concrete images so as to make it more intelligible. Ordinary or common-sense views may be used as a point of departure; but they are adopted only to be superseded. They are

<sup>1</sup> *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics*. By W. H. GREENLEAF. Longmans, 1958.

<sup>2</sup> Methuen, 1962, 35s.

<sup>3</sup> Cambridge University Press, 1933. Reissued, 1966, 60s.

examined and criticised with the aim of moving beyond them to a more comprehensive perspective. Philosophy, on this view, neither seeks nor desires a stopping place. It is not the construction of a complete system of knowledge, but rather a method or way of thinking. And its objective is nothing more ambitious than intelligibility. Philosophy, for Oakeshott, is explanation.

While Oakeshott may try (in Dr. Greenleaf's words) "to achieve on each question he discusses the most inclusive and concordant view," he does not imagine that such absolute coherence of concrete ideas is ever actually accomplished; this is simply the criterion of whatever is done. Oakeshott notes that men have an incurable tendency to look at the world in ways which, though wholly consistent and self-contained in their own terms, are not fully satisfactory in experience as a whole. Such limited perspectives Oakeshott speaks of as "modes" of experience; each "mode" constructs a specific and homogeneous picture not of a part of the real world but of the whole of experience as it is seen from a given point of interest. Oakeshott sees no theoretical limit to the number of such abstract worlds, but he distinguishes four as being particularly familiar and fully formed: namely those of practice, science, history, and poetry.

Each of these "modes," Oakeshott suggests, has its own validity, but all are in different ways limited, and none is able, in its own terms, to understand its limitations. Only the philosophical perspective is able to transcend the shortcomings of these several "modes," and re-interpret them from the standpoint of experience as a totality. The philosopher seeks to bring out the logical form of each particular "mode" with a view to perceiving "the degree and limitations of the coherence achieved."

DR. GREENLEAF believes that this is the method which Oakeshott applies to the study of politics, so that his first question becomes: what is the principle of coherence to be sought in the interpretation of political activity? Oakeshott considers, and rejects, two well-known ways of characterising political behaviour. First, he repudiates the notion of politics as an *ad hoc* activity of "waking up each morning and considering 'What would I like to do?' . . . and doing it." For this, he thinks, is to represent politics as something entirely capricious, which it is not. Secondly, he rejects the more exalted and very fashionable belief that politics is an activity which may be guided by an independently premeditated plan or set of principles. Some of the most telling, and often quoted, passages in

Oakeshott's writings are directed against this vision of politics. It is the one that he likes to call "rationalist."

Since the word "rationalism" has several meanings, it is hardly surprising that these arguments of Oakeshott have been misunderstood. He is certainly not attacking Reason. He is criticising rather a kind of intellectualism or what he has sometimes called *philosophisme*. "The Rationalist," writes Oakeshott, "is like a shopkeeper who, having bought an estate, thinks that a correspondence course in estate management will give him all the knowledge necessary to control it and its tenancy." The kind of rationalist Oakeshott has in mind is the man who thinks he can apply intellectual blueprints to the world of politics, who imagines he can solve concrete problems by the light of abstract generalisations, and who seeks, in effect, to introduce into politics the method of the *polytechnicien* or engineer.

Against such belief in the sovereignty of technique, Oakeshott insists on the importance of practical knowledge, which is largely traditional knowledge. He likens the art of politics to that of cookery. "A cook," he writes, "is not a man who first has a vision of a pie, and then tries to make it; he is a man skilled in cookery, and both his projects and his achievements spring from that skill." Political understanding comes as a result of being apprenticed to, participating in, and thereby "comprehending all the resources of a tradition of behaviour."

It must be said that Oakeshott's analogy between politics and cookery sounds rather odd (though Dr. Greenleaf does not seem to think so). Plato and other Greeks likened the politician to the flute player, which is surely a better analogy. If politics is an art, it is one of the performing arts, one in which speech, oratory, rhetoric, persuasion play a very large part. And indeed Oakeshott sees this plainly enough when he goes on to define politics. He defines it as "activity and utterance connected with government and the instruments of government" or, in a famous phrase, "the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice has brought together." Any group may have its politics, but we use the word primarily in connection with those associations known as states. Like all procedures among men, Oakeshott suggests, the rules and institutions of states are most useful when they are familiar and do not alter excessively. Not that Oakeshott sees anything sacrosanct in such rules and institutions; all are "susceptible of change and improvement." But such possible improvements, he argues, are prompted neither by caprice nor by abstract principles, but derive from the recognition of specific

and ascertainable defects in what already obtains. Thus political activity is a matter of "amending existing arrangements to make them more coherent."

