

Efraim PODOKSIK

Oakeshott Scholarship Today

(Paul Franco, *Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, pp. xii+209. ISBN 0-300-10404-9)

I

The wave of studies about the philosophy of Michael Oakeshott that appeared in the two recent decades can be seen as testimony to a growing interest in the ideas of this thinker. It was Paul Franco's first book (*The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, New Haven, 1990) which gave start to this wave, being the first systematic and comprehensive account of Oakeshott's political thought. Since then the study of Oakeshott's philosophy has advanced significantly. Many of his unknown works were posthumously published, previously neglected sides of his philosophy were discussed, a new light was thrown on his already famous writings, and all these were put in their proper historical and intellectual context. The establishment of the Michael Oakeshott Association (2001), which united Oakeshott scholars from around the world, encouraged and accelerated this process.

Franco's next study on Oakeshott, simply entitled, *Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction*, has become a welcome addition to this burgeoning literature. It summed up the achievements of Oakeshott studies in the preceding fifteen years; it offered many new interesting insights into our understanding of Oakeshott's philosophy; and, last but not least, having been written in an extremely lucid, concise and confident style, it can be recommended as an essential intro-

duction to Oakeshott's thought for those not previously familiar with his ideas.

Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) was a leading British thinker of the twentieth century. His main occupation was teaching the history of political thought, first at Cambridge (1925-1949) and then at the London School of Economics (1951-1968), where he held the Chair in Political Science. Besides this, however, Oakeshott was a philosopher, contributing to various fields such as philosophy of history, science, aesthetics, education, politics and law. He did not publish extensively. Yet he was a man of profound mind and wide erudition, and almost every published work of his became a masterpiece due both to the content of its ideas and its impeccable English prose (the elegance of his essays was sometimes compared to that of Hume, Dr. Johnson and Mill).

Oakeshott's talents were highly esteemed by a narrow circle of friends, disciples and colleagues. His appointment at the LSE after Harold Laski's death surprised a wider public, which saw a purportedly conservative academic entering the bastion of the progressive thought. This appointment, however, attested to the respect he had earned from those who knew him well and who recognised a formidable mind behind the figure of a humble and, at the same time, somewhat frivolous Cambridge don. Yet, despite this respect, wider recognition, even among the academic community, or rather, especially among the academic

community, was slow in coming. In the late 1940s Oakeshott became known as the author of a number of polemical essays which criticised the direction British and European political life was taking in that period, with its growing emphasis on economic planning and state intervention in many aspects of social life (this trend was associated in Britain with the reforms of the Attlee government). Oakeshott was not the only thinker who censured this trend. Friedrich Hayek, for example, labelled the welfare policies of Western European governments 'the road to serfdom'. Yet in many senses Oakeshott's criticisms were more radical and challenging than those of Hayek. Oakeshott's main concern in these essays was not to argue about the best way to achieve economic efficiency or even free constitutional government. His critique was more fundamental, as he rejected, or seemed to reject, the entire style of modern politics and moral life, labelling it as 'rationalist'. It was this Oakeshott, misperceived as a traditionalist reactionary, an enemy of rational thought and progress, who became known to the reading public, which was too impatient and limited in its interests to go beyond his rhetoric in order to explore the philosophical grounds on which he based his claims. Indeed, British intellectual life in these years was too parochial to be capable of a fair assessment of Oakeshott's ideas and of their connection with modern continental philosophy. Nor was Oakeshott himself particularly helpful here: tending sometimes to shock the public with his ostensible refusal to accept 'the facts' of modern life, he never tried to popularise his philosophy or to explain the pattern of thinking that stood at the background of his thought. Yet the caricature of Oakeshott formed in this period was grossly unfair. Con-

servative though he was in some of his attitudes, especially with regard to modern education, he had hardly anything in common with clichéd straw-man conservatism. For his respect for tradition went hand in hand with a profound and radical attachment to human freedom and authenticity, and his criticisms of some aspects of modern life were dictated not by a nostalgia for the past but by an earnest desire to preserve in the present those civilising features of life which were conducive to the development of modern individuality.

Belated recognition of these basic drives of Oakeshott's philosophy grew in the last decade of his life, when a new generation of scholars began to take seriously his philosophical ideas and made his thought a subject of serious research. Initially this research concentrated mostly on Oakeshott's philosophy of politics, due to his reputation, first and foremost, as a political thinker. Studies by John Coats, Paul Franco and Robert Grant, among others, published in the 1980s and early 1990s, finally debunked the myth of the reactionary Oakeshott. His political philosophy received recognition as an important contribution to liberal thought. Yet this was just the beginning of a deeper interest in Oakeshott's philosophy in which attention turned from his purely political to other writings. As a result, today it is difficult to imagine any proper account of British intellectual life in the twentieth century without some discussion of Oakeshott's ideas. There is no doubt that his place in the pantheon of British thought is assured. Thus he has joined the circle of celebrated thinkers of previous times, becoming to the last century what Hume and Burke, Bentham and J.S. Mill, Coleridge and Carlyle, Arnold and T.H. Green are to their times.

