AGAINST THE GRAIN: MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ON THE IDEA OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

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In 1990 Noel Annan, the widely respected British educational and civic leader and a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, described the philosopher Michael Oakeshott as mischievous, one who delighted in skewering his intellectual opponents: "[H]is writing twinkled with mischief," wrote Annan, "and his good humour was imperturbable as he twitted and taunted his opponents." Annan paradoxically recognized the significance of Oakeshott's ideas for modern society, yet saw him as one of the "deviants" from the generation of intellectuals who came of age in the years between the world wars and then influenced British culture and politics from the 1940s through the 1970s.[1] This generation of intellectuals rejected the aristocratic tradition of the British past, emphasized the expansion of social justice and maintained the welfare state established after the Second World War until one of its youngest members, Margaret Thatcher, sought to dismantle it in the 1980s. In contrast, Oakeshott went against the grain of his "... countrymen [whom he thought] en masse were taking the wrong turning and marching to perdition." He despised what he called the rationalism that governed the politics and social engineering of both the Left and the Right. Whether he was writing about the politics of contemporary Britain or modern Europe, modern morality or the education of citizens, he rejected the notion that we could devise a plan, a technique–that is, apply reason unfettered by authority, custom, or tradition–to solve the problems of the modern world.[2]

Oakeshott earned a reputation in the Atlantic world as a political philosopher from the wide circulation of his most well-known book *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, which first appeared in 1962.[3] Criticized as a Burkean conservative and a traditionalist in a time influenced by progressive ideas, his prominence rose as a conservative mood returned to Britain and overtook American society in the late seventies and early eighties. Oakeshott's popularity among conservatives, especially in the United States, however, has been based on a limited reading of his ideas, principally from *Rationalism in Politics*.[4] More recently, in a growing body of literature philosophers and political theorists have argued that Oakeshott ought to be seen as a philosopher whose corpus ranged from epistemology to political thought and one who, despite the implication of his essay "On Being Conservative,"[5] offered the world a reformulated version of liberalism. Harwell Wells, for example, argued that Oakeshott was not only a political philosopher but a philosopher in the traditional sense of the word. In "The Philosophical Michael Oakeshott," which appeared in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Wells explored Oakeshott's conception of rationalism from his early philosophical treatise, *Experience and its Modes*, through *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* to his magnum opus, *On Human Conduct*. He contended that a common thread about human experience and the philosopher's role of seeking to explain the assumptions of the modes of experience runs through Oakeshott's writings.[6]

Among those who have characterized Oakeshott's thought as liberal are Paul Franco, Terry Nardin, and John Gray. In *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Franco contends that Oakeshott's thought is complex and difficult to classify. Nevertheless, he identifies him as a liberal. Oakeshott's idea of civil association, writes Franco, rejects the atomistic individualism of the liberal tradition that arose with Hobbes, the economic and materialistic liberalism of Hayek and Friedman, as well as the emphasis on economic efficiency that the theories of Rawls and Nozick ultimately come to. "In short," writes Franco, "Oakeshott succeeds--as perhaps no other contemporary thinker has--in freeing liberalism from the utilitarianism, materialism, and economism which have haunted it since the seventeenth century." In *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Nardin argues that like John Dewey, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, and numerous other philosophers in the twentieth century, Oakeshott rejected the naturalistic claim that we experience a world of objects independent of us. Rather, Oakeshott engaged in a form of philosophical hermeneutics that had its roots in the ideas of nineteenth century historians Gustav Droysen and Wilhelm Dilthey. Especially in the human sciences, he [Oakeshott] posited two levels of meaning: that which the observer brings to the experience and that inherent in the observed experience, especially when it involves the act of an intelligent human being. Finally, the contemporary British philosopher John Gray portrayed Oakeshott as a classical liberal who likened political discourse and practice to a conversation and who, along with Isaiah Berlin, sought a *modus vivendi* for civil society.[7]

One of the earliest attempts to analyze Oakeshott's educational thought was a sympathetic yet critical essay

by the well-known British philosopher of education, Richard S. Peters. Writing in an era when ordinary language philosophy dominated virtually all branches of the discipline in the Anglo-American world, Peters noted Oakeshott's "impressionistic and rather literary" style of philosophical analysis leads to vagueness in some of his educational concepts. Although he was generally sympathetic to Oakeshott's educational thought and acknowledged his influence on him, Peters chided him for his elitist view of schooling, a problem that Oakeshott partially resolved in his later educational writings.[8]

Some historians have investigated Oakeshott's thought and have seen him as more than a political philosopher. Noel Annan, Robert Grant, David Boucher, and Gertrude Himmelfarb have written on his philosophy of history in the context of his political thought. Himmelfarb and Annan also have discussed Oakeshott's conservatism. Nevertheless, beyond passing references, only Annan has attempted to explain Oakeshott's ideas in the political and social context of post-World War II Britain. Although he saw him as a "deviant" from the intellectual trends of his generation, Annan did not explore Oakeshott's thoughts on the idea of a liberal education as a part of a larger project of criticizing the manifestation the modern technocratic mind in British society and education. This essay, therefore, is one attempt to further Annan's work and begin to fill that lacuna in the historical literature. It also is a part of the continuing debate among intellectual historians about the relationship between ideas and their intellectual and social context. It is intended as an example of William Bouwsma's notion of "cultural" history.[9] Thus this essay considers the intellectual and social context in which Michael Oakeshott expressed his thoughts about a liberal education. In it I argue that his educational thought was a part of his critique of the modern bureaucratic and technocratic mind and the dangers it posed to liberty and to an education that would enable one to become a free and active citizen in a modern democratic society and, ultimately, a participant in the conversation of humankind.

Michael Oakeshott wove his educational writings into the fabric of his political and social ideas through a series of essays produced between 1949 and 1975. The first part of the essay contains a brief summary of his ideas in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the context of his philosophical critique of modern bureaucratic thinking. The second part deals in more detail with his critique of the reform of British education in the post-World War II era, especially the significant restructuring of higher education. This discussion also considers the place of a liberal education in modern democratic society by exploring the ideas of a philosopher who devoted his professional career to the study of the human condition and the formation of civil polity that promoted individual liberty by means of a liberal education under the circumstances of the decline of the British Empire, the threat of the cold war and the growth a domestic commitment to an advanced technological society. It is intended, therefore, as a contribution to the contemporary debate over the meaning and achievement of liberty in modern society represented by the work of philosophers and historians, such as Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, Richard Rorty, Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Richard Bernstein, Alisdair MacIntyre, Christopher Lasch, Eric Foner, James Kloppenberg, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and others.

Following the Second World War, the United Kingdom instituted a planned economy and a welfare state, much to Oakeshott's chagrin. The kingdom struggled to rebuild its economy and institute the welfare state designed by the Labour Party under Clement Attlee. Enormous debt, a fuel shortage, and a financial crisis severely complicated the recovery effort. With the help of the Marshall Plan and specific economic controls, however, the British were able to end their dependence on the European recovery plan by 1950.[10]

Among the significant domestic reforms that occurred in the United Kingdom in the postwar era was the reorganization and expansion of education, mandated by law under the wartime coalition government and guided by reports from committees commissioned by Labour and Conservative governments in the late 1940s and early 1960s. The Butler Act of 1944 and the Barlow Committee Report of 1946 set forth plans for elementary and secondary schooling, and scientific and technological education in universities during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, respectively. In its principal thrust, the Butler Act called for the expansion of educational opportunity at the secondary-school level under the control of local educational authorities through three types of schools: grammar schools with a curriculum aimed at entry into higher education, technical schools providing vocational instruction, and secondary-modern schools. Indicative of the class-bias of British society, the reformers expected a division of 5:15:80 percent of the school-age population. What in fact occurred was a division of 25:5:70 percent as a result of parents pressuring officials to provide schooling that would prepare their children to enter a university. Working-class parents, for example, recognized that secondary-modern schools, aimed at

conditioning their children for working-class jobs, belied the government's claims of equal status among secondary schools. Thus with the support of the Labour government through the Department of Education and Science, led by Anthony Crosland, and continued under the conservative minister of education, Margaret Thatcher, the number of comprehensive schools grew to 2000 by 1974, serving 60 percent of the secondary-school pupils.[11]

