

'A Dark Age Devoted to Barbaric Affluence' Oakeshott's Verdict on the Modern World.

A paper by Ivo Mosley for the Michael Oakeshott Association Conference,
Colorado Springs, 2006.

Introduction.

'The beginning of a dark age devoted to barbaric affluence': Oakeshott's assertion of where civilization was heading in 1972 struck some as unduly pessimistic. Now, thirty-four years later, his diagnosis seems (to many) less like a gloomy prediction, more like a well-put observation.

I was drawn to Oakeshott's work because I felt he offered a convincing account of much that is puzzling in our modern world. He is particularly refreshing in one important respect: whatever his shortcomings may be, an excessive reverence for sacred cows is not one of them. This lack of reverence is surely one reason for his relative obscurity. To have a good solid constituency, you must make obeisance to at least one sacred cow. If you would be an alternative guru *à la* Chomsky, you must believe in 'the people'; if you would be a free-market hero, you must worship the golden calves of affluence and corporate power; if you would be a progressive liberal, you must genuflect to the moos of rationalism and science.

Oakeshott is in thrall to none of these. In some ways, his outlook is closer to certain Eastern philosophers than to the mainstream European tradition. He is particularly fond of quoting the philosopher Chuang Tzu¹ and various features of his thought seem more familiar in the Eastern than in the Western tradition: to mention a few, his disdain for power; his non-religious spirituality; his respect for ritual²; his detachment from worldly ambition; and his recognition of story-telling as a means by which philosophy occasionally 'reaches the level of literature'³.

I mention these because they are all significant in the story of Oakeshott's preoccupation with the idea of a 'dark age of barbaric affluence'. The sentence in which this phrase appears is the following:

'The design to substitute 'socialization' for education has gone far enough to be recognised as the most momentous occurrence of this century, the greatest of the

¹ For instance pp 14, 41, 417, 480. They are not referenced in the index.

² 'In short, the intimations of government are to be found in ritual, not in religion or philosophy; in the enjoyment of orderly and peaceable behaviour, not in the search for truth or perfection.' Hsün Tzu or Michael Oakeshott? (In fact, RiP 428).

³ His most expressive elaboration of this is the essay '*Leviathan: A Myth*'.

adversities to have overtaken our culture, the beginning of a dark age devoted to barbaric affluence.'

I want to examine what he means by this sentence. My motive is not to find guidance or useful tips, just a bit of understanding. Oakeshott warned us repeatedly that philosophy has no practical use. 'If we seek guidance,' he wrote in an essay titled *Political Philosophy*, 'we must hang up philosophy'.⁴ And yet in the same essay he introduced a paradox. Philosophy, being 'radically subversive reflection', questions the very assumptions we employ in practical living and so may have far-reaching practical consequences. Oakeshott compared the philosopher to a scientist investigating the nature of heat. The scientist is not trying to warm the room he inhabits, but his investigation may have huge implications for those who want to warm rooms in the future.

And Oakeshott certainly was 'radically subversive' in his thinking. He put his position most forcefully in the last dozen-or-so pages of 'On Human Conduct'⁵ where he ridicules political opinion-makers as 'somnambulists' and 'jokers', and states that our familiar political dualisms - such as left/right, progressive/conservative, pluralist/centralist - are insignificant compared to the the manifestations of two fundamentally opposed human dispositions, which may for convenience's sake be abbreviated to individualism and collectivism. This opposition, and the tensions it brings to human activity, is the subject of most of his work.

Isaiah Berlin, taking an idea from the ancient Greek poet Archilochus, suggested that thinkers can be categorised as either foxes or hedgehogs. 'The fox knows many tricks,' wrote Archilochus in the 7th century BCE. 'The hedgehog only knows one, but it's a winner'.

Hedgehog-philosophers, says Berlin, 'relate everything to a single central vision, a single organising principle in terms of which all they are and say has significance.'⁶ Oakeshott made a similar observation about Hobbes some decades earlier; 'the coherence of Hobbes thought,' he said, 'lies in a single passionate thought that pervades its parts.' Surely Oakeshott too is a philosopher of this type; a hedgehog-philosopher⁷. He elaborates his single central vision in many manifestations; in politics, in law, in morality, in education, and in aesthetics.

⁴ In 'Political Philosophy' (RPML p 155).

