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The Voice of Poetry in the Thought of Michael Oakeshott

Efraim Podoksik

The British philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) is mostly known as a political thinker of conservative persuasion, and his general philosophy is usually analyzed only in connection with the social and political aspects of his thought, with most attention being paid to his discussion of practical wisdom, rationalism, and tradition.¹ Yet social theory and politics were by no means Oakeshott's only preoccupation. Among the subjects of his books and essays are philosophies of history, science, and aesthetics.² A close look at these writings exposes a different Oakeshott, not a conservative defender of the importance of practice and tradition but a radical thinker familiar with the trends of his own time and deeply influenced by them.

Among those philosophies aesthetics is perhaps the most obscure one. Indeed, the significance of aesthetics for Oakeshott is readily recognized by commentators. His thought is often portrayed as having a strong aesthetic dimension. Thus, the influence of the Renaissance and Romanticism on his worldview is emphasized, he is sometimes compared with European existentialists, and one commentator even described his life as "poetic, not prosaic."³ But, there

I would like to thank Raymond Geuss, Derek Matravers, and David Runciman for their suggestions.

¹ See Charles Covell, *The Redefinition of Conservatism: Politics and Doctrine* (Cambridge, 1980), 251-82; Robert Devigne, *Recasting Conservatism: Strauss, Oakeshott, and the Response to Postmodernism* (New Haven, 1994); Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven, 1990); Steven A. Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott* (New York, 2000); John Gray, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy* (London, 1989), 199-216; John Liddington, "Oakeshott: Freedom in a Modern European State," *Conceptions of Liberty in Political Philosophy*, ed. Z. Pelczynski and J. Gray (London, 1984), 289-320.

² See David Boucher, "The Creation of the Past: British Idealism and Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy," *History and Theory*, 23 (1984), 193-214.

³ Andrew Sullivan, "Taken Unseriously," *The New Republic* (6 May 1991), 42; also Wendell John Coats, Jr., *Oakeshott and His Contemporaries* (Selinsgrove, 2000), 15-27; Colin Falck, "Romanticism in Politics," *New Left Review*, 18 (1963), 60-72; Kenneth Minogue, "Oakeshott's

are relatively few studies outlining the development of Oakeshott's aesthetic theory.⁴ These are usually found in short chapters in general surveys of Oakeshott's philosophy. Thus, W. H. Greenleaf analyzes Oakeshott's theory of aesthetics in the context of the idealistic tradition exemplified by Hegel, Croce, and Collingwood; Robert Grant discusses and rejects what he sees as the deceptive parallels between Oakeshott and the Bloomsbury group, and Andrew Sullivan argues that an aesthetic dimension is present in Oakeshott's concepts of practice and politics.⁵

Reasons for this neglect may lie in the fact that Oakeshott wrote little about aesthetics and that he was very ambiguous in his views on the character of this form of human experience. He formulated his views on science and history relatively early and never departed from them afterwards. These are first presented in the philosophical treatise *Experience and Its Modes* (1933). By contrast, it took him a long time to elaborate a coherent theory of aesthetics. It appears only in the essay "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," first published in 1959. This theory, however, occupies a central place in Oakeshott's mature philosophy as he radically defends "poetry" as one of the independent worldviews which constitute the character of modern experience. The purpose of this paper is to present the development of Oakeshott's view of the autonomy of aesthetic experience within its intellectual context.

Oakeshott's interest in art is visible in his early publications in which he tends to recognize the independent character of aesthetic experience. He makes clear the attitude towards art he is defending in his first student article which discusses the character of Shylock in Shakespeare's drama. Oakeshott is attracted by Shakespeare's ability to describe a villain as a character and by his capacity for sympathy for a personality, some of whose traits he may have loathed. That such sympathy does not imply any absolute moral standard makes Shakespeare's description more profound, for "life is more complex than to foster heroes and villains of the conventional type."⁶

Oakeshott is opposed to the vulgar moralization of art and argues that the artist is able to present a deeper and more complex view of life where all characters "have some intrinsic value of their own."⁷ In the inter-war period in

Idea of Freedom," *Quadrant* (1975), 77-83; Glenn Worthington, "Michael Oakeshott on Life: Waiting with Godot," *History of Political Thought*, 16 (1995), 105-19.

⁴ See Howard Davis, "Poetry and the Voice of Michael Oakeshott," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 15 (1975), 59-68.

⁵ W. H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (London, 1966), 30-35; Robert Grant, *Oakeshott* (London, 1990), 104-10; Andrew Sullivan, *Intimations Pursued: The Voice of Practice in the Conversation of Michael Oakeshott* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1990).

⁶ Michael Oakeshott, "Shylock the Jew," *Caian*, 30 (1921), 61.

⁷ *Ibid.*

which artists were often demanded to serve one or another social cause this position was not as commonplace as it is now. Oakeshott aligned himself with the trend usually called “aestheticism” in England or *l’art pour l’art* in France, which had been at the peak of its influence at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century and, while still quite popular in the twenties, was being challenged from many directions.