Before, during, and after the war, political and intellectual leaders, including scientists, philosophers, and social scientists, as well as industrialists called for the institution of a technocratic society that involved planning and social engineering, which had considerable implications for education.[12] The first important response to the call for a scientifically planned society came in the Barlow Report of 1946. Herbert Morrison, lord president of the council and chief governmental official responsible for scientific research, had appointed a committee chaired by Sir Alan Barlow to deliberate on "...the use and development of our scientific manpower and resources during the next ten years." The Barlow Committee recommended doubling the production of graduates in science and technology from British universities during the succeeding decade. Generally well received, the Barlow Report, asserts Michael Shattock, "...cast a long shadow through the 1950s with the concern for a prolonged national investment in scientific and technological education at university level." Although the committee had called for the creation of a new university, however, most of the funds went to existing universities. At the same time, the effort to expand scientific and technological education became entangled in the debate over standards for admission and the status of colleges and universities amid the continuation of the class-oriented structure of British higher education dominated by Oxford and Cambridge.[13]

The proposal to expand scientific and technological education seemed reasonable to many at the time, particularly the emerging generation of intellectuals and leaders, in the face of the need to maintain and expand the economy following the war, the shift in international responsibilities of the emerging cold war, and the decline of the Empire. British corporations and industries needed a new generation of scientists and engineers for research on new products, machines, and other equipment to produce them. Scientists and engineers were also necessary if Britain were to remain a world power, albeit a second-rate power. The military occupation of part of West Germany and the cold war demanded that the armed forces not be reduced to the size of the prewar limited force, but be maintained at a level that would enable Britain to project its power as a partner in the Atlantic Alliance. This attitude was especially evident in the generation coming to power after the war that stubbornly refused to allow any hint of future appeasement as it became clear that the Soviet Union was a menacing totalitarian state that threatened world stability. In addition, the decision to pursue the development of nuclear power furthered the need for increases in the scientific and technological communities.[14]

The proposals for scientific planning to advance British society that were to be supported by reforms in education did not go unscathed, however. Opposition to these proposals came primarily from humanists, particularly in the religious community. Intellectuals such as C. S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and Sir Walter Moberly worried about the power over society that technocrats might acquire or the potential loss of a religious sense regarding society and its inhabitants as what one critic called "scientific humanism" came to dominate education. Eliot, in particular, doubted that scientific planning would advance society at all.[15]

Michael Oakeshott joined these critics but took a different tack on the issue of scientific and technological planning and its concomitant proposals for educational reform. He attacked the thinking behind the social and educational planning, which he saw as dominating postwar politics in Britain. Having previously defined the philosopher's role as one who endeavors to examine the assumptions of the modes of human experience, Oakeshott sought to explain what he believed to be the epistemological assumptions of the modern bureaucratic mind and to warn those who would pay attention about the dangers of such thinking. In an essay entitled "Rationalism in Politics," which appeared in *The Cambridge Review* in 1947, he railed against a form of modern thinking, which he called "Rationalism"--that is, independence of thought free from any authority, except the authority of reason. The "Rationalist," according to Oakeshott, opposes authority, prejudice, and the "...merely traditional, customary or habitual." He is a modern "philosophe" whose

> ...mental attitude is at once sceptical and optimistic: sceptical, because there is no opinion, no habit, no belief, nothing so firmly rooted or so widely held that he hesitates to question it and to judge it by what he calls his 'reason'; optimistic, because the Rationalist never doubts the power of his 'reason' (when properly applied) to determine the worth of a thing, the truth of an opinion or the propriety of an action.[16]

The confidence of the Rationalist, he continued, rests in the Enlightenment belief that reason is common to all humans, that it serves as the foundation of argument, and that an honest and clear thinker will think as he does.[17]

Oakeshott contended that there are two forms of knowledge in every form of human activity that requires skill: technical and practical. In art, science, and practical activity there is a technique for engaging in such activity that comes from technical knowledge formulated into rules that can be learned from a book or correspondence course; it can be memorized and mechanically applied in practice. Practical knowledge, on the other hand, can only be found in the practice of the activity; it cannot be formulated into rules and procedures, but can only be "...imparted and acquired. It exists only in practice, and the only way to acquire it is by apprenticeship to a master...."[18]

At the heart of Rationalism, asserted Oakeshott, is an epistemological fallacy. The Rationalist, believes only in technical knowledge. He denies the existence of practical knowledge or sees it as nonsense, accepts the doctrine that reason is supreme which makes technique supreme, and believes the illusion that technical knowledge begins in absolute ignorance and ends in certainty. What he fails to understand, he opined, is that the acquisition of any form of knowledge is the result of reconstructing that which is already in the mind. Thus the illusion that practical knowledge is complete ends in the illusion of certainty.[19]

To Oakeshott, the British welfare state was a clear manifestation of the mode of life in which the Rationalist has had the greatest apparent achievements: politics. Politics, he wrote, are amenable to the application of reason, which the Rationalist sees as "... an infallible guide in political activity." His technique is argument, and his goal is true opinion and the rationalization of institutions. "Consequently," he wrote, "much of his political activity consists in bringing the social, political, legal and institutional inheritance of his society before the tribunal of his intellect; and the rest is rational administration, 'reason' exercising an uncontrolled jurisdiction over the circumstances of the case."[20] Such affairs thus are reduced to the solving of problems by one whose intellect is not hindered by habit or fogged up by the mists of tradition. The Rationalist cannot conceive that politics are anything other than problem solving or that there are problems that do not have a rational solution.[21]

In his criticism of the Rationalist as "modern philosophe" and his location of the origins of modern rationalism in the early modern era, Oakeshott was an early postwar critic of the universalism that had dominated modern thought. He thus anticipated the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment project. He also sought to deflate the overweening optimism that the age of scientism had produced. Oakeshott's critique of rationalism and modern politics also formed the epistemological context of his early educational writings.

In 1949 Oakeshott strongly disapproved of the calls for the reform of higher education that began to appear as part of the effort at the scientific planning of British society. In a lengthy essay entitled "The Universities," he objected to Sir Walter Moberly's analysis of the domestic and international crises facing Britain in the late 1940s and his claim that given the chaos, the universities needed to be reformed to better meet the immediate needs of the nation, which Moberly had made in *The Crisis in the Universities*.[22] Oakeshott dismissed the alleged crisis as alarmist: "The tone of this book," he wrote, "is one of desperate urgency; it has the hysterical atmosphere of a revivalist meeting." It was not that he thought European society was stable and that its people faced no real threats. Rather, he saw a more insidious threat coming from attempts to control human minds, such as in the Communist takeover of Eastern Europe, not from the threat of nuclear annihilation as Moberly had suggested. Oakeshott thought "...a powerful mass of deluded human beings is far more destructive than any bomb." He also objected to Moberly's recommendation that the universities should reflect present circumstances and concentrate on dealing with immediate social problems. Such recommendations, he insisted, carried the rhetoric of "--bigger, faster, more democratic, international, a freer kind of freedom ...." Although he did not deny that a university cannot be protected from the vicissitudes of the world, Oakeshott left no doubt what he thought of these suggestions:

> The doctrine that the university should move step for step with the world, at the same speed and partaking in every eccentricity of the world's fashion, refusing nothing that is offered, responsive to every suggestion, is a piece of progressive superstition and not to be followed by any sane man.