⁵ OHC pages 318-320.

⁶ In 'Russian Thinkers', The Hogarth Press 1978, p.22. Interestingly, Oakeshott made a similarly-worded claim for Hobbes (RiP 236) some decades earlier, using a metaphor not from Archilochus but from Confucius.

⁷ Curiously, the metaphor he used to represent civil association (from Schopenhauer) involved porcupines huddling together for warmth. (RiP 460).

Oakeshott's central vision is a polarity, and its political manifestation is familiar to all his readers. The political polarity is between two incompatible answers to the question, What role should the State play in our lives? The collectivist says the state should be the overseer of a great common enterprise and involve us all in a great common purpose. This kind of state needs great power to realize its vision. The individualist believes the state should consist in an indifferent and impartial rule of law, accomodating our differences and mitigating conflict without imposing uniformity⁸. This kind of state needs a bare minimum of power.

Oakeshott's object of attention was the modern European state; but his analysis is important for the rest of the world, partly because various versions of the modern European state have been adopted by - or imposed upon - other nations of the world, and partly because the economic and military power of states built upon the European model have made them objects of desire and political aspiration.

Returning to our sentence, it concerns of course not politics but education, culture and civilization.

At first sight it might seem surprising that he called 'the design to substitute socialization for education' 'the most momentous occurrence' of a century that had endured and seen off both Hitler and Stalin. It is an unusually passionate sentence for Oakeshott, who normally expresses himself with a calm and rather English reserve. To understand what he meant, we have to consider what he meant by 'socialization', 'education', 'culture' and 'barbarism'.

Oakeshott returned again and again to the theme that the words we use are full of ambiguities.⁹

Words such as 'freedom', 'rights', and 'democracy', he said, have long histories, and their meanings have shifted over time. Furthermore, when unscrupulous operators use them to rally supporters in some great cause, such words tend to become mere slogans, hazy promises of better things to come. The warm glow of anticipation they excite may be as deceptive as the witches' promises to Macbeth.

Education is another such word with multiple meanings. It can mean practical or vocational training. It can mean getting any old qualification for earning a living (as Oakeshott puts it, a 'certificate to let one in on the exploitation of the world'¹⁰). It can mean a child discovering who he or she really *is*. Or it can mean the business of transmitting our culture and civilization from one generation to the next.

⁸ RP (1991) p 460.

⁹ His fullest coverage of this is in 'Talking Politics' (1975) in RiP.

¹⁰ VLL 117.

Oakeshott meant something larger, more complex and more vital than all of these. Moreover, he felt that liberal education was under mortal threat; and in order to defend itself, it needed to understand itself clearly.

Liberal education, he said, is where, 'emancipated from the here and now of current engagements, we learn the languages of human self-understanding. ... These are the different languages of (for example) the natural sciences, history, philosophy, of poetic imagination.' These languages are 'not merely diverse modes of understanding the world, but the most substantial expressions we have of human self-understanding'.¹¹

In one of his most resonant idioms, Oakeshott said these languages of self-understanding are themselves voices in a conversation. This conversation is 'an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure in which we enter into a variety of modes of understanding the world and ourselves, and are not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inconclusiveness of it all.'¹² The flourishing of these voices is what constitutes our civilization. Barbarism intrudes when one voice wants to dominate the conversation, and it is victorious when one voice succeeds in suppressing all the rest. According to Oakeshott, it is the art of conversation that 'always distinguishes the civilized man from the barbarian.'¹³

Liberal education is the process of learning some of these languages and becoming acquainted with others. Oakeshott emphasises *learning*: 'None of us is born human,' he says; 'each of us *is* what we *learn* to become.'¹⁴ This statement, of course, would stampede several varieties of sacred cow.

But the truth of the statement is surely evident when we consider how a child brought up by wolves is hardly what we call human at all, nor will it be able to learn this quality subsequently. Stories about feral children with happy endings - such as Francois Truffault's film *L'Enfant Sauvage* - have to alter the historical facts upon which they are based. Feral children do not in fact learn humanity. They remain savage.

So, education is part of a slow and sometimes painful process of learning to be human. 'For the teacher, it is part of his engagement of *being* human; for the learner it is the engagement of *becoming* human.'¹⁵ People who disparage this view of education as 'cultural conditioning' are talking rubbish, says Oakeshott: 'a man is his culture; and what he is, he has had to learn to become.'¹⁶

¹¹ VLL 28, 29.

