



Intimations of Oakeshott: A critical reading of his 'Notebooks, 1922-86

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David Hexter and Michael Kenny

'Intimations of Oakeshott; a reading of his 'Notebooks, 1922-86'

[*Michael Oakeshott, 'Selected Writings, Vol VI: Notebooks, 1922-86* (2014), Edited by Luke O'Sullivan, Imprint Academic: Exeter]

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The nature and worth of Michael Oakeshott's contribution as a political thinker have long been the subject of deep disagreement within the community of Anglophone political theory. In some circles he remains an important figure who, despite the small number of his published works, deserves acclaim as the source of some of the most important, philosophically hewn reflections on politics to have emerged in British intellectual culture during the last century.¹ And, while the band of those he influenced directly through his teaching and scholarship has dwindled quite considerably from the point when the 'Oakeshottians' represented one of the most significant schools within British political theory,² his work has continued to serve as a point of attraction and interest. Most recently he has been claimed as an ally for the enterprises pursued by various contemporary theorists, including those seeking to delineate a postmodernist trajectory in political theory, and those championing his conception of politics as a conversation.³

Other theorists remain skeptical. Quentin Skinner's judgement expresses the views of many – and probably the majority – in the Anglophone community of political theory:

I am fairly confident about several points. One is that Oakeshott's work was of no philosophical influence at all ... He was widely understood as an illuminating commentator on Hobbes and I must say I found him virtually unreadable on that subject ... Oakeshott seemed a figure of the past and we rejected his anti-rationalism and political conservatism outright ... nothing

¹ CXX H. Zuckert ed., 'Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century', *The Review of Politics* 71 (1), 2009, pp. 1-6

² Paul Kelly, 'The Oakeshottians', in M.Flinders, A.Gamble, C.Hay and M.Kenny, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of British Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp?

³ See for instance Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1980), p.389; M XX Minch- *The Democratic Theory of Michael Oakeshott* (2009), Imprint Academic: Exeter ; and Stephen Gerencser, 'Voices in Conversation: Philosophy and Politics in the Work of Michael Oakeshott', *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Aug., 1995, pp. 724-742)

prepared my generation for his apotheosis under Thatcherism, nor the high esteem in which his philosophy continues to be widely held.⁴

This antinomian reception is rooted both in perceptions of Oakeshott's ideological preferences and allegiances and the distance between the nature and focus of his own philosophical interests and the dominant trends in Anglophone political theory from the late 1970s. But it is also the product of a partial familiarity with Oakeshott's *corpus*. During his lifetime, his body of published work had a rather slender appearance, comprising two major monographs,⁵ separated by some forty years, and two rather more accessible collections of essays on politics and history. His most widely read work was the first of these -- *Rationalism in Politics* (originally published in 1962), which included a notable clutch of essays which he wrote in the 1940s. Their wide readership resulted in the application of the ideological label Conservative to his thinking, and this has undoubtedly had a somewhat distorting effect upon perceptions of his intellectual contribution.

Following his death 1990, however, a much larger body of writings, from different stages of his life, has become available. And, with their appearance comes the opportunity for a more rounded and contextually meaningful appreciation of the development and range of his thought. There are now six additional collections of essays, reviews and lectures, all compiled and edited with care and skill by Luke O' Sullivan.⁶ In this same period there has been a notable increase in the number of academic treatments of different aspects of his thought.⁷ And this welter of posthumous publication has done much to create the impetus for the reappraisal of the status and import of Oakeshott's diverse body of writing, and a reassessment of his place in the pantheon of British political thinking.

A considerable portion of his intellectual life – including all of the ‘middle years’ between the appearance of *Experience and its Modes* (1933) and *On Human Conduct* (1975) – has been *terra incognita* for many of his interpreters. And, as a result, it has been hard to grasp the relationship between the seemingly disparate ideas set out in these different works. But with the publication of his *Notebooks* we are afforded the chance to form a nuanced and informed understanding of how the thinking in them interconnected, and to appreciate the range of intellectual influences and political preoccupations that characterised his work.