Aestheticism insists on the independent character of artistic activity and artistic perception which are driven by the “love of the things of intellect and imagination for their own sake.”⁸ Some of its proponents, such as Pater, introduce a strong subjectivist element into aestheticism by denying that beauty belongs to an object as the objective quality and concentrating on aesthetic experience.⁹ Aestheticism puts itself into an opposition to the practical attitude to art and advocates the independent value of aesthetic experience and of artistic creativity. It looks for sources of inspiration in the Renaissance and in the Romantic movement; it is closely connected with artistic movements such as Decadence and Symbolism, and its exponents include names such as Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde in Britain and Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Proust in France. At the beginning of the twentieth century the ideal of art for art’s sake transformed itself into formalism and found its best expression in the theories of “significant form” of Clive Bell and Roger Fry. Oakeshott’s aesthetic tastes lie within this cultural tradition. He was fascinated by the Renaissance, Montaigne was one of his favorite authors, and he liked the Romantic notion of adventure. Pater was one of the writers he warmly recommended and he appreciated the talents of some of the figures of the Bloomsbury group such as Virginia Woolf.¹⁰ In one of his juvenile works Oakeshott also admits the influence of Bergson’s philosophy on him.¹¹

The term “aestheticism” is, however, ambiguous and can be used to indicate various, even contradictory approaches towards art. It can be interpreted both as the consequence of the industrialization and division of labor in modern society, in which the artist becomes a professional, and as a protest against rationalization and alienation in the modern industrial civilization.¹² It can be seen as an escape from life, a disenchantment from Nature and an attempt to

⁸ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London, 1967), 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27-32.

¹⁰ See Sullivan, *Intimations Pursued*, 281n; Grant, *Oakeshott*, 106.

¹¹ Michael Oakeshott, “An Essay on the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry, and Reality,” Oakeshott, 1/1/33, LSE Archives. The draft is apparently written in the early twenties. Oakeshott is here under the influence of Bergson’s intuitivism, and claims that while both philosophy and poetry attempt to reach the knowledge of reality, the poetical insight is a shorter and a more certain way to the truth than the philosophical investigation. Although many claims of this work are later abandoned by Oakeshott, the essay is the evidence of his early interest in the questions of aesthetics, and of his attachment to the genre of poetry.

¹² Arnold Hauser, *Sozialgeschichte der Kunst und Literatur* (Munich, 1972), 771-72.

find a shelter in the artificial world of beautiful things.¹³ But some of its proponents have presented it as an endeavor to render life in its fullness.¹⁴ One can even argue that aestheticism bears in itself the seeds of its own destruction, since its insistence on the irrelevance of moral values comes into conflict with the tacit criticism of modern society implied in aestheticism's rejection of reality and concentration on artificial beauty.¹⁵

As for aestheticism's insistence on the irrelevance of morality, Monroe Beardsley distinguishes between two different arguments. The first is what he calls "an argument from Innocuousness," in which there is an implied optimism about the potential of aesthetic education. A proper education in art is supposed to teach the right way to respond to aesthetic objects, while preventing people from confusing artistic and non-artistic discourse. Though moral considerations are irrelevant to art, this will not lead to immoral conduct. The other argument is "an argument from Aesthetic Primacy," where an aesthetic attitude is perceived as the supreme attitude towards life and where it demands the rejection of all moral considerations if they stand in the way of the pure aesthetic experience.¹⁶ The intimations of such a view can be found, for example, in Bell's presentation of art as the highest good.¹⁷

In other words, two contradictory tendencies exist in aestheticism. One insists merely on the autonomous character of art; the other presents the aesthetic as the highest form of a good life, however immoral such a life may seem from the point of view of a conventional morality. This ambiguity is not peculiar just to the realm of aesthetic, and the modern philosophies of science and history contain the same contradictory tendencies. Thus, one can see in scientific positivism either merely a method to preserve the independent character of scientific experience with respect to other forms of experience or the supreme form of understanding of any aspect of reality. Philosophies of history, while aiming to defend its autonomy, may end up as well describing history as the superior form of understanding.¹⁸ Already in his early writings Oakeshott, in order to defend science's and history's autonomy, argues against their claims for supremacy; yet his view on the autonomy of art is more ambiguous. In his occasional remarks on art, Oakeshott seems to sympathize with the view, that art, being seemingly detached from the world, expresses the true value of life.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 944-45.

¹⁴ Albert Cassagne, *La Théorie de l'Art Pour l'Art: En France Chez les Derniers Romantiques et les Premier Réalistes* (Seysse, 1997), 401-2.

¹⁵ Ralph-Reiner Wuthenow, *Muse, Maske, Meduse: Europäischer Ästhetizismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1978).

¹⁶ Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (Indianapolis, 1981), 561-63.

¹⁷ Clive Bell, *Art* (Oxford, 1987), 106-17.

¹⁸ Lord Acton's phrase "history rescues us from transient," is cited by Michael Oakeshott in *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge, 1933), 149.