In his view, the contemporary world offered little or nothing that the university should emulate and that conformity to the world would be indiscriminant.[23]

Oakeshott answered Moberly and those who wanted to plan the society and its educational system by first describing his perception of the traditional practices of British universities. Universities, he said, were not designed for a ruling or leisured class, but instead for

the type of student who could find something valuable in their offerings and by implication who was prepared to enter in a curriculum that offered a limited number of "recognized branches of learning" not intended to train students, but rather to initiate them into the traditions of knowledge. Alluding to what he would later argue was the aim of a liberal education, Oakeshott pointed out that these branches of learning were voices in a conversation, which the student came to know through listening and observing the scholars who practiced them. Universities in the United Kingdom also offered extracurricular activities representative of British life that were intended to appeal to the tastes and interests of undergraduates. They especially enabled students to enter what he called an "interval" in their lives, away from the immediate demands of living. Finally, universities also provided students an opportunity to suspend disbelief amid the inherited learning of the civilization combined with the study of a recognized discipline"...neither as a first step in education, for those wholly ignorant of how to behave or think, nor as a final education to fit a man for the day of judgment, but as a middle."[24]

Although there was an element of nostalgia in Oakeshott's characterization of a university, his practical experience as a Cambridge don and his reflection on the idea of a liberal education led him to argue against the grain of the technocratic trends in British society that he believed threatened to reduce higher education from an initiation in the tested traditions of the modes of human experience to the inculcation of technical knowledge. Oakeshott agreed with Moberly that the universities were being overloaded with specialties, which was causing the degeneration of the type of university education he envisioned. At the same time, he adumbrated what may have been his own class bias when he worried about the growing probability that the universities would be flooded with students who were unprepared for a university education.[25]

In practical terms, however, it was not until the dramatic reforms of the schools, beginning in the late 1940s and early 1950s and the universities in the 1960s, that British universities become open to youths from the working class to the upper class. Prior to that time, most of the undergraduates were from the upper and upper-middle class, of which Oakeshott was a member. The entire system of higher education, moreover, was hierarchical, with a few universities, led by Oxford and Cambridge, and numerous colleges, teacher-training colleges, technical colleges and other further-educational institutions.[26]

What kind of university was Oakeshott thinking about? To begin with, he asserted that a university ought to be very selective in deciding what specialties to offer and to resist the increasing pressure to provide professional–that is, technical–training. It ought to ensure that these branches of learning maintain high standards and demonstrate their connection to the whole of experience. The aim of such a curriculum, he argued, was in part to teach knowledge of some branch of learning. For Oakeshott it also was intended "... to enable a man to make his own thought clear and to attend to what passes before him. Such an achievement is not a set of abstract skills, but, he wrote, "...is indistinguishable from participating in and handling the civilized inheritance of our society." In the end a university ought to provide an education in a recognized branch of learning, a *techne*, and undertake the difficult task of demonstrating how it is related to the other specialties, but not as a new "*techne*" of integrated studies, which he thought would be a phony specialty. Oakeshott reasoned:

> Each "true" *techne* is, or involves, a particular manner of thinking, and the notion that you can think but without thinking in any particular manner, without reference to some definite universe of discourse, is a philosophical illusion. Every "true" *techne*, profoundly studied, knows something of its own limits, not because it possesses a comprehensive knowledge of its context and not because it knows everything or has some abstract scheme or key to everything (it cannot have these things while remaining a *techne*), but because it has some insight into its own presuppositions. And when to this is added, as it is added in a university, the presence of other special studies, unless somebody raises the dust, the invitation to conversation is compelling.[27]

A year after "The Universities" appeared in the *Cambridge Journal*, Oakeshott wrote a briefer version of the essay for *The Listener* entitled "The Idea of a University." In this article he reiterated his vision of a university and added some new thoughts on the idea of learning in such a setting. A university, he said, offers a "special manner of engaging in the pursuit of learning" that is fostered by "a corporate body of scholars, each devoted to a particular branch of learning as a cooperative enterprise." It also preserves and extends "a tradition of learning" by providing the means for that activity to occur. Then in a statement that pointed to what he later asserted was most important activity for the people of a civil association to participate in, he said,

> The pursuit of learning is not a race in which the

competitors jockey for the best place. It is not even an argument or a symposium; it is a conversation. And the peculiar virtue of a university (as a place of many studies) is to exhibit it in this character, each study appearing as a voice whose tone is neither tyrannous nor plangent, but humble and conversable. A conversation does not need a chairman, it has no predetermined course, we do not ask what it is "for," and we do not judge its excellence by its conclusion; it has no conclusion, but is always put by for another day. Its integration is not superimposed but springs from the quality of the voices which speak, and its value lies in the relics it leaves behind in the minds of those who participate.

Oakeshott went on to lament the movement of university offerings away from the arts and sciences, as well as the deterioration of scholarship into research, teaching into "mere instruction," and the growing desire among students, unprepared for the conversation intended to liberate their minds, for vocational qualifications.[28]

In 1950 Michael Oakeshott became professor of political science at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Already unpopular because of his unrelenting criticisms of British society and politics, his appointment to replace the venerated socialist Harold Laski disturbed many people on the Left. Yet the leftist scholar and longtime member of the School's faculty, Ralf Dahrendorf, in his history of LSE, suggested that the appointment was in keeping with common practice to balance the faculty with scholars whose perspectives differed. Dahrendorf said of the faculty at LSE in general, "Every creed was held and taught by someone." Nevertheless, Oakeshott apparently sent a shiver through the audience with the thrust of his inaugural lecture in March of 1951.[29]

The lecture, entitled "Political Education," enabled Michael Oakeshott to link politics and education with tradition and offered him another opportunity to continue his unrelenting attack on the modern mind, its rejection of tradition and the corruption of politics and political education that had resulted from it. He defined politics as "...an activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice have brought together." Although many social institutions have their "politics," he said, it was the communities with a long lineage and for which politics are the pre-eminent activity that attracted his interest. He explained that, "...as we have come to understand it, the activity [politics] is one in which every member of the group who is neither a child nor a lunatic has some part and some responsibility." These arrangements and how to take care of them, moreover, need to be learned.[30]

To set the stage for proposing his idea of political education, which paralleled his view of a liberal education, Oakeshott began by criticizing the common forms of politics of his day: the politics of empiricism and the politics of ideology. He criticized the former for reducing its concerns to immediate political circumstances. Regarding the politics of ideology, he objected to its foundational epistemology and the conservative and liberal politics derived from it. He remarked acerbically that this

> ... quasi-divine parent of political activity turns out to be its earthly stepchild. Instead of an independently premeditated scheme of ends to be pursued, it is a system of ideas abstracted from the manner in which people have been accustomed to go about the business of attending to the arrangements off their societies.

In other words, political activity actually precedes the formulation of a political ideology.[31]

Having demolished the politics of empiricism and ideology in the same way he had criticized Rationalism in politics, Oakeshott then expounded on the notion of the politics of tradition. He argued that in this form of politics, a group of people who attend to the arrangements of society and respect their common political practices form a community. Their political activities arise not from their passing desires or a set of abstract principles, but from "...the existing traditions of behaviour themselves..." that are amended through a sympathetic examination of the implications of those arrangements--that is, a conversation about political behavior.[32] To fend off criticism of promoting slavery to an unchanging tradition, Oakeshott carefully explained that "[a] tradition of behaviour is not a fixed and inflexible manner of doing things; it is a flow of sympathy. It may be temporarily disrupted by the incursion of a foreign influence, it may be diverted, restricted, arrested, or become dried-up, and it may reveal so deep-seated an incoherence that (even without foreign assistance) a crisis appears." In order to ameliorate the crisis, he continued, we cannot look for a fixed guide, but must draw on the fragments of our political experience.[33] He said,

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

order to make a friend of every hostile occasion.[34]

If politics ought to emerge from a tradition of experience, then according to Oakeshott, political education ought to come from "...knowledge, as profound as we can make it, or our tradition of political behaviour." He warned, however, that political tradition is "a tricky thing." It is not static; there is no overarching purpose to be pursued; there is no model or set of rules to guide our behavior. Nevertheless, a political tradition can be learned. Oakeshott suggested that like learning a language, political education begins in the cradle; we become immersed in it from our earliest years.[35] Although our political education should begin with immersion in the political tradition of our society, he continued, it must be deepened through academic study in three fields: the history of the society's political tradition, the political behavior of neighboring countries, and political philosophy. The first two parts of a political education have obvious implications for practice. In keeping with his claim that philosophy is not practical, he saw political philosophy as the "...range of reflection the object of which is to consider the place of political activity itself on the map of our total experience." Political philosophy would not tell us how to conduct the business of politics, but as a historical study, it would aid in our reflection on the thoughts and arguments conveyed in the conversation that would enable us to attend to the arrangements of our society.[36]