Above all, these private writings offer insight into the mixture of personal, cultural and political factors that shaped this extraordinary mind. The idiosyncratic and – typically cryptic – jottings and thoughts contained in this volume have been culled from an array of journals written between 1922 and 1986. These include his own reflections on a host of philosophical issues, topical political and cultural questions

⁴ Skinner, Q. ([2001] 2002). ‘On Encountering the Past’, *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 6, pp. 32-63, Minerva: Helsinki

⁵ *Experience and its Modes* (details) and *On Human Conduct* (details).

⁶ DAVID: pls add suitable footnote to Fuller here.

⁷ There were two “Companion” volumes published in 2012 alone: *A Companion to Michael Oakeshott*, edited by Paul Franco and Leslie Marsh, Pennsylvania State University Press: Pennsylvania, and the *Cambridge Companion to Michael Oakeshott*, edited by Ephraim Podoksik, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

and personal preoccupations, intermingled with quotations and passages transcribed from other writers, as well as short essays, dreamy asides and a number of heartfelt, often narcissistic, musings on the state of his own romantic life.

The prevailing style is cryptic and, as their editor rightly notes, deliberately aphoristic. O'Sullivan indeed contends that they should be placed within a European 'aphoristic tradition' which tended to regard successful aphorisms as 'brief, definitive and philosophical', and which incorporated such figures as Pascal, the Marquis de Vauvenargues, Nietzsche and Bradley -- all of who are liberally referenced in the *Notebooks*.

As well as offering invaluable material for the biographer, these materials supply important clues about some of the intellectual threads running throughout Oakeshott's various works, and point to a string of normative commitments which recurred throughout his evolving thinking, several of which render him a much harder figure to appropriate for those engaged in contemporary normative projects than is typically appreciated. The place and persistence of these norms is of particular importance to the study of Oakeshott's own thought given his own repeated insistence upon the inadmissibility of normative considerations to the enterprise of theorising about politics.

The Notebooks are striking too for the combination of mood and tone that run throughout them. They reveal a rich seam of cultural pessimism intermingled with a deep-seated romanticism. Both of these moods infuse the many reflections upon love, life, death, morality and Christianity that pepper these writings. Among these, his musings on the ontological condition of mortality and the potential for both religion and love to help us deal with the limitations that defy dreams of human perfectibility are particularly striking. So too is the deep scepticism he manifests towards claims advanced in the name of three of the rising forces of the twentieth century -- science, materialism and progress. His critical reflections in these areas are saturated with references to romantic literature and poetry. As O'Sullivan observes, the *Notebooks* demonstrate that 'his interest in Romanticism was not purely academic; in his youth in particular he treated it as a living tradition which had a major impact on his approach to life'.⁸

It was against this backdrop that the youthful Oakeshott dramatised an insurmountable conflict between 'worldly' and 'spiritual' values. In one of his early essays, *Religion and the World* (1933),⁹ and also in *On Human Conduct*, he presented questions of belief and purpose as integral aspects of the pursuit of the 'good', but also as immune to any kind of rational evaluation or objective measurement. Questions of meaning and moral conviction were indissolubly connected in his mind with an acceptance of what he called the 'deadliness of doing'.¹⁰ This signalled the conviction that:

... the actual conditions of life are always more or less unsatisfactory. This is the condition of Mortality - what are we to do about it? A belief in progress does not help ... We must admit this condition, admit it as the actual essence

⁸O'Sullivan ed., in Oakeshott 2014, xi

⁹ 'Religion and the World' [1933] in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* (1993), Editor Timothy Fuller, Yale University Press; New Haven & London

¹⁰ Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 1975, 74.

& character of human life, & from it we must derive our values: they must be the values of mortality.¹¹

There is a restive, angst-ridden, quality, to the early Oakeshott's reflections on these themes, and these are interfused with the rather romantic notion that the cultivation of certain kinds of cultural practice offers the best prospect for a deeper understanding of the limits of the human condition. Writing in 1928 he enquired:

How then shall we employ ourselves? What employment is there that will not distract us from this purpose to be without a purpose, this accomplishment to achieve nothing? No employment can save us. But cookery is better than most ... here if anywhere is the art which may be practiced for art's sake: the contemporary life.¹²