Thus, in one of his book reviews Oakeshott distinguishes between three different notions of culture which shape our civilization. The first sees in culture “the indiscriminate acquisition of knowledge of whatever sort.”¹⁹ Its opposite pairs are Culture and Ignorance. This activity is, however, “pathetic” and “febrile” containing “a fanatic, breathless view, totally out of harmony with the real conditions of human life: it has no answer ready for death.” The second notion, associated with Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot, calls us back to the past by creating standards coined by “the classics” of literature, the “great men” of history, or “the masters” of art. Its pairs are Culture and Anarchy. Oakeshott finds it unsatisfactory, though to a lesser degree, because this view ignores life by looking into the past in the quest for a “classic” permanence. Not unlike Bell, he is opposed to the concept of culture as the cultivation of the standards of taste.²⁰

Oakeshott recommends the third view, which he calls “a personal criterion for culture.” This notion’s pairs are Culture and Despotism, and the representatives of “culture” in this sense include Epicurus and Montaigne. It is characterized by “an improvident desire for freedom, integrity,” where the only thing which is essential is “an integrated self, whose purpose is ... to live a life contemporary with itself,” a life of one’s own, in which personal integrity in the present is valued above all. “What is valued is not the fruit of experience, but the flower—something we know only in a present enjoyment and cannot garner.”²¹

The emphasis on personal integrity as a condition of human freedom, the radical insistence on the importance of the present, and the idea of an aesthetic resignation from the endless process of satisfactions of desires are characteristic of the views which Oakeshott advocated in the early thirties. He praised those who had embraced “a radical, an Epicurean individualism.”²² According to him, the real meaning of life lies not in the pursuit of external rewards, which makes one a slave to the future and past, but in the integrity of the self. Such integrity is achieved when life is conducted in the present. For Oakeshott art is one of the activities which reflect this profound condition of human life in which integrity of character can only be achieved, if it is pursued entirely in the present regardless either of the past or of the future. “The length of art does not dismay us, for we are not conscious of the briefness of life.”²³

¹⁹ Michael Oakeshott, “Review of Powys, J.C., *The Meaning of Culture*,” *Cambridge Review*, 51 (1930), 367.

²⁰ See Bell, *Art*, 267-73.

²¹ Oakeshott, “Review of Powys,” 367.

²² Michael Oakeshott, “John Locke,” *Cambridge Review*, 54 (1932), 73.

²³ Michael Oakeshott, “Religion and the World,” in his *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life*, ed. T. Fuller (New Haven, 1993), 34.

In Oakeshott's view art's role in life was akin to that of religion. He saw religion as "practical experience in its fullest"²⁴ and claimed that "culture is ... a way of life, a religion."²⁵ The character of religion is twofold. It rejects the world composed of an incessant satisfaction of desires, where what is valued is the external result, but at the same time this rejection gives an inner value to life, thus endowing it with a real significance.²⁶ Similarly, an artist is independent of society, but also involved in it up to his neck. In *Experience and Its Modes* Oakeshott claimed that "the most thoroughly and positively practical life is that of the artist or the mystic."²⁷ Art, music, and poetry are not an escape from life, since in them "we are wholly taken up with practical life."²⁸

This resemblance of art to religion is not accidental, for Oakeshott exposes here the basic sentiment of many proponents of aestheticism. According to Gene Bell-Villada, figures such as Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde, having started out as religious believers and having lost their faith, turned to art as a substitute for religion.²⁹ Similarly, Oakeshott saw art as a refined form of life, and yet he did not elaborate his views on this subject but mentioned it only in occasional remarks.

R. G. Collingwood's *Principles of Art* (1938) presented Oakeshott with another opportunity to reflect on the role of art and of the artist. Collingwood saw artistic activity as a process of creation by which the artist expresses his emotions. This creation involves an activity of imagination in which an emotional state is raised to the level of consciousness. Thus, what is expressed is not an immediate feeling of emotion which vanishes but a conscious reflection about this emotion. By expressing his emotions the artist also compels a society to be more deeply conscious of itself. Therefore, the content of art is of no less importance than its form. As Collingwood points out, "subject without style is barbarism; style without subject is diletantism. Art is the two together."³⁰ In his review of this book, Oakeshott did not spare his praise of Collingwood, saying that this was "the most profound and stimulating discussion I have ever read of the question, What is art?" This is "a book which anyone who can take pleasure in a profound and critical piece of philosophical thinking will find a delight."³¹

²⁴ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 294.

²⁵ Oakeshott, "Review of Powys," 367.

²⁶ On Oakeshott's view of religion see Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (Cambridge, 1980), 251-82; Glenn Worthington, "Michael Oakeshott and the City of God," *Political Theory*, 28 (2000), 377-98.

²⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 296.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 297.

²⁹ Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life* (Lincoln, 1941), 177.

³⁰ R. G. Collingwood, *Principles of Art* (Oxford, 1958), 299.

³¹ Michael Oakeshott, "Review of R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*," *Cambridge Review*, 59 (1938), 487.