Oakeshott believed that the political education he proposed would enable citizens to guide the ship of society as it sailed the political seas. The deeper our understanding of our political tradition, the less likely we would be attracted to a false model of politics or mesmerized by the illusions to which the ignorant succumb: the illusion that we can function without a tradition of political behavior, the illusion that an ideology will seem sufficient to guide our political activity, and the illusion that there is a safe harbor into which we can sail or at least some destination we can reach.[37]

Throughout most of the decade of the 1950s, Oakeshott limited his scholarship to book reviews, likely due to the demands of administration and teaching. As a teacher, Oakeshott practiced the art of conversation, which he obviously thought was the method of an education that liberated the mind. He thoroughly enjoyed engaging in conversation with students. Tutorials with those who were particularly receptive to philosophy of history sometimes went beyond the scheduled hour to two or three hours.[38] By 1958, Oakeshott was again producing essays. In that year a piece on the practice history appeared in *Historical Studies*, and in 1959 he published his famous statement on aesthetics, *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*, in which he described poetry--that is, aesthetics--as a mode of human conduct like science, history, and practice. He also saw the "conversation of mankind" as a metaphor for civilized living toward which a liberal education ought to be aimed.[39]

Although his purpose in this essay was to explicate the place of poetry in the most human of activities, a conversation, it was that enterprise in general to which Oakeshott continually returned in his effort in his writings to resist the tide of Rationalism and technocracy through his writings. His later essays on education, moreover, make it clear that he saw participation in the human conversation as the ultimate goal of a liberal education. In other words, a liberal education initiated the citizen in the inherited traditions of the civilization and taught her how to find her own voice through an understanding of the voices of the modes of human experience. Before we explore his thoughts on education amid the reform of higher education in Britain, we ought to examine what Oakeshott meant by a conversation?

Going against the grain of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy in the late 1950s with its emphasis on logic and the clarification of ordinary language and, at the same time, anticipating the postmodern concern with discourse, Oakeshott proffered the idea of an activity in which participants exchange thoughts in a friendly atmosphere characterized by mutual respect. For him a conversation is not a debate; there was no search for truth, attempt to prove a proposition, or effort to draw a conclusion. Participants do not seek to persuade or refute each other, and thus are able to speak in different idioms. There may be differences, but not disagreement. Although on occasion one may argue a point, reasoning in the sense of logical argumentation is not the dominant mode of discourse, or of the conversation itself. Furthermore, there are no qualifications for entering the conversation; anyone may participate in it. No one serves as an adjudicator, and there is no hierarchy of voices. "Conversation," wrote Oakeshott, "is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis; it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure." Alluding to one of his favorite pastimes, he explained that, "It is with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering." According to Oakeshott conversations cannot take place without a diversity of

voices in which "... different universes of discourse meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to one another." There are an unlimited number of voices that may participate in the conversation, he continued, but the most common voices heard in the conversation are those of the principal modes of human activity: practical activity, science, and poetry. Each mode has its own discourse, and as it becomes part of the conversation, the voice develops its own temper and form of expression. Ironically, philosophy is not a participant in the conversation. Instead, he argued that philosophy "... must be counted a parasitic activity. It springs from the conversation because this is what the philosopher reflects upon, but it makes no specific contribution to it."[40]

Oakeshott held that a conversation was "the appropriate image of human intercourse," and the conversation of mankind, which began in the mists of the past, is the inheritance of civilization. It occurs both in public and within ourselves. Again in contrast to the conventional wisdom, he claimed that civilized humans are distinguished from animals and barbarians by their ability to engage in this intercourse of voices, not by their capacity "... to reason cogently, to make discoveries about the world, or to contrive a better world ...." The real world of human experience, he continued, is a world of self and not-self, of modes of activity that involve "'imagining': the self making and recognizing images, and moving about among them in manners appropriate to their characters and with various degrees of aptitude." Practical activity is the mode in which we construct and reconstruct our world aimed at giving us pleasure. The world we construct is one of "desire and aversion" and "approval and disapproval," a world of pragmatic activity and moral judgment. Science, he explained, involves rational understanding of the natural world. In it we imagine rationally constructed, universally accepted images of the world in which we live. Poetry, on the other hand, is a mode of human activity different from practice and science. It is the contemplation of images that do not fall into the categories of fact or not-fact. It is the "making and entertaining" of mere images, or as Oakeshott remarked, it is delighting in mere images. For him, delight was simply another word for contemplation, and contemplative imagining was the voice of poetry. In a description that foreshadowed the work of Richard Rorty, he said poetry is a mode that "... begins and ends in language."[41]

In poetry words are themselves images and not signs for other images; imagining is itself utterance, and without utterance there is no image. It is a language without a vocabulary, and consequently one that cannot be learned by imitation. But if we were to call it (as I think it might properly be called) a metaphorical language we should at once go on to recognize the difference between metaphor in poetry and metaphor in symbolic language. In a symbolic language metaphor is and remains a symbol.... In the language of poetry, on the other hand, metaphors are themselves poetic images, and consequently they are fictions.[42]

Oakeshott believed that the proper context for considering the utterances of the voices of practice, science, and poetry, as well as all other the modes of human activity heard in the conversation was not a society of practical or scientific activity, but a society of conversationalists.[43] Thus, a proper education for such a society, he said, aimed at enabling one to participate in this conversation:

> Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation.[44]

The metaphor of a conversation, however, was not what the British government and educational reformers had in mind in the 1960s. From the time of the Barlow Committee and Butler Reports near the end of the Second World War, the issue of higher education in the United Kingdom had been a topic of considerable discussion. By the 1960s, the Macmillan government saw the need to examine the whole of post-secondary education as a basis for potential reform "...in light of national needs and resources." Consequently, early in 1961, the prime minister announced the appointment of a committee chaired by Lord Lionel Robbins, professor of economics at the London School of Economics, to advise the queen's government about the long-term development of higher education. The Robbins Report, as it was called, appeared in 1963 and set in motion a significant alteration of British higher education that included, among other things, elevating regional colleges and "Colleges of Technology" to university status and the establishment of "Special Institutions for Scientific and Technological Education and Research."[45] Such recommendations were consistent with the more than thirty-year discussion of the scientific and technological needs of the country paralleling those occurring in the United States. For Michael Oakeshott, however, these developments, especially the Robbins Report and its ramifications, were further manifestations

to different modes of thought.

By suggesting that the pupil must learn to appreciate the "modes of thought," furthermore, Oakeshott was alluding to learning to hear the voices in the conversation of humankind. The pupil must not only learn to acquire information and exercise judgment, she must also learn to distinguish among the voices of the modes of thought by listening to the idioms in which they speak. Although these voices are never explicitly learned except in practice, they "...may be learned in everything that is learned, in the carpentry shop as well as in the Latin and chemistry lesson." Then echoing Michael Polyani's concept of "tacit knowledge," Oakeshott said the voices that are learned by listening to the utterances and observing the conduct of representatives of each mode cannot be forgotten; often they are what remain when all other knowledge is forgotten as "the shadow of lost knowledge."[50]

In 1972, R. F. Dearden, Paul Hirst, and R. S. Peters edited a book of essays offering readers several perspectives on the relationship between education and reason. Among the essays was one by Oakeshott entitled "Education: the Engagement and Its Frustration." Apparently, analytic philosophers, who at the time were broadening the scope of their philosophical examinations of the language of education, had concluded that Oakeshott, who had never participated in the work of ordinary language philosophy, nevertheless had some ideas about education worth considering. This act of recognition by the leading British philosophers of education likely was a direct result of R. S. Peters' complimentary treatment of his educational thought nearly a decade earlier.