II

Paul Franco underscores Oakeshott's place within British culture and his particular contribution to it. Structuring the book more or less chronologically, he follows the development of particular aspects of Oakeshott's thought as they evolve through different periods of his life and intellectual career.

As a young man, Oakeshott was converted to a trend known as British Idealism, being especially influenced by F.H. Bradley, a great metaphysician among those Idealists. Bernard Bosanquet and R.G. Collingwood were two other Idealist philosophers who would exercise considerable influence on Oakeshott. British Idealism developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, challenging the empiricist philosophy and utilitarianism which had until then been the dominating voice in British philosophical life. Under the influence of German philosophy, especially that of Hegel, Idealists emphasised the spiritual unity of reality and the primacy of mind. The differentiation of knowledge and experience as a symptom of modern life was analysed by them as a derivative of this presupposed unity. This was the philosophical current which was at the background of Oakeshott's preoccupations in his early years and to which he made an original contribution in his first philosophical book, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933). There are, according to Oakeshott, a number of modes of experiencing reality, each relatively valid within itself but unsatisfactory from the point of view of what he calls 'the totality of experience'. Such are, for example, the modes of history, science and practical life. A somewhat similar view was professed by other thinkers such as Collingwood. Oakeshott, however, dif-

fers from them, postulating that modes of experience are irrelevant to each other and to the totality of experience, and that the gravest error is to attempt to make a connection between them, which may result only in the confusion of thought. In other words, the corruption of our understanding occurs when one attempts to apply categories of scientific research to a study of history, or when considerations of practice intervene in the mode of scientific experience. This general position lies at the background of Oakeshott's famous and controversial claim: that philosophy cannot say anything relevant to the practice of politics. This is because political life is a part of the practical mode of experience, whereas the task of philosophy is to reach the whole of experience without presuppositions.

This is, as Franco notes, 'perhaps a strange conclusion for someone destined to make his great contribution in the area of political philosophy to reach' (p. 55). For, although not much was said about politics and society in *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott's further writings reveal his growing interest in these subjects. In the years following the publication of that volume Oakeshott remained quite faithful to his own philosophical position, regarding political philosophy as an attempt at understanding the basic postulates of political activity, not as a guide of conduct for a practising statesman. He made several attempts to outline a theory of political philosophy on the basis of the postulates of his Idealist worldview. These first attempts were marked by an influence of thinkers such as Bosanquet and Hegel, although Oakeshott gradually became fascinated with Hobbes' thought, and this influence would eventually make Oakeshott's phi-

losophy evolve into a more individualist fashion.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, Oakeshott's interest in politics led him to adopt a less impartial standing. It is in this period that he published his most famous essays directed against rationalism. His ostensible theoretical position remained unchanged. He saw in ideological politics, that is, politics driven by abstract ideas rather than actual experience, an attempt to bring an alien mode into what was in essence a practical activity, and he claimed that this would lead to the ultimate corruption of political life. Yet the tone of Oakeshott's essays become more engaged, his criticisms more 'timely'. This led some of his critics to wonder whether Oakeshott's rejection of ideologies stood in contradiction to the polemical character of his essays.

His political views were at the time usually interpreted as conservative traditionalism. Franco shows, however, that Oakeshott's protest against rationalism in politics and his defence of tradition should not be understood as the reactionary lament of a disenchanted Tory. For he envisaged a sort of liberalism as a 'countertradition to rationalism' (p. 98), and it is this combination of the notion of tradition and his liberal politics which made Oakeshott such an unusual author. This liberal element strengthened in his thought towards the end of the 1950s, when many of his ideas began to sound like those of J.S. Mill. As Franco puts it, Oakeshott did not agree with Mill on many things, 'but on the value of individuality and its central place in the understanding of liberal democracy they speak with one, eloquent voice' (p. 110). Yet the polemical period in Oakeshott's life happened to be a transient one. After a few years he retreated from the role of

the 'public intellectual', again fully dedicating himself to teaching and philosophical reflection. He worked on a newly reformulated idea of the plurality of forms of experience espoused formerly in *Experience and Its Modes*. This time it was articulated as the notion of the plurality of voices such as the voice of science, of poetry or of history taking part in an everlasting 'conversation of mankind'. Franco deals in detail with Oakeshott's philosophies of history and aesthetics, offering an account full of acute understanding of their different nuances, and expressing a number of insightful criticisms of Oakeshott's ideas. Finally, the author offers us an interesting treatment of Oakeshott's contribution to political philosophy in *On Human Conduct* (1975), a volume in which the British thinker attempted to provide a comprehensive theory of human interaction in general and of human association in particular. Oakeshott outlined in it his idea of civil association, understood as a type of association in which members are united not in pursuit of any specific purpose but by virtue of being subject to a common system of general nonpurposive law. Franco sees in this theory an important contribution to modern liberal thought and argues that it is based on more solid theoretical foundations than theories of other liberal philosophers. According to him, the significance of the theory of civil association lies in the fact that it allows liberty to be reconciled 'with civil authority, obligation, and law', which, in the context of nonpurposive association, 'do not appear as impediments to human liberty but as a necessary condition of it. Oakeshott thus supplies a criterion by which to distinguish different types of state action, depending on whether such action issues in nonpurposive ... rules of

conduct or in measures that are instrumental to a substantive purpose' (p. 180).