It is not hard to see what so attracted Oakeshott in Collingwood's treatise. Affirming Oakeshott's own intuitions, Collingwood succeeded in constructing a philosophical view in which he preserved the relative autonomy of art but at the same time afforded it the noble role of raising modern society's consciousness of itself. Unsurprisingly, Collingwood's influence is salient in Oakeshott's short essay "The Claims of Politics," published a year later. There he argued against the claim that politics was the central expression of social sensibility, insisting that it was a relatively unimportant realm of social activity. A political system serves for the protection or modification of the legal and social order, but it lacks the ability to contribute to the permanent recreation of a society. This function can be fulfilled only by literature, art, and philosophy; and, paradoxically, in order to perform this role, an artist and a philosopher should abstain from any political activity. In a Collingwoodian manner Oakeshott describes their task as mitigating "a little their society's ignorance of itself."³² They are active not in the political sphere, "but in another and deeper sphere of consciousness." As "the last corruption that can visit a society is a corruption of its consciousness," their role is to make a society become "conscious and critical of itself."³³ In other words, Oakeshott seems to suggest that an artist or a philosopher plays an important social role; yet this role can be fulfilled only at the price of retreating from the participation in the public life, which has only a short-term and superficial effect. What is truly important is that these activities render service to the society on a deeper level as they affect society's understanding of itself.

Oakeshott, however, was not entirely satisfied with these views on the character of artistic activity. In the early post-war years he still saw art as a reflective activity. In the essay "Rational Conduct" (1950) he mentioned the artist alongside the historian, the cook, the scientist, and the politician as one "engaged upon answering questions of certain sort."³⁴ Yet there are already indications that Oakeshott is less certain about this claim because he sometimes advances a rather different view which denies reflectivity to "poetry." This appears in the essay "The Tower of Babel" (1949), where poetry is likened to what is called "morality of custom." Sounding here more like Nietzsche than Collingwood, Oakeshott argues that "a poem is not the translation into words of a state of mind. What the poet says and what he wants to say are not two things, the one succeeding and embodying the other, they are the same thing...."

³² Michael Oakeshott, "The Claims of Politics," in *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life*, 96. (The essay was first published in *Scrutiny*, 8 (1939), 146-51.)

³³ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁴ Michael Oakeshott, "Rational Conduct," *Cambridge Journal*, 4 (1950), 16. Oakeshott deleted "artist" when he published this essay in his *Rationalism in Politics* in 1962. See Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics*, 33n.

Nothing exists in advance of the poem itself, except perhaps the poetic passion."³⁵

Moreover, his previous views seemed to entail a certain tension. On the one hand he sympathized with the view of art as an autonomous activity, but on the other hand he recognized the importance of the link between art and society, thus being led to include art in practical experience. This tension seemed to weaken his general idea of the existence of absolutely independent and homogeneous modes of experience as it had been presented in *Experience and Its Modes*.

These doubts led Oakeshott to review his views on the nature of artistic activity in the essay "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" (1959), where he for the first time presented an elaborate aesthetic theory. This essay was later included into *Rationalism in Politics*, the volume of essays written by Oakeshott in his middle period between the end of forties and the beginning of sixties. As he said in the preface to this volume, "The Voice of Poetry" was "a belated retraction of a foolish sentence in *Experience and Its Modes*."³⁶ There, as we have seen, the life of an artist was described as "most thoroughly and positively practical."³⁷ In "The Voice of Poetry" Oakeshott completely abandons this view and presents an opposite claim: poetry is an independent voice in the conversation of mankind, irrelevant to the considerations of the practical voice.

Oakeshott's ideas here seem to be shaped under the influence of Edward Bullough, who taught at Cambridge in the first decades of the twentieth century. Oakeshott published a long obituary of Bullough after his death in 1934, in which he mentioned all Bullough's major works, including those concerned with aesthetics.³⁸ Bullough is primarily known in the history of aesthetics because of his concept of "psychical distance" as the main characteristic of aesthetical experience.³⁹ Yet even before introducing this term, Bullough presented a coherent theory of aesthetical experience in his lectures, which, as Oakeshott tells us, he delivered in Cambridge annually from 1907 until shortly before his death.⁴⁰ It is quite likely that Oakeshott attended one of these courses of lectures and also had an opportunity to consult them again when they and the article on "psychical distance" were republished in 1957, just two years before the publication of "The Voice of Poetry."

³⁵ Michael Oakeshott, "The Tower of Babel," in his *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, 1991), 479 (first published in *Cambridge Journal*, 2 [1948], 67-83 [1962]).

³⁶ Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, xi.

³⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 296.

³⁸ Michael Oakeshott, "Edward Bullough," *Caian*, 43 (1934), 1-11.

³⁹ Diané Collinson, "Aesthetic Experience," in *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction*, ed. O. Hanfling (Oxford, 1992), 158-61.

⁴⁰ Oakeshott, "Edward Bullough," 2.