Oakeshott began this essay by describing the human condition and why we have to be educated to become fully human. Reiterating what he had said in 1967 about humans living in a world of ideas not objects, he reminded his readers that human life is composed of acts that reflect our convictions about ourselves and the world. Like the existentialists, he believed that there was not an essential human nature toward which we strive. Instead we have a history that "...is not an evolutionary process of a teleological engagement; there is not 'ultimate man' hidden in the womb of time or prefigured in the characters who now walk the world." We pursue our desires, and what satisfy those desires are the relationships we have with other human beings through meaningful linguistic interactions. We are not fully human at birth; we do not have a germ of humanness within us that emerges through a process of growth; and we are not an organism seeking conditions favorable to our continued existence. Instead we are "... a creature capable of learning to think, to understand and to enact himself in a world of human enactments and thus to acquire a human character. In other words, Oakeshott argued that in order to become fully human, we had to be educated—that is, the young person has to learn "... to look, to listen, to think, to feel, to imagine, to believe, to understand, to choose and to wish... [as well as to see] himself in the mirror of an inheritance of human understandings and activities ...."[51]

The process of becoming human, according to Oakeshott, begins when the conditions of schooling are met. Young children learn to satisfy their immediate wants and ephemeral interests as an outgrowth of play. Education, on the other hand, occurs when a teacher deliberately begins the initiation of the child into the human heritage, which is to say when schooling occurs. The teacher schools the newcomer in that which is not immediately connected to his desires and interests. This distinction between learning, in general, and education, in particular, reveals Oakeskott's idea of school, which he said is first "... a serious and orderly initiation into an intellectual, imaginative, moral and emotional inheritance; an initiation designed for children who are ready to embark upon it." The second characteristic of the idea of school is that it requires study, which entails "perseverance" to develop the "...habits of attention, concentration, patience, exactness, courage and intellectual honesty ...." to ensure that what is learned is "understood and remembered by the learner." The third quality of the idea of school is its detachment from the immediate world of the pupil and its constant demands for attention. School is, fourth, a personal transaction between a teacher and a learner. Finally, it is a community of teachers and learners that is primarily concerned with initiating each successive generation into the human heritage. For the teacher, the initiation is part of her commitment to "being human," and for the pupil, it is the act of "becoming human."[52]

Unfortunately, thought Oakeshott, this effort at an education in what could be called *paideia* in the United Kingdom was being frustrated by attempts, first, to corrupt the idea of school and, second, to abolish it altogether. These frustrations for him were another manifestation of modern Rationalism. American educators at the time, however, would have recognized these efforts at reform of British schooling as "progressive education." Oakeshott complained about plans to indulge the whims of children, to put them on to individual projects of "discovery," to use the "discoveries" as the subject of "free" discussions or "creative" writings. He explained his objections by pointing out what he thought would be lost if a pupil

of the influence of half-witted, rationalistic thinking and the concomitant growth of a planned technocratic society in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the objections to the undermining of a liberal education he voiced were evidence that a philosopher who saw himself, and was widely recognized at the time, as a conservative thinker could not brook rationalistic thinking whether it came from Labour or Tory politicians, especially if such reasoning threatened the human condition.

In the decade and a half that followed the publication of *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*, Oakeshott wrote three essays in which he eloquently explained his views on the issues of teaching, learning, schooling, and the idea of a liberal education. As one might expect, he included in his analyses criticisms of the British system of education, which he still thought was a victim of rationalism. Instead of limiting his critique to the technocratic society and its effects on higher education, however, he took on both the reforms in primary and secondary education that had begun in the late 1940s and the significant restructuring of higher education that had grown out of the Robbins Report of 1963.

The first essay, entitled "Learning and Teaching," appeared in 1967 in an anthology edited by R. S. Peters. Oakeshott began by defining learning as "... a comprehensive engagement in which we come to know ourselves and the world around us." It is an activity of an intelligent person who is capable of making choices and directing his own desires in the world about him. A learner is not a mere recipient of information, one who reacts to circumstances, or a person who tries to do something he does not know how to do. Critical of both progressivism and behaviorism in education, he remarked that the "... analogies of clay and wax, of receptacles to be filled and empty rooms to be furnished, have nothing to do with learning and learners."[46]

What then is a teacher? A teacher, according to Oakeshott, is a learned person who communicates what is appropriate to his partner, his pupil. What is communicated, moreover, is that which the pupil may only receive by learning. Here he repeated a common theme of his ideas on a liberal education: That which is to be received is the inheritance into which the learner is born. As he put it,

> What every man is born to is an inheritance of human achievements; and inheritance of feelings, emotions, images, visions, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, understandings, intellectual and practical enterprises, languages, relationships, organizations, canons and maxims of conduct, procedures, rituals, skills, works of art, books, musical compositions, tools, artifacts, and utensils—in short what Dithey called *a geistige Welt*.[47]

Reflecting the hermeneutic nature of his philosophy and its roots in Hegelianism and British idealism, Oakeshott explained that one inherits a world of facts not objects, of human expressions that have meaning and must be understood because they are the achievements of human minds. The world itself has no meaning; rather it is the intertwined ideas of the *geistige Welt* that have meaning, and in order to become a human being, he opined, a child must be initiated into this web of meanings. Although the child begins at birth to initiate itself into the world of meanings, a teacher is responsible for "... deliberate and intentional initiation of a pupil into the world of human achievement, or into some part of it." Learning, however, does not cease with the initiation. Oakeshott saw it as more than the acquisition of the inheritance of human achievement; it involves expansion of the capacity to learn. Thus he described the task of a teacher as instructing a pupil "... to recognize himself in the mirror of this inheritance."[48]

Oakeshott's desire to see that the best of human achievement preserved and transmitted across the generations was not a reactionary call for a return to tradition. He denied the existence of a permanent foundation of knowledge upon which civilization had been built and that could merely be transmitted to the young. Rather, he saw the world of human achievements as historically contingent. It was the result of human effort to take advantage of the opportunities fortune had presented to them, and it was constituted of tested standards of conduct, intellectual enterprises undertaken, "duties [humans] have imposed upon themselves, the activities they have delighted in, the hopes they have entertained and the disappointments they have suffered." This condition makes the task of initiation difficult, for inherited experience is a complicated web of meanings created by humans "who knew only dimly what they did" and that we see only through a glass darkly, as it were.[49]

Teaching then becomes more than passing on information to pupils and developing their skills. Like John Dewey, Oakeshott thought that "knowing *that*" and "knowing *how*" too easily could be separated. The teacher, therefore, must intertwine "knowing *that*" with "knowing *how*" into what he called "judgment": "Judgment," then, is that which, when united with information, generates knowledge or "ability" to do, to make or to understand and explain. It is being able to think—not to think in no manner in particular, to think with an appreciation of the considerations which belong

were "progressively educated."

Fancy will have no encouragement to flower into imagination, or impulsive expression to acquire the intellectual virtue of grace, let alone exactness. Seeing and doing are preferred to speech and writing. Remembering, the nursing mother of learning, is despised as a relic of servility. Standards of understanding and conduct are not merely ignored; they are taboo. The so-called inner discipline of impulse, coupled with persuasion and physical intervention, takes the place of rules of conduct.