¹² VLL 30.

¹³ WiH 191.

¹⁴ VLL 6.

¹⁵ VLL 72.

¹⁶ VLL 17.

Barbarians, by definition, are people who know nothing of a cultured way of life, and when a civilization weakens they gather to loot, and maybe destroy it. The kind of barbarians Oakeshott had in mind are not wild-eyed horse-riding types from the wastes of central Asia. They are barbarians within - like the ones Erasmus wrote about in his *Antibarbari*, also in defence of education, only five hundred years earlier. They are men and women who want to seize control of society in the name of some great vision, in order to impose that vision on the rest of us. In Erasmus' time, the barbarians were religious dogmatists; in Oakeshott's day, they were and are social engineers.

Socialization

'Socialization' is the process by which social engineers create a new kind of person who will be malleable material for their visionary dreams. Would-be social engineers are inevitably confronted with the question, what kind of citizen do we want to produce? Of course, the answer varies from time to time, from society to society, and it is a tribute to the versatility of the social engineer that the nature of the project is less important than the fact that there is a project to be getting on with. Oakeshott described socialization as 'the doctrine that because the current here-and-now is very much more uniform than it used to be, education should recognize and promote this uniformity... Every learner should be recognised as nothing but a role-performer in a so-called social system.'¹⁷

When socialization replaces education, what is offered to the next generation shrinks from the unknown and potentially infinite to the small and always shrivelling. What could have been an adventure in self-understanding, its possibilities intimated but never known, becomes the business of accommodating to a contemporary culture that is already shrinking as its members grow unfamiliar with the notion that there is more to life than the petty concerns of the moment. Socialization, says Oakeshott, 'not only strikes at the heart of liberal learning, it portends the abolition of man.'¹⁸

What does Oakeshott mean by this astonishing phrase, the abolition of man?

I suppose it is fair to say of Oakeshott that he was not, in any sense of the word, a materialist; nor even a utilitarian. In this respect he quotes Paul Valery: 'Tout ce qui fait le prix de la vie est curieusement inutile': 'Everything that makes up the value of life is curiously useless'.¹⁹

¹⁷ VLL 20.

¹⁸ VLL 20.

¹⁹ VLL 28. A modern idiom for this would be, perhaps: "No one's last words were ever, 'I wish I'd spent more time at the office.'"

Affluence, of course, is not inherently barbaric. Aristotle was only the first to remind us that a certain amount of affluence is necessary for civilization to exist at all. Affluence becomes barbaric when all other activities are regarded as secondary or subservient to its pursuit - when society is permeated by what Oakeshott referred to, always in quotation marks, as 'the plausible ethics of productivity'.²⁰ In a book review of 1949, he attacked this ethic:

'The good life here is nothing other than the enjoyment by more and more people of more and more of everything ... So far as I am concerned it involves a revolting nothingness, which has only to be successful to reduce human life to absolute insignificance'²¹.

The 'plausible ethics of productivity' produce a slavery to wants. He wrote about this slavery to wants in various essays and from various points of view.

In his essay 'Work and Play', for instance, he wrote:

'To be a creature of wants, desires which cannot have more than a temporary satisfaction because each satisfaction, however easily achieved, leads only to new wants - to be a creature of wants is itself a curse, a condemnation to a life in which every achievement is also a frustration. ...It is an activity of getting and spending, of making and consuming, endlessly.'²²

The dream of satisfying every want, says Oakeshott, has consumed our civilization. In the same essay, he describes the progress of that dream as it took hold in the West:

'I suppose that at no time in the history of the world has mankind been more determined to devote itself to exploitation of nature for the satisfaction of all its wants, less dismayed at the proliferation of wants to be satisfied, or more confident of success.

This enterprise, I have suggested, is as old as the human race, as old as the emergence of man as a creature of wants rather than of needs. What is comparatively new is the faith and fervour with which it is being pursued and the manner in which all else tends to be regarded as subordinate to the happiness that comes from the satisfaction of wants.'²³

Oakeshott was fairly pessimistic about where this enterprise would lead.

²⁰ SPDCE xx, xxi.