In the lectures Bullough, like many other theorists of art for art's sake, rejected the concept of beauty as an objective essence and argued for the psychological analysis of aesthetic perception. He distinguished between four sorts of experience: practical, scientific, ethical, and aesthetic, each determined by its own set of conditions and independent from the others. Aesthetic experience is characterized by detachment and contemplation in which aesthetic delight is achieved.⁴¹ This view is presented later as the idea of psychological distance. The distance is between the self and its affections, so that the phenomenon is perceived in a detached form—a fog at sea does not raise anxiety or terror but merely a contemplative pleasure. The artist creates through this experience of detachment, which is not reflective. “The genuine artist appears to have no deliberately elaborated intention in producing his work.”⁴²

Oakeshott, similarly to Bullough, distinguishes between four completely independent forms of experience, which he calls “voices.” Every voice is constituted through the partnership of an active self and the images it constructs, and each of them creates a different kind of images.⁴³ There are some differences between Oakeshott and Bullough with regard to the classification of voices. Oakeshott adds a historical voice not mentioned by Bullough and, as in *Experience and Its Modes*, he unites “practical” and “ethical” within the same voice. “Practical” is characterized by two parallel pairs of images, those of desire and aversion and those of approval and disapproval. Yet even Bullough's taxonomy itself crops up once, when Oakeshott mentions the difference between “poetic” delight and “pleasure or virtue or knowledge,” so that it is obvious that “pleasure” stands for practical, “virtue” for ethical, and “knowledge” for scientific experience.⁴⁴

Oakeshott calls aesthetic experience a “poetic” activity and defines it in terms of “contemplating” or “delighting.” Its images are not concerned with making propositions and are individual and unique because they cannot change or be destroyed. They exist only in the present, and no image can take the place of another one. The combination of these images does not constitute an argument, and their composition has no premeditated end or conclusion. The voice of poetry is not concerned with the images of the practical voices such as desire or aversion, approval or disapproval, and “fact” or “non-fact.” As Oakeshott says,

images in contemplation are merely present: They provoke ... only delight in their having appeared. They have no antecedents or conse-

⁴¹ Edward Bullough, *Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays* (London, 1957), 66-79.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴³ Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (essay first published in 1959), 495-97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 540.

quents; they are not recognized as causes or conditions or signs of some other image to follow, or as the products or effects of one that went before; they are not instances of a kind, nor are they means to an end; they are neither “useful” nor “useless.”⁴⁵

By presenting the idea of “contemplation” as irrelevant to practical considerations, Oakeshott associates himself with the respectable modern philosophical tradition which sees in “disinterestedness” the central feature of aesthetic experience. Aesthetics as a distinct field of philosophical inquiry, like the term “aesthetics” itself, is a peculiar development of eighteenth-century European philosophy. From the beginning, the concept of “disinterestedness” played a key role in it, becoming especially associated with the Kantian idea of the “beautiful” outlined in his *Critique of Judgment*.⁴⁶ According to Kant, the judgment of the beautiful arises from a disinterested delight. This delight is distinct from the pleasure derived from what is agreeable and what is good. The pleasure from the agreeable implies some practical interest in the object of pleasure, whereas the judgment of taste is contemplative, thus being indifferent to the existence of an object. Kant insists that judgments of beauty are categorically distinct from judgments involving practical and moral considerations, which are treated by Oakeshott as images of desire and aversion, or approval and disapproval.

Thus, for Oakeshott “poetry” is a sort of a disinterested activity, and this preconditions the kind of questions that can be appropriately asked about poetic images. For example, it is irrelevant to consider them in terms of “fact” and “non-fact.” It is irrelevant to inquire whether Anna Karenina’s words were accurately reported by Tolstoy, or what was Hamlet’s normal bed-time. They cannot exist apart from the poetic images in which they are presented, so that “what Anna said on any occasion could not have been misreported by Tolstoy because she is incapable of speaking any words which he has not put into her mouth. Hamlet never went to bed....”⁴⁷ We are usually held back from approving or disapproving of the conduct of such characters as Anna Karenina because we recognize them as poetic images. Finally, these images do not evoke pleasure or pain, for those are partners of desire, which is absent in contemplation. “Pleasurable or painful situations in poetry are alike delightful.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” 509-10.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, J. C. Meredith (Oxford, 1978), part 1; also Dabney Townsend, “From Shaftesbury to Kant: The Development of the Concept of Aesthetic Experience,” *Essays on the History of Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Rochester, N.Y., 1992), 205-23.

⁴⁷ Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” 519.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 520.