The worldly/spiritual duality was one of a succession of dichotomies through which he tended to anchor his thinking, and force the ideas of other traditions and philosophers into very broadly drawn alternatives. While these varied in their terminology and focus, each of these dualities expressed an entrenched dichotomy between the modernist notion of the conscious pursuit of pre-determined goals -- an endeavor that was bound to lead to disappointment, frustration and futility -- and the 'worldly' embrace of the sensual, the experiential and the contingent. Restated, and subtly re-conceptualised, versions of this duality crop up throughout his writing. The first appearance of this dichotomous habit can be located in an early essay *Work and Play*,¹³ where he countered the instrumental pursuit of pre-determined goals -- which he called 'work' -- and the spirit of '*ludens*', an intuitive embrace of the ethos of enjoyment, experience and emotion. The metaphor of 'play' was especially important. It signalled his commitment to the intrinsic value of experience, as opposed to the pre-determination of one's goals and desires, and also the need to submit oneself to an external set of rules which provide the necessary conditions for the playing of the game.

In *On Human Conduct*, this abstract dichotomy re-emerged, but was now couched in a different philosophical idiom. There he pointed to the intrinsic importance of 'adverbial', non-instrumental rules of conduct and those norms and rules which were formed around the pursuit of specific goals. And he established a connection between this dichotomy and his very well-known distinction between 'civil' and 'enterprise' association. Distancing himself from liberal understandings of the relationship between individual and law which posited the latter as a restraint upon the liberty of the citizen, he argued for an adverbial conception of morality in the public realm, and a legal code founded upon its principles, as the preconditions for the exercise of liberty. The status and implications of this distinction have been queried by a number of commentators, including those broadly sympathetic to his ideas.¹⁴

¹¹ See 13[16]

¹² See 10[69]

¹³ 'Work and Play' (1995), *First Things* 54, pp. 29-33. (It remains unclear exactly when Oakeshott wrote this essay, and was released for publication by his literary executor in 1995).

¹⁴ Gray, J. (1993), *Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought*, Routledge: London Gray, J. ([1986] 1995), *Liberalism*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis. Letwin, O. (2011), 'Are adverbial

As well as offering us glimpses of the patterns of thinking which pre-dated and prepared the way for some of his later, better known formulations on politics and state, *The Notebooks* confirm the judgement of those scholars – for instance Elizabeth Corey, Wendell John Coats Jr., Glen Worthington and Timothy Fuller – who have stressed the integral importance of religion to his thought. In another early essay, *Religion and the World* (written in 1929 and published in 1993),¹⁵ he elaborated the principles that in his mind spanned the conventional divides between theology, morality and political philosophy. On this occasion he sketched a contrast between ‘worldly man’ and ‘religious man’, and these ideas undergirded his critique, in the 1940s, of rationalism and its influence upon politicians and planners. Those who lived in the ‘worldly way’, he maintained, directed their lives towards the pursuit of various kinds of ‘immanent’ ideals, including those associated with religion. Fulfilment, according to this model, was deferred to an unknown and unknowable future, and goals pursued only so far as they fitted with this schema, or accomplishments praised according to norms that had been stipulated prior to experience itself. But ‘religious man’ -- unlike many actual people who pursued religious convictions – did not, he insisted, live by deferring satisfaction but was fully immersed in, and open to, pleasures and pain associated with experience in the here-and-now, living truly in the present. This, he argued, represented ‘...the difference between mere inconsequent flitting from one occupation indifferently pursued to the next as lazily followed - the present for the sake of the present - & the present for the sake of life, for the sake of freedom’.¹⁶ The truly good life, he was convinced, was that associated with the unselfconscious libertine, a character who – following conventional usage – he typically sketched in the image of the gentlemanly amateur.

The Notebooks offer ample evidence that romantic themes, works and motifs underscored this radically individualistic understanding of the self. They show too that he was endlessly preoccupied by the figure of the rakish gentleman, a subject who was typically presented in the wider culture as emblematic of a disappearing age. Oakeshott gave this figure more intellectual depth than many others did, identifying origins in Aristotelian thought and sanctifying ‘the gentleman’ as the vehicle of the ideal of unfettered individuality.