²¹ Cambridge Journal 2, 694. 1949.

²² WiH 309.

²³ WiH 307-8.

'When what a man can get from the use and control of the natural world and his fellow men is the sole criterion of what he thinks he needs, there is no hope that the major part of mankind will find anything but good in this exploitation until it has been carried far enough to reveal its bitterness to the full.'²⁴

Oakeshott concludes his essay by saying that the defence against this 'barbarity' can only lie in education. Socialization provides no such defense; in fact, it prepares the citizen to be a working unit in this slavery to wants.

As a project capable of uniting society, 'enjoyment by more and more people of more and more of everything' proved to be a promising one. All the great powers - corporations, governments trade unions - were happy to join in. By and large, democracies embraced the project with open arms, and in his essay *The Masses in Representative Democracy* Oakeshott examined the process by which this occurred.

Here, Oakeshott explains what he means by a phrase we come across often in his work: 'the illusions of democracy'. The idea that democracy is to some extent an illusion is familiar, but as usual Oakeshott provides us with a more chilling insight.

'What in fact has happened,' he writes, 'whenever the disposition of 'popular government' has imposed itself, is that the prospective representative has drawn up his own mandate and then, by a familiar trick of ventriloquism, has put it into the mouth of his electors: as an instructed delegate, he is not an individual, and as a 'leader' he relieves his followers of the need to make choices for themselves. ... Thus was generated a new art, not of ruling, but of knowing what offer will collect most votes, and of making it in such a manner that it appears to come from 'the people' (the art, in short, of 'leading' in the modern idiom).'²⁵

So, here we have two themes; the leader as ventriloquist, and the pursuit of affluence as a purpose popular enough to unite a democratic state. Oakeshott returned to both these themes in his magnum opus 'On Human Conduct', where we have the memorable sentence: 'The outcome of trying to make the state a paradise has always been to turn it into a hell'²⁶.

²⁴ VLL 124.

²⁵ RiP 380. Oakeshott also referred to Marx as 'the German ventriloquist,' a phrase that can only delight anyone who has spent time listening to the rantings of some of the ventriloquist's dummies.

²⁶ OHC p319, n

This sentence provided him with the theme of his last substantial work, titled *The Tower of Babel*. He approaches his theme in a somewhat unusual way - by retelling an old myth.²⁷

Myth

Oakeshott had a high opinion of myth. Hobbes' *Leviathan*, according to Oakeshott, is 'one of the masterpieces of the literature of our language and civilization' because it is an authentic re-telling of the myth that is the common dream of our civilization. When a work of philosophy reaches this level, he says, 'its gift is not an access of imaginative power, but an increase of knowledge; it will prompt and it will instruct. In it, we shall be reminded of the common dream that binds the generations together, and the myth will be made more intelligible to us.'

Philosophy prompting? Philosophy instructing? Can this be Oakeshott talking? And - myth and philosophy all scrambled up? Was not Oakeshott the great drawer of boundaries? Did he not insist that category errors are *the* great source of confusion? But consistency is the first victim of genius and one of Oakeshott's strengths is that he did not suppress contradictions.

The Tower of Babel

It seems to me that Oakeshott's retelling of the Babel story is even more illuminating of our present condition than of the time it was written; in other words, we have moved nearer to the model of human conduct he describes.

The citizens of Babel want not just affluence, but an end to any sense of deprivation. They resent the humiliating conditions imposed upon Adam and Eve when they were thrown out of the Garden of Eden. They want to transform their world of dirt and pain, of thorns and thistles and sweat and mortality, into a land of guaranteed plenty. They take *seriously* the old fantasy of a land where everything is for free; the land flowing with milk and honey, the peach-blossom fountain, the Big Rock Candy Mountain. They are going to make good their dreams by storming heaven; by taking away from God control of the satisfactions he doles out so stingily to humankind.

²⁷ The essay is the second of two he wrote with the same title - *The Tower of Babel*. Had he read Lu Hsun's *Old Tales Retold*, I wonder?

The city of Babel is in many ways recognizable to us. It is 'a city of Freedom; the home of every imaginable lib.'²⁸ Its people are self-absorbed and self-indulgent; they are rebellious, with the rebelliousness 'not of wild and passionate people, but of spoiled children.' They are 'not strikingly affluent', but they are 'devoted to affluence'. What they expect from life is the 'ready satisfaction of all their wants.'²⁹ But because their wants are unlimited, they experience a constant sense of deprivation. Indeed, this 'profound feeling of being deprived'³⁰ is what they share in common.