This view causes Oakeshott to oppose some other explanations of the character of poetic activity. One is the view that a poetic image represents some “poetic truth” which is deeper than other manifestations of truth. This cannot be correct, as “truth,” in Oakeshott’s view, implies making certain propositions, while poetic images are never of this character because the concepts of “fact” and “non-fact” are alien to them.⁴⁹ Another view describes poetic activity as one which sees things “as they really are,” but it is similarly unsatisfactory, for it presupposes either the world of independent facts or the Platonic theory of “permanent essences,” which is rejected by Oakeshott. He also distances himself from Schopenhauer’s interpretation of contemplation as an achievement of the highest reality by escaping the domination of an irrational will.⁵⁰ For Oakeshott, the fact that aesthetic imagining is different from the practical does not make the former superior.⁵¹

A third view is that poetic images represent the expression of the poet’s feelings or emotions so that “poetry begins with an emotional experience undergone by the poet himself . . . this emotional experience is then contemplated, and from this activity of contemplation a poetic image is generated which is an ‘expression’ of an analogue of the original emotional experience. . . .”⁵² Oakeshott presents Wordsworth, Sidney, and Shelley as proponents of this view, and one can also notice the similarities between it and Collingwood’s understanding of art as the creative expression of an artist’s emotions. Here Oakeshott rejects it completely, pointing out that this implies the belief that “poetry must be supposed to provide information or instruction of some sort.”⁵³ This, however, would contradict the view of poetry as a contemplative activity. Oakeshott follows Bullough, denying that the process of the poetic creation consists of several stages and says that there is no deliberately set end in the poetic activity. The poet “does *one* thing only, he imagines poetically.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, this theory assumes that the poet is pre-eminently a man of feeling and emotion, whereas Oakeshott thinks that it is not necessary to have experienced the emotion in order to contemplate it. Moreover, “it would seem that the spectator-like mood of contemplation would be more likely to establish itself if the emotion had *not* been experienced.”⁵⁵ This view does indeed correspond to Bullough’s idea of psychical distance.

Thus, Oakeshott presents a radical view of the nature of aesthetic experience, which he sharply distinguishes from other forms of experience. He un-

⁴⁹ Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” 522.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 511.

⁵¹ This position is also a retraction of Oakeshott’s own early view outlined in the aforementioned essay “On the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry, and Reality” (see the note 11).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 524.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 525.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 524.

equivocally argues in favor of an independent character of aesthetic activity and advocates the view of art for art's sake. At the same time, this radical separation enables him to reject his previous view, according to which aesthetic experience somehow represents a higher form of human life. Oakeshott further distances himself from any accusations of providing aesthetic justifications for ethical nihilism by stressing that, in the social discourse, certain images "are more readily and more unmistakably recognized as poetic images because of the circumstances in which they appear."⁵⁶ These images are called works of art. Of course, no work of art is absolutely protected from being read in an unpoetical manner, and every work of art can be subject to a scientific, historical or practical inquiry. Yet the circumstantial frame in which a work of art appears, be it a theater, a picture gallery or the covers of a book, significantly protects its character as a poetic image and points to the kind of questions which can relevantly be asked about it. Oakeshott adopts here what Beardsley calls "an argument from Innocuousness" about the relation between art and morality, claiming that the framework of art is likely to prevent it from being confused with the voice of practice.

Thus, Oakeshott finally distinguishes between the aesthetic and other forms of experience, although he limits aesthetic experience primarily to recognized forms of art. Poetry is a completely independent voice, and together with science and history is one of the most important activities in modern civilization. A poetical imagining is not "a naïve and a primordial activity."⁵⁷ Poets, indeed, existed in the ancient world, but their activity did not acquire a peculiar aesthetic character, being confused with the wisdom of a magician or the entertainment of a gleeman. The emancipation of poetic activity from the authority of practical imagining is a much later development. "Properly speaking, it never took place in ancient Greece; a glimpse of it is to be found among the Romans; and subsequently in Europe it has been slowly and uncertainly achieved."⁵⁸ A purely aesthetic attitude emerged later as a result of a gradual circumstantial change in which surviving works of art were detached from their religious and practical context thereby inviting the attitude of contemplation and making a poetic outlook on art possible. This attitude of detachment is a specific feature of modern European civilization, and therefore it is "a comparatively new and still imperfectly assimilated experience."⁵⁹

Oakeshott is not alone in his view of aestheticism as a trend exclusively characterizing modern Western sensibility. As Gene Bell-Villada points out, art for art's sake is "a specifically Western notion, generated on European soil by European writers," with "no major, vital resonances or academic standing

⁵⁶ Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," 517.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 529.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 530-31.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 532.

outside Western (and Westernized) societies.”⁶⁰ Moreover, Oakeshott is attentive to the underlying tendencies of his time, for when he was writing “The Voice of Poetry,” aestheticism again became an influential and fashionable view. In the forties such prominent figures as E. M. Forster and the literary critic Lionel Trilling protested against the over-ideologization of art and defended the autonomous character of aesthetic experience.⁶¹ In the fifties the view of art for art’s sake acquired a new popularity, when the New Criticism, which rejected any external criteria for judging works of art and advocated criticism from within as the only appropriate form of aesthetic judgment, became the pre-eminent conviction on U.S. campuses.⁶² Moreover, in the context of Cold-War liberalism, the idea of art for art’s sake was regarded as an alternative which preserved the freedom of artistic expression as opposed to Communist ideological suppression.⁶³

Poetry, then, finally captures in Oakeshott’s thought the place of one of the cornerstones of Western modernity, being a completely autonomous voice, along with science and history. Yet even here Oakeshott’s attitude towards poetry is ambiguous, as he attempts to qualify his insistence on the absolute irrelevance of poetry to practice. In this, however, he exposes the complexity of the idea of “disinterestedness” itself within the philosophy of aesthetics.