A handful of commentators have long identified this character as the assumed subject of Oakeshottian thought. Shirley Letwin, in her *The Gentleman in Trollope*,¹⁷ long ago characterised Oakeshott’s *On Human Conduct* as an extended effort to formulate the morality of the gentleman. And Steven J. Wulf depicted his ethical preferences as ‘civilized self-cultivation, personal integrity, restraint from mean endeavors, and a

rules enough?’, Michael Oakeshott Memorial Lecture, LSE, 19th October 2011, downloaded from www.michael-oakeshott-association.com, April 5 2014

¹⁵ Glenn Worthington, “Michael Oakeshott and the City of God” (2000), *Political Theory* Vol. 12 No. 3 (June) pp. 377-398; Wendell John Coats Jr., *Oakeshott and his Contemporaries* (2000), University of Susquehanna Press, Susquehanna; Elizabeth Campbell Corey, *Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics and Politics* (2006), University of Missouri: Missouri

¹⁶ SC [15]

¹⁷ Shirley Robin Letwin (1982), *The Gentleman in Trollope*, p. 276 n., Harvard University Press: Harvard

nonchalance concerning risk... they neatly fuse several conceptions of the gentleman which had long been extolled in [Victorian and Edwardian] British literature and school culture'.¹⁸ He also viewed Oakeshott's fascination with the disappearing gentlemanly ideal as closely intertwined with his romantic sensibilities.

Aristotle aside, the gentlemanly amateur was, for Oakeshott, a descendant of the Epicurean tradition, and the latter was a surprisingly common point of reference in *The Notebooks*. Thus, an author widely seen as the high priest of twentieth-century Conservatism was in fact a strong advocate of a conception of freedom that was strongly individualistic, and decidedly libertarian, at least in his early years. The enemies of liberty were latter-day stoics, for whom ... 'to despise ambition & to be free from the world had become a cult - a negative cult. But with Epicurus it was a positive way of life - 'Live Alone.' The freedom of the Stoic was an escape: that of the Epicurean a fulfilment'.¹⁹

The employment of the term 'religious' to describe such a moral outlook was deliberately paradoxical, but also reflected a very distinctive understanding of religion and its purposes. As Robert Grant has shown, Oakeshott did in fact subscribe to a broadly Christian outlook during the 1920s, and had a deep interest in theological questions and writings.²⁰ But, in the light of *The Notebooks*, it is clear that depicting him as conventionally Christian is also somewhat misleading. As he observed in an early Notebook:

Christianity has rejected the ethical scheme propounded by Jesus. E.g. the moral outlook of Jesus would for example have countenanced sexual intercourse, but not if it led to children, but not the future.²¹

What he derived from religion was not a commitment to the promise of a realm of unconditional freedom, but the injunction to live and enjoy life in the contradictory complexity of the present:

That is what is wrong: life lived for "what comes after" understood as what we have earned here and made the ideal of a consequential moral and religious life. What matters is here and now. Death is the most important event in life, but because of what it ends, not what it may begin. A religion dominated by the notion of "salvation" is corrupt (& unchristian) as a morality dominated by the natural or penal consequences of ill-doing.²²

This profound objection to the metaphysical idea of a realm of emancipation, which, once attained, would save those virtuous souls who understood its promise, suggests an important overlap between his ethical, theological and political sensibilities. A very similar objection informed his scepticism towards those political philosophies that were animated by the dream of establishing heaven-on-earth, and which he – and other conservative European intellectuals in the middle of the twentieth century -- regarded as harbouring a latently totalitarian potential.

¹⁸ Wulf, S. J. (2007), 'Oakeshott's Politics for Gentlemen', *The Review of Politics* 69 (2), pp. 244-272

¹⁹ 11 [41]

²⁰ Robert Grant (2012), 'The Pursuit of Intimacy, or Rationalism in Love', in Franco and Marsh, eds., op. cit., n. 2.