III

To follow the intricate intellectual journey of one of the leading minds of his period is not an easy task, but Franco proceeds confidently, escaping the danger to which intellectual biographies are usually prone: to be overwhelmed by secondary details and lose the sight of what is important. Though this book offers a detailed account of various nuances of Oakeshott's views and of their intellectual context, it never departs from what is truly significant in his thought. And these significant moments, which accompany us throughout the entire volume, are again brought to our attention in the epilogue, where Franco highlights the two aspects in which Oakeshott's contribution seems to be enduring. The first is the aforementioned theory of civil association, in which Oakeshott 'elaborates an essentially liberal political order ... but without recourse to some of the more questionable ethical and metaphysical assumptions that have haunted liberalism since its inception' (p. 183). The second is his 'theory of knowledge', in which '[a]gainst the two great reductivisms of the twentieth century – positivism and "pragmatism" – Oakeshott defended the autonomy of history, philosophy, and (later) poetry' (p. 184).

I completely agree with Franco in his emphasis on these two moments of Oakeshott's thought, and I believe he is also right when he points to a connection between them. For, as he argues, both ideas, firstly, 'reflect Oakeshott's consistent opposition to the reductive and Gnostic tendencies of our age and his profound appreciation of the variety, contingency, diversity, and complexity of

human life'. Secondly, 'the theory of culture embodied in the conversation of mankind in many ways provides the ultimate justification for Oakeshott's ideal of civil association' (p. 184). To excel in the conversation of voices present in our civilisation as well as in civil life means maintaining and recognising the plurality of ways of human activity and knowledge instead of attempting to impose a uniform paradigm or purpose on them. The rejection of domination, the insistence on the respect for plurality, the reconciliation to imperfections of life are the grounds of civility and of freedom, the spirit of which is at the heart of Oakeshott's thought. And it is indeed the education to civility both in our knowledge and in our civil life which is the preoccupation of Oakeshott the educator. This voice of modest civility is what distinguishes him from more impatient critics of modern education such as Allan Bloom (p. 146). Oakeshott's liberal conservatism is driven by an anxiety over the fate of civil institutions of modern Europe, but this anxiety never leads him 'to formulate a one-sidedly pessimistic and monolithic account of modernity of the sort found in thinkers such as Heidegger, Strauss, Voegelin, Marcuse, Foucault and MacIntyre' (p. 169). This could have hardly been otherwise, as Oakeshott's cherished conservative disposition is that of a civilised enjoyment of the present, not of a vulgar worshipping of the dead past.

Franco's book is therefore a significant achievement. That said, however, some qualifications would not be inappropriate here, qualifications which are not so much a criticism of his work, but a reflection of the current stage of Oakeshott studies and its limitations. The days in which Oakeshott was known only as a controversial conservative po-

lemicist are over: his place in British intellectual life is recognised. Yet Oakeshott was more than this. His modesty and the distinctly English style of his essays disguise the extent to which Oakeshott was not only a literary public figure but also a philosopher of the first order, whose style of thinking was marked by the influence of the flourishing European philosophy of the first decades of the twentieth century. We are not well aware of Oakeshott's debt to continental European philosophy. The over-emphasis on his political ideas and our intellectual distance from that constituent period of his thought hinder us from doing justice to its philosophical side. However attentive Franco's book may be to Oakeshott's philosophical thinking, it does not attempt to reveal

this thinking in its full significance and only places his thought within a familiar English intellectual context. This does not help us to reach a satisfactory understanding of the meaning of Oakeshott's ideas. Any future research that endeavours to engage in Oakeshott's philosophy should no longer concentrate on his ideas in the context of figures such as Arnold and Mill, Leavis and Popper, Berlin and Rorty, but should rather go to the basic philosophical texts of the last century – to Tönnies, Husserl, Simmel, Heidegger and Deleuze. Still, the existing literature is a necessary stage in the progress of this research. Only when Oakeshott's thought is first put in a certain (even if inadequate) historical and intellectual environment will future scholars be able to move beyond it.

Efraim PODOKSIK is a senior lecturer in the department of Political Science of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Among his publications are: *In Defence of Modernity: Vision and Philosophy in Michael Oakeshott* (Thorverton, 2003); 'Overcoming the Conservative Disposition: Oakeshott versus Tönnies', *Political Studies* 56 (2008): 857–880; 'The Contract of Fallibility', *Contemporary Political Theory* 8 (2009): 394–414; 'One Concept of Liberty: Towards Writing the History of a Political Concept', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71 (2010): 219–240. He is also the editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott* (forthcoming). His current research project is Georg Simmel's thought. E-mail: podoksik@mscc.huji.ac.il