Thus, Kant sees judgments about what is agreeable, beautiful, and good as distinct from each other, and therefore maintains the autonomy of beautiful. At the same time, he thinks that delight in the beautiful may serve as a passage from the agreeable to the good, because the experience of the beautiful somehow intimates in itself the experience of the good. Morality, according to Kant, is the realm of freedom. As in the experience of the beautiful, intuition and thought engage in a “free play of imagination” without forming some “determinate concept,” this experience symbolizes the freedom of the moral law, and thus beauty can be called a “symbol of good.” Paradoxically, the realm of the beautiful is independent, but this independence serves the interests of practical reason in the long run.⁶⁴ Friedrich Schiller applied this view to his social concerns, seeing the aesthetic education of man as a necessary stage in social progress. In order to serve the practical interest aesthetic experience should remain independent, being only indirectly linked to the realm of morality.⁶⁵ Paul Guyer calls this view a “dialectic of disinterestedness.”⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Bell-Villada, *Art for Art’s Sake and Literary Life*, 3.

⁶¹ See E. M. Forster, “Art for Art’s Sake,” in his *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London, 1951), 98-104; Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York, 1953).

⁶² Bell-Villada, *Art for Art’s Sake and Literary Life*, 254.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 254. See also Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” in *Art in Modern Culture*, eds. F. Frascina and J. Harris (London, 1992), 82-90.

⁶⁴ Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*.

⁶⁵ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford, 1967).

⁶⁶ Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (Cambridge, 1993), 50, 96.

Likewise, Bullough indirectly connects aesthetic experience with certain practical aspects of life, notwithstanding his affirmation of its independent character. For him, one who has an aesthetic ability to see his own actions as well as those of others in a detached light is likely to contrive conduct which will provoke admiration, behaving according to duty and not sensual pleasure. This leads Bullough to the assertion that aesthetic experience is conducive to individualism, which he ardently supports since he thinks that the social significance of the individual is superior to that of the community.⁶⁷

This ambiguity is present in Oakeshott's essay as well. Although, he separates poetry and practice, he still thinks that there are some intimations of poetry in the practical life. Oakeshott rejects any straightforward relation of art to society; yet he states that some of the ideas about such a relation "may not be ill-observed or untrue."⁶⁸ It is possible to speak about the role of art in a society if the society is understood not in terms of an engagement in practical enterprise but as a society of conversationalists. Then, "Schiller's thoughts on the usefulness of a 'useless' activity" are not altogether incorrect.⁶⁹ The metaphor of conversation lets Oakeshott say that idioms of each voice are irrelevant to the arguments of other voices and, at the same time, claim that different voices may recognize each other and understand the idiom in which everyone is speaking. Therefore, although practice and poetry are strictly speaking irrelevant to each other, there are still in practical activity "intimations of contemplative imagining capable of responding to the voice of poetry."⁷⁰ Among the examples of such intimation are relationships of friendship, which are "dramatic, not utilitarian," or of love, whose object is "individual and not concretion of qualities." Friends and lovers are not concerned with what use they can make of each other, but "only with the enjoyment of one another."⁷¹ Although these are not strictly speaking contemplative activities, "they are at least ambiguously practical activities which constitute a channel of common understanding between poetry and practice."⁷² Or, Kant-like "moral goodness," in which an action is detached from usefulness and external achievement, can also be seen as an intimation of poetry.⁷³

At the same time Oakeshott denies that, by virtue of this fact, poetry can be understood as superior to other voices. The attempt to base the conduct of life on an aesthetic dimension is folly since by its own nature poetry is elusive and transient. "There is no *vita contemplativa*; there are only moments of contem-

⁶⁷ Bullough, *Aesthetics*, 85.

⁶⁸ Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," 534.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 534n.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 536.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 537.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 538.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

plative activity abstracted and rescued from the flow of curiosity and contrivance.”⁷⁴

This newly formulated view of the independence of poetic activity presented, however, some problems for Oakeshott’s general position. In his early philosophical book, *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott followed the tradition of rationalistic idealism and emphasized the significance of reflective thought postulating that every experience involves judgment.⁷⁵ The inclusion of art into practical experience as a reflection of consciousness of some sort fitted well into this structure. But now, as Greenleaf points out, Oakeshott presented a poetic imagination as a sort of experience from which thought, which is concerned with making propositions, was absent.⁷⁶