²¹ 10 [56]

²² 21 [24]

Intimately bound up with his various reflections on mortality and religion in *The Notebooks* is a consistent interest in the philosophical and moral implications of love. In 1922 he observed that ‘in love our existence is made intelligible. For in love all contraries are reconciled’.²³ The experience of loving or being in love created the ultimately unfulfilled promise of some resolution of the foundational paradoxes and fallibilities of human existence. But love, like play, was only meaningful if embraced and lived as an end in its own right. It represented one of the vital ingredients of the outlook of the ‘religious man’, he declared in 1933, along with friendship and contemplation. What he abhorred from an early stage was the tendency to regard these qualities through the lens of instrumental satisfaction – as a means to the various ends that the modern age enshrined.

Doggedly faithful to his romantic roots, Oakeshott can be placed among a larger band of mid-century British intellectuals -- some with very different political sympathies to his own -- who believed that it was in poetry, not the prose of the technician or politician, that the intrinsic importance of friendship and love could be grasped: ‘loving is not “doing good”; it is not a duty; it is emancipated from having to approve or disapprove ... what is communicated and enjoyed is not an array of emotions - affection, tenderness, concern, fear, elation etc. - but the uniqueness of a self’.²⁴ On this theme he filled up eleven separate notebooks – all of which are reproduced here – between 1928 and 1934. These are named after Keats’s poem “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. In these jottings the young Oakeshott intersperses high-flown observations about the nature of love and loss with narcissistic complaints about his girlfriend, Céline, and howls of thinly veiled sexual frustration. These passages are unlikely to find favour among many contemporary interpreters, and their amoral and misogynistic aspects may well make some of his current advocates reconsider their allegiances to him. But they also provide a fascinating insight into the different domains – the personal, the philosophical and the aesthetic – where Oakeshott was willing to explore the nature and implications of the distinctive combination of philosophical scepticism and romantic individualism which united and defined his intellectual and personal sensibilities.

The overall picture that emerges of the author of these reflections is of a complex figure who looks, for the most part, much more like a libertarian individualist than a Burkean conservative. The individualistic ethos to which he subscribed was recurrently depicted through positive references to the ‘manly’ values associated with the gentleman, including ‘... “physical” courage, nerve, respect for tradition & contempt for convention, a proud sense of personal honour, an indifference to death’.²⁵ These he characterised as the moral outlook of ‘... an aristocrat’,²⁶ an embodiment of ‘the standard of Hellenic Life and Culture’.²⁷ His thinking on this score was derived from a scattergun of different sources, including the writings of Pascal and Montaigne on integrity and probity. Among his contemporaries, the artist

²³ 01 [50]

²⁴ ‘The voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind’ (1959), in *Rationalism in Politics*’ op. cit., n.3, p. 537

²⁵ ([20]11, April 1967)

²⁶ 20 [11]

²⁷ AR2 [44]

who came closest to this outlook was D.H. Lawrence, whose novels include characters, Oakeshott observed, who ‘... follow no calling or trade, ... are not concerned to eat & drink, they make no money - but they *live*’.²⁸ The literary culture of his early adulthood may well have served as a more important source of intellectual influence and inspiration for him than the idealist philosophical tradition with which he has routinely been associated.

Among the masculine virtues which are hymned in *The Notebooks*, courage was especially prominent. And in these private writings he explores one particular exemplar – Admiral Nelson (whose biography he appears to have considered writing) – in some depth.²⁹ Nelson, he announces, was not driven by ‘exterior success’ or ‘tangible ends’ but by ‘interior success’ - ‘honour’, ‘reputation’, ‘fame’.³⁰ And he approvingly notes Aristotle’s claim that ‘courage is no mere matter of discipline, but is an energy of the individual soul - a quality of character’.³¹ Courage is lauded in stark opposition to the ‘safety-first’ attitude which he regards as the principle of loving which modernity enshrines, one which is fit merely for ‘getting off a bus!’.³²

Appreciating the extent of the romantic influence upon him helps explain the difficulty of aligning Oakeshott with any single ideological perspective. Indeed *The Notebooks* lend support to the interpretive argument that his work can in some ways be read as an elegiac hymn to a way of life that was fast disappearing. In one sense this judgment suggests a line of connection between his thinking and ostensibly conservative political sentiments – and it is notable that at various points he depicts the British Conservative party as the political force most congruent with his own outlook.³³ But, for the most part, politicians from the political right were, he thought, just as likely to embody the kinds of utilitarian and progressivist sentiments which he regarded as increasingly hegemonic, and as liable to drive to the margins the kinds of cultural ethos and character which he favoured.