The second source of frustration of an Oakeshottian paideia was the numerous calls for the abolition of school: Some saw initiation into the human heritage as condemning them to the drudgery of learning things remote from their interests; others, ironically, viewed paideia as a rejection of "'life'": still others saw schooling as an invasion of childhood innocence. What particularly rankled Oakeshott were proposals for experiments in learning or creative experimentation to solve technological problems.[53]

Like its ideological companion, the corruption of schooling, the attempt to eliminate schools, according to Oakeshott, was rooted in the educational theories of Francis Bacon, John Milton, and Jan Amos Comenius who thought learning ought to be about the world of things not words and about the self as a constituent part of that world. These thoughts, he continued, eventually became the foundation of the contemporary "progressive" attempt to abolish school by conflating it and the outside world into a "'community center'" where children and adults would go when the spirit moved them, as it were, to indulge in mutual learning about the adult world. Worse yet, some reformers wanted to create a home-based amusement arcade of electronic devices through which "education" would be transmitted from a central computer. Oakeshott's withering critique of contemporary educational thought reached a climax when he echoed C. S. Lewis by saying, "They [the reformers] design not merely the abolition of the child but the abolition of man."[54]

Despite critics' claims that Michael Oakeshott's educational ideas were elitist, he did not avoid adumbrating the need for social justice in education for the working class. Apparently, he had changed his attitude about the students from the lower class then attending British universities in increasing numbers whom he had previously thought would have been unprepared for higher education. Oakeshott saw the irony that in the eighteenth century, an age of "enlightenment," western European nations had created a class-biased educational system. The German states, France, and the British Empire had devised apprenticeships in adulthood for the poor masses that substituted social needs for educational needs. This "socialization" was not to be confused with an education to acquire a human character, the qualities of which often proved valuable in the performance of tasks for a society. More recently, European nations had made education an "... apprenticeship to domestic, industrial and commercial life in a 'modern' State." To make matters worse, at the behest of the government, British colleges and universities were attempting to further this apprenticeship in the mistaken belief that it was in the best interest of the nation. Oakeshott excoriated them for being mesmerized by the sirens of national self-interest into transforming their institutions "... into instruments of 'socialization,' hardly needing to be bribed to undertake this destruction of themselves." He also recognized that the universities had received considerable encouragement from the Robbins Committee, which had recommended the formation of a system of higher education to prepare learners with the complex skills increasingly needed for national economic growth and competition with other developed countries in a time of rapid technological and social development. Finally, Oakeshott reminded his readers of the meaning of the idea of education as an initiation into the human heritage and warned them against confusing education with "...that accommodation to circumstances in which a newcomer learns the latest steps in the *danse macabre* of wants and satisfactions and thus acquires a 'current' value in the world."[55]

The final essay Oakeshott wrote that was expressly concerned with education was entitled "A Place of Learning." It was the one piece in which he explicitly discussed the idea of a liberal education. In September 1974, he presented his thoughts on the subject in the Abbot Memorial Lecture in the Social Sciences at Colorado College, a small liberal arts college in Colorado Springs, in conjunction with the its Centennial.[56] He devoted the first part of the lecture to an explanation of the human condition. Reflecting his debt to Hegel and the hermeneutic idea that human life is a historically contingent search for meaning, Oakeshott said, the human mind is the seat of "intelligent activity." It is composed of " ... perceptions, recognitions, thoughts of all kinds, of emotions, sentiments, affections, deliberations and purposes, and of actions which are responses to what is understood to be going on." Because we are self-conscious, we are inherently free. This freedom is not free will, but the capacity to communicate what we understand about ourselves and the world, and in our understanding of

who we are as human beings. We are distinguished by both these characteristics and the necessity of having to learn them. "The price of intelligent activity which constitutes being human is learning," he asserted. That learning is not acquisition of habits or tricks, but the acquisition of something useful because you understand it. Unlike Sartre, who thought we are condemned to choose in order to make a life, Oakeshott believed we are condemned to learn meanings. Through learning human beings produce their "'history'" as they respond to other humans and the mutable conditions of the world. Such learning occurs throughout life in the world in the family, school, and university, and it involves "... adventures in human self-understanding." In other words, the deliberate learning of meanings is what we traditionally refer to as a liberal education–"liberal," he opined, "because it is liberated from the distracting business of satisfying contingent wants."[57]

Oakeshott thought liberal learning meant fulfilling the ancient maxim Know Thyself: *learning* to know oneself through an understanding of what humans have thought over time about the commitment of learning to be a human. Learning to know oneself also meant coming to understand and to participate in a culture. He was careful to distinguish culture from a set of doctrines or a finished body of knowledge to be learned as a subject of study. Rather, it is made up of competing "... feelings, perceptions, ideas, engagements, attitudes and so forth ... [in] "a conversational encounter." More specifically, he said,

> A culture comprises unfinished intellectual and emotional jouneyings, expeditions now abandoned but known to us in the tattered maps left behind by the explorers; it is composed of lighthearted adventures, of relationships invented and explored in fragments of human self-understanding, of gods worshipped, of responses to the mutability of the world and of encounters with death. In the end a human learns to become her culture.[58]

After locating the origin of liberal learning in the recovery of ancient Greek and Latin culture in the Renaissances of the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, he briefly mentioned that some elements of liberal learning had been lost in the intervening centuries but that it had also been expanded by the addition of vernacular languages and literatures, as well as the natural sciences. This tradition survived into the twentieth century, but according to Oakeshott, had become corrupted. Educators had been bewitched by the sirens of "relevancy" and thus clogged the curriculum with ephemera peripheral to the human tradition, such as languages, literature, and history aimed at contemporary culture. He also objected to the growing vocational emphasis in the university aimed at national economic development, what he had previously called "socialization." The most insidious form of corruption in higher education was that liberal education had come to be seen as "'general education,'" which Oakeshott dismissed "...as learning not only liberated from the here and now of current engagements but liberated also from an immediate concern with anything specific to be learned." General education also had come in the form of a study of culture, which was so broad as to give only fleeting attention to any issue.[59]

Another development affecting liberal education was the corruption of the place of the natural sciences in the curriculum. Oakeshott was ambivalent about the sciences. On the one hand, he characterized the world as a place of ideas not objects. On the other, he was willing to give an important place to the natural sciences in a liberal education. The natural sciences, he explained, like any voice of human endeavor had to prove themselves to be accepted as part of a liberal education. They became incorporated into liberal learning by presenting themselves as modes of inquiry that promoted understanding of the natural environment. Unfortunately, said Oakeshott, their place in liberal learning had been undermined by attempts to emphasize the use of the sciences--namely, applied science. A more serious impediment was the ridiculous claims others had made about the sciences. C. P. Snow had propounded the idea of two cultures, which Oakeshott called "'silly,'" but did not mention Snow by name. Others had claimed that science represented "The Truth" about the world or that it "...constitute[d] the model of all valid human understanding." These hindrances notwithstanding, he said the natural sciences held an honorable place in liberal education.[60]

Oakeshott clearly thought the humanities had a secure and central place in liberal learning, since "[t]hey are directly concerned with expressions of human self-understanding ...." Languages, literature, and history uncorrupted by attempts at being relevant or directed at socialization constituted the heart of the humanities. Philosophy had a special role to play as the discipline that reflected on the assumptions of all fields of human understanding.[61]

Having given the natural sciences and the humanities honorable places in a liberal education, what did he think of the social sciences? Oakeshott reluctantly accepted the incorporation of sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, " ... perhaps jurisprudence and something called 'politics'" into the liberal education curriculum. He thought, however, that

if they were truly concerned with "...human beings as self-conscious, intelligent persons who are what they understand themselves to be ..., they belonged more properly among the humanities." Furthermore, the project of separating these disciplines from the humanities was a mistake, but the language used to identify them was " ... nothing less than a disaster." In the first place, the word social was jargon. As its practitioners of these alleged "sciences" used it, social meant an investigation into the "relationships," "associations," and "practices" of human conduct, rather than an inquiry into "substantive [human] actions and utterances." Instead of being concerned with intelligent human expressions and proceedings, they attempted to discern the regularities of human conduct and to separate human actions from that which must be learned in order to be practiced and thus see them as mere "'processes.'" Oakeshott left no doubt where he stood regarding the place of the social sciences in liberal learning:

This project of collecting together a number of respectable inquires under the head of "the social sciences" and the attempt to impose this equivocal character upon them has not met with universal acceptance but it has gone far enough to have deeply damaged liberal learning; no other failure of self-understanding in the humanities has generated such confusion. It is all the more damaging because, in putting on the mask of "science," some of these departments of learning have succumbed to the temptation to understand and to value themselves in terms of the use that may be made of the conclusions of their inquires. In the end he accepted the individual disciplines called "social sciences" as part of a liberal education so long as they were acknowledged as *Geisteswissenschaften*.[62]

Oakeshott's final statement on the idea of a liberal education brought him back to the conversation of humankind. He insisted that each of the recognized fields of liberal learning constituted a language of understanding--that is, each one was composed not just of its linguistic idioms but also of "particular conditional modes of understanding." Coming to know the language of the natural sciences, history or philosophy meant one became familiar with the "conditions each imposes upon utterance" and thereby became able to communicate comprehension of the language uttered. By absorbing one of these languages, the learner does not become a scientist, historian, or philosopher; instead he is recognized as one who understands a language.