An example Oakeshott takes from recent history is the enfranchisement of women in England. He suggests that this was not enacted because Parliament recognised any natural or human right to equality of suffrage, but because Englishwomen had already, as a result of the Married Women's Property Act and of various war-time changes, become by 1918 on the same footing as Englishmen in so many other fields that it was anomalous, or inconsistent, for them to remain excluded from the voting register; their enfranchisement was a result of Parliament's recognition of "an incoherence which pressed convincingly for remedy."

All politics, as Oakeshott understands it, is "the politics of repair." The enterprise of politics is

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

This emphasis of Oakeshott's on the "politics of repair" and on statesmanship as "choosing the least evil" has prompted some readers to see him as another Edmund Burke. But this is a mistake. Burke, like most conservative political theorists, is a champion of the Christian Order, of Natural Law, of the Right to Property, and so forth. Oakeshott, who carries the scepticism of his philosophy into his politics, has no belief in such metaphysical abstractions. His kindred spirit is not Burke, but David Hume. Like Hume, Oakeshott is conservative as a result of his doubt. Hume relied on tradition, habit and custom precisely because he could see nothing else to rely on: no God, no Natural Law, no Rights. But Hume did not make the mistake of elevating custom and tradition into sacred substitutes for God and Natural Law. His sceptical conservatism was open, undogmatic, and splendidly tolerant.

THIS IS EQUALLY TRUE of Oakeshott's conservatism. Opposed to all ideology, he cannot, and does not, share the ideological conservatism of

Burke and his successors. This attitude which is required by Oakeshott's theory is clearly also part of his natural disposition. No one can read his writings without being struck by his manifest devotion to freedom. And whatever his debt to Hegel in other fields, Oakeshott owes nothing to Hegel in his understanding of what freedom is. Oakeshott's notion of freedom is the plain man's, or rather the plain Englishman's, notion. Freedom is something to be defended against the régime and against any other great concentration of power. And although Oakeshott has sometimes criticised forms of theoretical individualism, his freedom is the freedom of the individual. This is made strikingly clear in an essay of his which has never been published in England but which deserves to be better known: "The Masses in Representative Democracy."<sup>4</sup> In this essay he introduces the concept of the "anti-individual." "The 'masses' as they appear in modern European history," Oakeshott writes, "are not composed of individuals, they are composed of 'anti-individuals' united in revulsion from individuality."

The main argument of the essay is that freedom, as Englishmen understand it, is something that emerged in medieval times with the sense of individuality. Individuality demanded a government strong enough to enable the individual to escape from communal or other established pressures, a government which could maintain order and create new rights and duties appropriate to the interests of individuality, but which at the same time was not so powerful that it would itself constitute a new threat to those interests. Legislative bodies arose to make laws favourable to the individual, and establish spheres of private activities (or liberties) in which the individual could act without interference:

In this condition [Oakeshott writes] every subject was secured of the right to pursue his chosen directions of activity as little hindered as might be by his fellows or by the exactions of government itself, and as little distracted by communal pressures. Freedom of movement, of initiative, of speech, of belief and religious observance, of association and dissociation, of bequest and inheritance, security of person and property; the right to choose one's own occupation and dispose of one's labour and goods; and over all the "rule of law"; the right to be ruled by a known law, applicable to all subjects alike. And these rights, appropriate to individuality, were not the privileges of a single class; they were the property of every subject alike. Each signified the abrogation of some feudal privilege.

On this view, government acted like an umpire, administering the rules of the game without taking part, intervening only to settle col-

<sup>4</sup> *Freedom and Serfdom*, ed. A. Hunold (Dordrecht, Holland, 1961).

lisions of interest among the players. And such is the chief characteristic of what Oakeshott speaks of as "parliamentary government."

The rise of the "anti-individual," he argues, goes together with another view of government: what Oakeshott calls "popular" (as opposed to "parliamentary") government. The popular system looks to the establishment of universal adult suffrage to confirm the authority of mere numbers or the mass man; the parliamentary representative is seen, not as an individual, but as an instructed delegate whose function is to assist the creation of a society appropriate to his masters; mass parties grow up composed of "anti-individuals" and dominated by their leaders. But in all this the mass man does not make his own choice; he does not really give a mandate to his leaders. The so-called representative draws up his own mandate and "by a familiar trick of ventriloquism" puts it into the mouths of his electors. Similarly, the favourite device of "popular" government, the plebiscite, is not a method by which the mass man imposes his choices upon his rulers; it is a method of generating a government with unlimited authority to make choices on his behalf. Through the plebiscite, the mass man finally achieves release from the burden of individuality: he is told emphatically what to choose. Oakeshott adds that the style of general political discourse most suited to "popular" (as opposed to "parliamentary") government tends naturally to be the idiom of ideology or, as he calls it, rationalism.