He directed particular enmity towards trends in the culture and society around him, more than he did to any particular political opponent or ideology. An important essay penned towards the end of the 1970s -- *The Tower of Babel*³⁴ – reveals that the

²⁸ BD5 [02-04]

²⁹ Horatio, 1st Viscount Nelson, KB (1758-1805), one of Oakeshott’s great heroes, died in action at the Battle of Trafalgar, 21st October 1805. Among Oakeshott’s planned but unrealized projects was a biography of Nelson (see Oakeshott [1947] 2014, at loc. 8802 (Kindle edition)).

³⁰ NE [06]

³¹ AR2 [14]

³² AR 2 [15]

³³ (Oakeshott [1978] 2008, 281-282).

‘A state is understood as persons associated, not in respect of their interests and of the substantive satisfactions they may choose to seek transactionally or co-operatively among themselves, but in respect of their acknowledgment of the authority of certain non-instrumental conditions of conduct.... Such a view of the office of government, *which owes more to the Whigs than the Tories*, is deeply embedded in our constitutional arrangements ... but if it *now has a home anywhere* in our politics it is surely in the Conservative party Mrs Thatcher seems more of a genuine Conservative than her predecessors’ (281-282, italics added). *The Vocabulary of a Modern European State* ([1978] 2008), Imprint Academic: Exeter.

³⁴ There are two essays entitled ‘The Tower of Babel’. The first was originally published in 1948 and is included in *Rationalism in Politics, op. cit.*, n.3. The second dates from 1979 and is included in Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays*, Liberty Fund: Indianapolis.

creeping melancholy which is apparent throughout *The Notebooks* had begun to crystallise into a gloomy sense of defeat. As Noel O'Sullivan has observed, '...everything he came to value in education, social life and the politics of civil association was unlikely to endure for much longer in an age which has become almost completely devoid of any sense of play'.³⁵ The instrumentalism which had infused public education, at both secondary and University levels, was caustically rejected, in a discussion that reprised his observations on Universities in his celebrated essay –

Start here

XX: 'For centuries ... "Education" has meant a release from the current vulgarities of the world ... Now education is merely instruction in the current vulgarities'.³⁶ The degradation of education was symptomatic of a deeper and wider loss:

Education now. The whole force and pressure of the contemporary western world is against education. It is a world of violent stimuli - film, radio, newspapers, magazines - and a mind early adapted to these stimuli will be a mind so much less capable of suffering that slow permeation of the personality that is characteristic of great literature. The world once, undesignedly, offered no positive opposition to this: the walk to school, the relatively slow moving days, long days without movement, time for enjoyment, time for recollection, time for doing nothing.³⁷

The Notebooks reflect the workings of a highly individualistic, romantic and pessimistic mind that was growing increasingly disillusioned with the pattern and pace of twentieth-century life.³⁸ As early as the 1930s, his observations on the cultural growing import of science and technology were unremittingly negative, and sometimes vituperative: 'Rape is the typical crime of modern politics; politicians rape their victims, rulers rape their subjects; technology is the rape of the earth'.³⁹ This outlook underpinned the well-known critique of rationalism as a doctrine which he expressed in the 1940s:

... if the scientist were to perish along with the civilization he has created, nobody could regret this loss. No, my view of the menace of the scientist is more profoundly shocking than this ... the science ridden civilization is a menace to civilized life. Worse than a menace; it has already removed from mankind both the hope & the desire for a civilized mode of existence ... the scientist does not keep himself to himself - he is an evangelist, a preacher with a gospel that is anything but good news ... it has created a civilization which is a menace to civilized life ... the price we have paid for allowing the scientist to do what he likes with the world is a civilization based on false hopes, desires & values: a radical perversion of human life.⁴⁰

³⁵ 'Why read Oakeshott?', a presentation to the inaugural conference of the Michael Oakeshott Association at the LSE, 3-5 September 2001.