The languages of liberal learning, or languages of human achievement, furthermore, are the constituent parts of a culture, said Oakeshott. A liberal education is an invitation to initiation into the culture by coming to know and be able to distinguish among the languages as both "modes of understanding the world" and "as the most substantial expressions we have of human self-understanding." Yet we must understand that each of the languages is distinct from all of the others and is not commensurable with any other language; each constitutes a voice of human understanding. Each voice, moreover, is heard in the culture, not in a debate since they cannot refute one another, but as a conversation. As he put it,

> Perhaps we may think of these components of a culture as voices, each the expression of a distinct and conditional understanding of the world and a distinct idiom of human self-understanding, and of the culture itself as these voices joined, as such voices could be joined, in a conversation--an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure in which, in imagination, we enter into a variety of modes of understanding the world and ourselves and are not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inclusiveness of it all. And perhaps we may recognize liberal learning as, above all else, an education in imagination, an invitation into the art of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices; to distinguish their different modes of utterance, to acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to this conversational relationship and thus make our *début dans la vie humaine*.[63]

Thus, for Michael Oakeshott, a liberal education is learning to understand the voices of human experience and becoming a participant in the conversation of humankind.

In 1989, the year before Michael Oakeshott died, political scientist Timothy Fuller edited a volume of his writings on education entitled *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. The timing of this publication was fortuitous since universities across the United States were engaged in a debate about the idea of a liberal education. The most famous of these debates occurred at Stanford University, where the faculty engaged in a pitched battle over the required course on Western Civilization, and throughout academe over *The Closing of the American Mind* by University of Chicago philosopher Allen Bloom. Amid this furor, scholars wrote generally favorable reviews of the book. Yale literature professor David Bromwich, for example, saw Oakeshott as a teacher of the limits of politics and on education as "a strong antidote to the pronouncements of William Bennett and Allen Bloom and to all of the replies to Bennett and Bloom from the academic left...not

because Oakeshott's essays offer a *via media*...but rather because they recall the forgotten logic of liberal education itself." In contrast, Bruce Kimball, author of *Orators & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, thought Oakeshott was merely an old man at the end of his career who was ranting about modern education. On a historical note, Kimball criticized him for expressing thoughts about experience that paralleled those of John Dewey, but then objecting to pragmatism, utility, curricular relevance, and the doctrine of "'childish self-indulgence.'" Unfortunately, Kimball failed to remember that Dewey had criticized progressive educators for failing to understand the meaning of experience in there interpretations of such ideas, which led them to indulge children. One of the most important commentaries on *The Voice of Liberal Learning* came from philosopher John Searle in an extended review of *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Higher Education* by Roger Kimball, *The Politics of Liberal Education* edited by Darryl L. Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, and Oakeshott's book under the title "The Storm Over the University." The tone of his review is reminiscent of Oakeshott's discussion of Sir Walter Moberly's *The Crisis in the University*. Searle thought the debate over the curriculum in American higher education has yet to produce "a coherent theory of undergraduate education." Hoping to find such a theory he compared the essays in the Gless and Smith volume with Kimball's book. What he found in the former was a series of hysterical leftist critiques of Allen Bloom and E. D. Hirsch and in the latter an attack on the cultural left and Kimball's defense of what Searle assumed was a single tradition that all must learn. Still looking for a coherent theory of undergraduate education, he turned to Oakeshott's essays. There he found elegant prose that tended to obscure a clear philosophical statement about a liberal education. Nevertheless, Searle recognized that Oakeshott was not attempting to prescribe a body of knowledge to be learned, but sought to present a "...conception of the relationships between human beings and culture, and the consequences these have for what he [Oakeshott] likes to call 'learning.'" Despite the criticisms about the vagueness of Oakeshott's ideas, Searle noted that the strength of the essays in *The Voice of Liberal Learning* is his understanding that the most significant contribution of education is not the words imparted but the sensibility conveyed.[64]

The comments of Bromwich and Searle, clearly indicate that they thought Michael Oakeshott's idea of a liberal education had considerable merit. Recently, philosopher, Anthony O'Hear went even further in saying that his thoughts "...represent the twentieth century's most sophisticated articulation of the traditional conception of liberal learning."[65] These commentaries on Oakeshott's educational thought indicate that he had escaped the quagmire of arguments over the "canon" and the disciplinary rigidity of an essentialist curriculum. More importantly, they confirm that he acted as the philosopher whose task it is to stand apart from the modes of human experience, listen to their voices, and examine their assumptions. In the case of his thoughts on politics and education during the three decades following the Second World War, Oakeshott the philosopher considered these forms of the mode of practical activity in the United Kingdom and found them wanting. The voices of the modern mind uttered ideas born of limited thinking that ignored the heritage of human achievement. As Noel Annan noted, Oakeshott had gone against the grain of his own generation and had railed about "the lamentable spectacle of 'a set of sanctimonious, rationalist politicians'" in post-war England promoting a welfare state that had undermined the roots of moral behavior and other politicians offering an equally detestable rationalist ideology to an unsuspecting public.[66] From this investigation of Oakeshott's idea of a liberal education, it is clear that he could also have been talking about the effects of rationalism on education.

The thoughts of Michael Oakeshott on liberal learning began as a critique of the modern bureaucratic and technocratic mind, especially in politics and higher education. In his inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics, moreover, he worried about the effects of rationalism on an education for engaging in the political dimension of the mode of practical experience. In the essays on education he wrote during the decade and a half that followed this lecture, he offered British society and the world his notion that a liberal education is an initiation in the languages of the heritage of human achievement and a preparation for participation in the conversation of humankind. Noel Annan thought his ideas were romantic and failed to account for the enormous social changes that had occurred in post-war Britain.[67] Yet his romanticism must be seen, not as a flight of fancy, but a romantic view in the historical sense of critically looking to tradition as a source of understanding the whole of human experience and as the intellectual resources needed to engage in the human conversation about the modes of experience. Furthermore, there is sufficient evidence of forms of rationalistic thinking in modern society that perhaps we should worry as did Christopher Lasch when he called for a new notion of progress grounded in an

understanding of the competing interpretations of how a society can best deal with the vicissitudes of existence.[68] Finally, as one reads the elegant prose of Michael Oakeshott in all of his writings, notwithstanding the vagueness of his ideas, one is struck by his insight into the human condition and the risks to it from modern technocratic thinking. One is forced thereby to reconsider the meaning of a liberal education, to see it as an initiation into the whole of human experience, not by reifying one of the modes of experience but by enabling one to hear the voices, understand their meaning, and offer another voice in the on-going conversation of humanity.

ENDNOTES

1. Noel Annan, *Our Age: English Intellectuals Between the World Wars, A Group Portrait* (New York: Random House, 1990), 387. The other two "deviants" of the generation identified by Annan were the novelist Evelyn Waugh and the literary critic F. R. Leavis. See chapters 11, 20, and 24.

2. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, with forward by Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991 [London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1962]), 5-6. This edition of *Rationalism in Politics* includes several additional essays by Oakeshott.

3. Timothy Fuller, "Forward," in ibid., xiv-xv.

4. Harwell Wells, "The Philosophical Michael Oakeshott," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55 (January 1994): 129.

5. Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1962), 168-96. The remaining citations from *Rationalism in Politics* are from the 1962 edition.

6. Wells, "The Philosophical Michael Oakeshott," 129-45; See also David Walsh, *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997) and Michael H. Lessnoff *Political Philosophers in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1999).

7. Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 9-11; Terry Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 4-5, 107-08; John Gray, "Oakeshott as a Liberal," in *Post Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1993)40-46. See also John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (New York: New Press, 2000).