The ruler of Babel is a charismatic leader. Like other Babelians he is a person of infinite wants. He rouses the people to communal action in the one project which can unite them all: putting an end once and for all to their sense of deprivation. They will build a mighty tower all the way up to heaven, displace God by force and 'appropriate for the enjoyment of all Babelians the limitless profusion of paradise.'³¹

The citizens of Babel are thus joined in a great collective enterprise, fuelled by enthusiasm for a better future. The leader is able to compulsorily commandeer resources (including 'human resources') for the great task in hand, and all that makes up a free society - institutions, professions, law are absorbed into the great task, their original purpose forgotten.

Because almost everyone is caught up in the enthusiasm, there is no need for political oppression. Sceptics go unheard except in their homes. The government is not guilty of 'the more scandalous charges which may be brought against collectivism in action'³²: there are no concentration camps, no wars, no torture camps. Babelians are not racist or intolerant. These obvious evils are not Oakeshott's theme. His theme is that the project itself is enough to create hell and eventually bring ruin upon them all.

As time goes on, what started off as 'a distant and precarious vision of limitless loot' turns into a monotony of hard work. Paradise seems as remote as ever. Moreover, the morally dubious nature of the undertaking has its effect upon the mood of the people. In a fascinating passage, Oakeshott describes the difference between living in a civilization of which one may feel proud, and being part of an enterprise which engenders misgivings - if not positive shame:

²⁸ OH 191.

²⁹ OH 192.

³⁰ Ibid 196.

³¹ Ibid 195.

³² RiP 399.

‘Confidence in the nobility of a long and difficult enterprise may go far to sustain its pursuit and it may even make its collapse endurable. Indeed, an illusion of nobility may suffice. But those who invest all their energies and hopes in an undertaking even tinged with depravity are bound to its success and are apt to acquire an obscure self-contempt which qualifies their faith, first in their fellows, and then in themselves.’³³

Discontent and paranoia become the norm. Enjoyment of the present dries up; everything is sacrificed to the vision of a plentiful tomorrow. The diverse small enjoyments of life are long forgotten and the citizens of Babel hang around listlessly waiting for the promised abundance, prey to all sorts of doubts. Are they being duped? When the ascent into heaven comes, will some be left out? Or will something go wrong, making a mockery of their lives spent in one huge effort?

Eventually, in a fit of mass paranoia, the citizens of Babel storm the Tower. Heavy with their weight and shaking with the thunder of their feet, the Tower comes crashing down. Everyone is destroyed, even the little crippled boy who could not keep up.

I said earlier that the theme of this essay was, ‘The outcome of trying to make the state a paradise has always been to turn it into a hell’³⁴. Oakeshott appends a poetical version of this sentence at the end of his *Tower of Babel* essay:

Those who in the Elysian fields would dwell
Do but extend the boundaries of hell.

This final collapse is only one moral of the story. The other moral, more pertinent perhaps to our present condition, is the hell it creates along the way. Long before it destroys itself, its citizens are living in a hell of dissatisfactions.

³³ OH 205.

³⁴ OHC p319, n

As a coda to this tracing of Oakeshott's ideas on the project of modernity, I want to quote from another late essay, 'A Place of Learning'. In this essay, first presented here at Colorado College I believe in 1974, I presume under the invitation of Timothy Fuller, Oakeshott ties in the problems faced by educators with the problems we humans face more generally. 'The world in which many children now grow up,' he writes, 'is crowded, not necessarily with occupants and not at all with memorable experiences, but with happenings; it is a ceaseless flow of seductive trivialities which invoke neither reflection nor choice but instant participation. A child quickly becomes aware that he cannot too soon plunge into this flow or immerse himself in it too quickly; to pause is to be swept with the chilling fear of never having lived at all... This world has but one language, soon learned; the language of appetite.'³⁵

To that he might have added, quoting Shakespeare: 'And appetite, an universal wolf, must make perforce an universal prey, and last eat up himself.'³⁶

³⁵ VLL 33.

³⁶ Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, 1, 3, 121.