³⁶ 17 [66]

³⁷ CV [37]

³⁸ 13 [78]

³⁹ 17 [72]

⁴⁰ 13 [B]

In some moods, this rejection of scientism amounted to a blimpish rejection of scientific advance in all its forms: ‘the inventions of “science” - what do people want with all this electricity rushing up & down the country - telephone & telegraph’.⁴¹ Along similar lines he privately seethed about the ‘the indescribable vulgarity of “Sergeant Pepper”’.⁴²

Some of these observations and reflections reflect sentiments which rarely surfaced in his philosophical writings, and need to be treated carefully on that basis. But there are many different connections between the material in *The Notebooks* and the works that he did publish in these years, and these are suggestive of important intellectual overlaps between these works. This volume includes various versions of his essays, for instance, as well as passages that are close in content and tone to essays that appeared in print. One of these – *A Conversation* (which he wrote in 1944) – offers an early indication of his feel for one of the most distinctive metaphors with which Oakeshott is associated – the idea of politics as a conversation. In this work he depicted the political as a civilised and structured set of interactions taking place within an established set of rules, rather than – as his ideological opponents insisted – a set of practices and institutions that should be subordinated to particular moral goals.

But, while it is possible to see the genesis of aspects of his thinking in such writings, it is also striking that some of the key concepts with which he is most associated are rather notable by their absence from these private reflections – most strikingly the concept of ‘civil association’ which appears only twice in the seven decades that this collection covers. Whether this signals that its importance has been overstated in commentary upon his work is an interpretive question of some import. And it is noteworthy too that Hobbes – with whom he is identified as a result of his book on him – figures hardly at all.⁴³ Nietzsche, however, is present throughout.

But while the concept of civil association may be absent, the pattern of thinking to which it fits is very much present throughout these writings. There is a clear, on-going concern to delineate politics as a set of procedures, institutional rules and non-coercive laws that set the terms for the peaceful co-existence of citizens pursuing different, and irreconcilable, moral goals. What these writings also show is that this perspective bumped along with a sceptical – sometimes anti-political – take upon the actual practice of politics and politicians: ‘politics are an inferior form of human activity to anyone who has no desire to rule others’,⁴⁴ and ‘politics is a suitable subject of conversation - indeed perhaps that is all it is suitable for’.⁴⁵

What is also apparent here is that one of the sources of such judgements was Oakeshott’s enduring, Edwardian unease about the advent of mass democracy. ‘The people’ are very rarely invoked in a positive manner in relation to the politics of his

⁴¹ CV [33]

⁴² 20 [60]. Oakeshott did not typify the critical reaction. According to Bob Spitz, *Time Magazine* declared it ‘a historic departure in the progress of music and the *New Statesman* praised its elevation of pop to the level of Art’ (Spitz 2005).

⁴³ *Hobbes on Civil Association* (1975), Basil Blackwell: Oxford

⁴⁴ 13 [80]

⁴⁵ CV [D]

age. As he put it in 1955, the nature of democratic politics 'is what makes democracy difficult. Not only or not so much, the stupidity of the mass, but their superstition'.⁴⁶ This powerful seam of pessimism about the participative dimension of democratic politics needs to be brought into plain sight for those debating his relevance, and considered along with those features of his thought that continue to appeal today.

Quite frequently – as for instance in his essay *The Masses in Representative Democracy*⁴⁷ -- he depicts 'mass man' as an archetype who stands in stark contrast with the spirit and ethos of the rugged individualist, the courageous gentleman. But Oakeshott knew all too well that the conditions in which the latter could thrive were disappearing as he wrote, and so the alternative individualist ideal which he lauded was freighted with a deep sense of elegy and loss.

These various ideas constituted the platform upon which his own, highly distinctive, understanding of the political took shape. Politics, he argued in the most cautious of terms, needed to be understood within its own limits, and insulated from moral visions and ideological programmes that threatened to jeopardise its constitutive features. And it needed to be preserved, above all, from hubristic theories that regarded it as the vehicle for the realization of some ulterior purpose. In the wake of the publication of this extraordinary and difficult medley of writings, we are provided with the opportunity to glimpse the range of cultural influences and intellectual sources which flowed into the political thinking of this most English of philosophical minds.

⁴⁶ 14 [12]

⁴⁷ In *Rationalism in Politics*, *op. cit.*, n. 3