8. R. S. Peters, "Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy of Education," in *Politics and Experience: Essays Presented to Professor Michael Oakeshott on the Occasion of His Retirement*, ed. by Preston King and B. C. Parekh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 43-63.

9. Annan, *Our Age*, 387-401; Robert Grant, *Oakeshott (Thinkers of Our Time)* (London: The Claridge Press, 1990); David Boucher, "The Creation of the Past: British Idealism and Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy of History," *History and Theory* 23 (1984): 193-214 and "Human Conduct, History, and Social Science in the Works of R. G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott," *New Literary History* 24 (1993): 697-717; Gertrude Himmelfarb, "The Conservative Imagination: Michael Oakeshott," *American Scholar* 44 (Summer 1975): 405-20 and "'Supposing History Is a Woman--What Then?'" *American Scholar* 53 (Autumn 1984): 494-505. Forty years ago, intellectual historians faced withering critiques from social historians about their tendency to remain in the rarified atmosphere of ideas expressed by intellectuals without ever asking the question, What happens to ideas as they penetrate minds in the society below the level of the elites? Many contemporary intellectual historians and some philosophers have argued that to understand the meaning of ideas, one must explore the intellectual and social context in which they were developed. One historian, William Bouwsma, for instance, recently wrestled with this issue and suggested that to call the study of ideas in the past intellectual history is to suggest that humans have a special faculty associated with the brain and located in a high place that enables them to deal with "'higher things.'" This abstraction, inherited from the Greeks, however, is too limited. We need a different notion of "intellectual" history. Bouwsma prefers to call it "cultural" history, because "...we need now to recognize that 'thought' takes a multitude of forms, that it operates at various social levels, and that it generally expresses complex impulses emerging out of holistic and infinitely complex selves, unconscious as well as conscious." William Bouswma, *The Waning of the Renaissance, 1550-1640* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), ix.

10. Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1996), 224-31

11. Ibid., 283-87.

12. W. H. G. Armytage, *Four Hundred Years of English Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 237-38. Nobel Prize winner Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins and industrialist Sir Josiah Stamp, respectively in 1933 and 1936, told the British Association for the Advancement of Science that government should use planning techniques. Philosopher Karl Popper argued for a scientifically driven society in which humans could gain increasing control over the social environment in the same way natural scientists were gaining control over the physical world. These demands for a scientific society gained the support of such notables from the natural and social scientific communities as Sir Richard Gregory of *Nature*, Sir Henry Tizard, F. A. Lindemann, Harold Laski, Julian Huxley, and Karl Mannheim. One of the most important effects of these clarion calls for a scientifically planned society was the adoption of operational research tools by the Ministry of Education, established under the Educational Reform Act of 1944, commonly known as the Butler Act.

13. Ernest Simon, "The Universities and the Government," *Universities Quarterly* 1(1946-47): 79-95, in *The Creation of the University System*, ed. by Michael Shattock (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1996), 35; Michael Shattock, "The Creation of the British University System," in ibid., 4-5. See also A. H. Halsey, "British Universities and Intellectual Life," in ibid., 61-71.

14. See Clarke, *Hope and Glory*, chap.7 and Annan, *Our Age*.

15. Armytage, *Four Hundred Years of English Education*, 237-38. C. S. Lewis, warned in *The Abolition of Man* (1946) that a society dominated by technique would result in the creation of "men without chests." He also worried about the power of those who assumed the role of technocratic planners and thus asked, "Who would control the controllers?" Lewis had recently come to public prominence through his widely-read *Screwtape Letters* (1942). Further criticism came from T. S. Eliot in *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (1948). He warned that the proposals for reforming the society may not produce desirable results. Eliot thought that a scientifically planned society would limit education. Happy with the class-oriented traditional educational system of Britain, he did not believe that education would enable the society to achieve the goals of the planners, nor would more education necessarily make people happier. He also questioned the goal of expanding equality of opportunity through education, suggesting it would limit education to that which would bring success, and that only those who learned to play the "game," as it were, would become successful. A third critic of technocratic planning was the former chairman of the University Grants Committee, Sir Walter Moberly, who thought the planners had created a religion, which he called "scientific humanism." According to Moberly, this new religion was a blend of the ideas of "Francis Bacon and Karl Marx."

16. Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," in *Rationalism in Politics*, 1-2. The characterization of the Rationalist as a philosophe comes from Wells, "The Philosophical Michael Oakeshott," 135.

17. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 2.

18. Ibid., 8-11.

19. Ibid., 11-13.

20. Ibid., 3-4.

21. Ibid., 5-6.

22. Sir Walter Moberly, *The Crisis in the University* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1949): 7-11.

23. Oakeshott, "The Universities," 122-30.

24. Ibid., 144-150.

25. Ibid., 150-54.

26. Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990*, 288. See also A. H. Halsey, "Higher Education," in *British Social Trends Since 1900*, ed. by A. H. Halsey (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1988), 268-96 and "Further and Higher Education" in *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends*, ed, by A. H. Halsey and Josephine Webb (London: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 2000), 221-53.

27. Oakeshott, "The Universities," 155-57.

28. Michael Oakeshott, "The Idea of a University," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning* with forward and introduction by Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001), 105-10, 108, 110-13, 116-17.

29. Ralf Dahrendorf, *LSE: A History of the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1895-1995* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 47, 368-69. In addition to leftist scholars such as Dahrendorf and Harold Laski, the conservative economists F. A. Hayek and Lord Lionel Robbins had held faculty appointments at LSE, although Hayek had left for the University of Chicago in 1950.

30. Ibid. 113.

31. Ibid. 118-119.

32. Ibid. 123-124.

33. Ibid. 126.

34. Ibid. 126-127.

35. Ibid. 128-129.

36. Ibid. 132-133.

37. Ibid. 133.

38. Josiah Lee Auspitz, "Michael Oakeshott, 1901-1990," *American Scholar* 60 (Summer 1991): 354-56.

39. Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1959). Originally published as a brief book, Oakeshott later included this essay in *Rationalism in Politics*.

Citations in this essay come for the 1991 edition, edited by Timothy Fuller.

40. Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry," in *Rationalism in Politics*.

41. Ibid., 489-90.

42. Ibid., 491, 495-528.

43. Ibid., 534.

44. Ibid., 490-91.

45. Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education: Report of the Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1963), 1, 281-82. See Michael Shattock, "The Creation of the British University System," in *The Creation of a University System*, ed. by Michael Shattock (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996), 1-27.

46. Michael Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 35-36.

47. Ibid., 37.

48. Ibid., 38-41.

49. Ibid., 42-43.

50. Ibid., 49-60.

51. Michael Oakeshott, "Education: Its Engagement and Frustration," in *Education and Reason*... ed. by R. F. Dearden, Paul Hirst, and R. S. Peters, Timothy Fuller included this essay in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. Citations from this essay are from the reprinted version in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. Oakeshott, "Education," 62-67.

52. Ibid., 68-72.

53. Ibid., 74-77.

54. Ibid., 77-82; see also C. S. Lewis *The Abolition of Man; or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943).

55. Ibid., 83-104.

56. Timothy Fuller noted that this lecture was published in *The Colorado College Studies* 12 (1975).

57. Michael Oakeshott, "A Place of Learning," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 1-15.

58. Ibid., 16-17.

59. Ibid., 19-21.

60. Ibid., 22.

61. Ibid., 23.

62. Ibid., 23-26.

63. Ibid., 28-30.

64. David Bromwich, "The Art of Conversation [A review of *The Voices of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*], *New Republic*, 10 July 1989, 33-36; Bruce A. Kimball, "Professions of Language and Reason," *American Journal of Education* 98(May 1990): 251-69; John Searle, "The Storm Over the University," *New York Review of Books*, 6 December 1990, 34-42.

65. Anthony O'Hear, "Michael Oakeshott, 1901-92 [sic]," in *Fifty Modern Thinkers on Education*, ed. by Joy A. Palmer with advisory editors Liora Bresler and David E. Cooper (London: Routledge, 2001), 48

66. Annan, *Our Age*, 387.

67. Ibid., 387-401.

68. Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991).