This involved a significant change in Oakeshott’s description of the character of mental activity. Not every act of thinking is reflective, and alongside reflective thought there is an unreflective imagination. This new understanding of the mental activity corresponded to the general spirit of *Rationalism in Politics*. In essays such as “Rationalism in Politics” and “The Tower of Babel” Oakeshott placed an unreflective, poetic-like mental activity (called “practical” knowledge, or “morality of custom”) in opposition with that which included reflective thought (“technical” knowledge or “reflective morality”) and gave precedence to the former. This distinction invited accusations of irrationalism and “revulsion” from thought.⁷⁷ These were not always fair, since for Oakeshott, the distinction between the reflective and unreflective was analytical, and he recognized that, in actual activity, both kinds are involved to some degree. Yet there was some truth in these claims, because the general mood of Oakeshott’s essays of that period seemed to be hostile to reflective thought. Even Peter Winch, who was quite sympathetic to many of Oakeshott’s ideas, found this aspect of his thought unsatisfactory.⁷⁸

Oakeshott seems to have taken these criticisms seriously. In *On Human Conduct* (1975), where he deals mostly with the questions of practical conduct and social theory, he attempts to present such a view that will emphasize again the importance of reflection and judgment in human experience, thus offering a framework which cannot be interpreted as the rejection of thought. He makes clear that any experience involves reflection. He distinguishes between practical conduct and understanding of this conduct but points out that even conduct

⁷⁴ Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” 541.

⁷⁵ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 9-27.

⁷⁶ Greenleaf, *Oakeshott’s Philosophical Politics*, 33-34.

⁷⁷ M. Postan, “The Revulsion from Thought,” *Cambridge Journal*, 1 (1948), 395-408.

⁷⁸ Peter Winch, *The Idea of Social Sciences and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London, 1958), 62-65.

itself involves “deliberating” as one of its postulates.⁷⁹ This view is, however, presented at the expense of “poetry.” Oakeshott builds an appropriate theoretical framework for the analysis of practical conduct, distinguishing between two orders of inquiry, those of intelligent and non-intelligent goings-on. But in this new framework which emphasizes reflection he can barely find a place for poetry, which appears only a few times in the book. Firstly, aesthetics is mentioned alongside ethics and jurisprudence as one of distinguishable idioms of the order of inquiry concerned with intelligent “goings-on.”⁸⁰ Yet here aesthetics seems to be mentioned in its common meaning as a theoretical activity which analyzes art. Secondly, in his account of religion Oakeshott mentions a “poetic quality” of its images, but it is not clear from this phrase if “poetic” stands here in the relation of “conversation” to the practical, or whether this is a return to the earlier view from *Experience and Its Modes*.⁸¹ The description of “self-enactment” and of an “individual” can be seen as intimating some “poetical” quality.⁸² Yet I tend to think that Oakeshott still considers “poetical” experience to be irrelevant to practical conduct. He analyzes human conduct in the terms of relationships between human agents, and distinguishes between “acting” and “fabricating.” In “acting” the agent is looking for a response from other agents, while in “fabricating” the imagined outcome is an artefact. Fabricating is usually understood as a performance in “acting” made in order to evoke a certain response in the conduct of other agents. Only when an artefact is “recognized as a work of art,” is it taken exclusively as the product of fabricating.⁸³ It follows from this that Oakeshott believes that artistic activity as such does not belong to the realm of “human conduct.” However, all these brief remarks in *On Human Conduct* hardly say anything substantial about the mode of poetry as such.

In his last book, *On History* (1983), Oakeshott hints that he still holds the view that poetry is a distinct universe of discourse “governed by delight.”⁸⁴ At the same time, the ambiguity is present in his remarks as he speaks about “the poetic terms of affection, friendship and love.”⁸⁵ Thus, after the publication of “The Voice of Poetry” Oakeshott did not publish anything significant on this subject. It seems that his views on the character of poetry still remained ambivalent. Nevertheless, he never repudiated the view expressed in “The Voice of Poetry,” according to which “poetry” is an autonomous human activity which deserves to be cherished for its own sake.

⁷⁹ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, 1975), 43–46.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸² See Worthington, “Waiting with Godot.”

⁸³ Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 35.

⁸⁴ Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, 1999), 26n.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

To conclude, aestheticism is an ambiguous phenomenon, much harder to grasp than the idea of science for science's sake or history for history's sake. From his early writings, Oakeshott intuitively felt sympathy for the ideas of art for art's sake, but he did not avoid the ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions which characterized this trend. However, towards his middle period he worked out a view of aesthetic experience, in which he defended its autonomous character. He argued that poetry was one of the important voices of modernity, but at the same time he denied it any claims of supremacy to ethics. Poetry is an autonomous activity establishing criteria of its own, but in society it is usually put within an appropriate framework such as a theater performance.

Oakeshott did not abandon completely the view that life could have aesthetic overtones, which endowed it with a unique value, but he realized that these overtones were only "a brief enchantment."⁸⁶ An intelligent aesthetic education is supposed to teach us how to recognize "poetry" as an independent world, and not to confuse it with ethical discourse. Poetry, like science or philosophy has nothing to teach about life, it is merely "a dream within the dream of life."⁸⁷

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⁸⁶ Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," 540.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 541.