Oakeshott's belief in the superiority of the parliamentary form of government goes together with his special feeling for England: his sense (as Dr. Greenleaf puts it) "of the greatness and uniqueness of the British political achievement and way of life generally." Oakeshott has more than once spoken of the English system as "the most civilised and effective method of social integration ever created by mankind (for it is not the gift of the Gods)." But while Dr. Greenleaf is right, I think, in noticing this patriotic sentiment in Oakeshott, I suspect that he goes wrong in placing Oakeshott's general theory in a distinctively English tradition of political philosophy. Oakeshott is surely not, as Dr. Greenleaf suggests, the successor of T. H. Green, B. Bosanquet, and F. H. Bradley in the English Idealist school. Green, in particular, is an example of the high-minded ideologue (or Balliol *philosophe*) that Oakeshott most mistrusts. Oakeshott's "Hegelianism" comes straight from Hegel without any mediation from Victorian Oxford. Oakeshott's affinities are altogether closer to several continental theorists, to Wilhelm Dilthey, for example, and Benedetto Croce. And it is interesting to notice

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that just as Croce, who always reckoned himself a liberal, proved when it came to the test surprisingly conservative, so Oakeshott, the professed conservative, turns out to be remarkably liberal. Not, of course, a liberal in the pejorative sense in which he himself uses that word; but liberal (or "libertarian" as he would rather have it), in the sense of one who loves freedom for the sake of freedom. Dr. Greenleaf goes so far as to call him a Whig, but this strikes me as the wrong word. The aristocratic element is there, assuredly; Oakeshott is conspicuously non-bourgeois. But he has so little affection for the leading Whigs, and he rejects so decidedly the central Whig doctrine of Rights, that the name sounds oddly incongruous.

MORE SERIOUSLY, I think it must be said in criticism of Dr. Greenleaf's monograph that its very title is out of place. What can "Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics" mean, when it is a central point of Oakeshott's argument that philo-

sophy and politics are distinct and categorically different? Politics, if Oakeshott's understanding is correct, cannot be philosophical, although there can be philosophy of politics. Again, for all the emphasis that Dr. Greenleaf places on the continuity of Oakeshott's thought, he does not really explore the logical connections between Oakeshott's different writings; he may even prompt the conjecture that if Oakeshott had been a literary man, and not a philosopher, he would still have had the same political views and defended them in the manner of Montaigne. To concentrate, as Dr. Greenleaf does, on Oakeshott's politics is to miss something of Oakeshott's great distinction, which resides in the fact that he *is* a philosopher. This, however, is not something to be unfolded in a book of a hundred pages, or appraised in a review of a dozen paragraphs. There is a lot to be learned from contemplating Michael Oakeshott in the role of the sceptical conservative, but it would be a mistake to think of this as his most important role.

## The Last English Imagist

*On Sir Herbert Read — By G. S. FRASER*

THE FIRST collected volume of Sir Herbert Read's poems that I remember buying was that of 1935. What one noticed then was that this was essentially a poet of the family of Pound in his Imagist phase and of Eliot in that early phase which might be called Impressionist. In rhythm, in economy, in choice of words, this is very like Pound:

*Like a faun my head uplifted  
in delicate mists:*

*And breaking on my soul  
tremulous waves that beat and cling  
to yellow leaves and dark green hills:*

*Bells in the autumn evening.*

This is very like Pound in tea-shops, in South Kensington, and like the short poems about damp souls of housemaids and so on in which Eliot was much influenced by Pound:

*In this teashop  
they seem so violent  
Why should they come here  
dressed for tragedy?*

*Did they anticipate  
This genteel atmosphere?  
Her eyes are like moth-wings  
furtive under a black arch.*

*She drinks a cup of tea.  
But he is embarrassed—  
stretches his gross neck  
out of the white grip of his collar.*

*Sits uneasily  
eagerly rises now she has done.  
Anxiously seeks the looking glass  
then seeks the door.*

*She is gone  
a vestal her robes fluttering  
like a printed sheet  
in a gusty Tube.*

The poise and concentration of the second poem, particularly the rhythm which, by suggesting detachment and withdrawal avoids melodrama and sentimentality, a detachment and withdrawal heightened by the formal diction, and word order, "genteel," "furtive," "eagerly rises," "anxiously seeks," the felicity of the two similes (the eyes like moth-wings under a black arch, which is her eyebrow, but also a smoke-blackened archway under which moths might gather; the dress, a print dress probably, like a printed sheet in a gusty Tube, a newspaper in the underground, but also a sheet carried by suction down a long tubular corridor), all these things catch a particular