Michael Oakeshott would have enjoyed his funeral. There was almost nothing remarkable about it. The pelting rain and rough winds that swept the Dorset coast on the morning of December 24 had subsided into a mild blue sky by the early afternoon when the funeral party of a few dozen people converged from several points in England and abroad on the village church at Langton Matravers. The service followed the simplest Anglican rites, and the village pastor, as he likes to be called, began the eulogy sparsely, with the dates of the deceased's birth and death, his education, war record, academic career, the names of his surviving family, the thirty-year period of his local residence. There would have little more to say, had not the pastor recorded his own astonishment upon opening the Daily Telegraph of December 21, 1990, and reading: 'Michael Oakeshott, who has died aged 89, was the greatest political philosopher in the Anglo-Saxon tradition since Mill – or even Burke.' The Times the next day brought equally portentous praise: over a sixty-year career of writing and teaching, Oakeshott had done more than anyone this century to make conservatism intellectually respectable. The Guardian called him ‘perhaps the most original academic political philosopher of this century’. And the Independent devoted the better part of a page to an erudite essay on the less overtly political aspects of the philosopher’s work, comparing it to that of Montaigne in its composure, humour, gentleness, and self-restraint.

'It appears,' the parson said, 'that we have had a very great man living amongst us.' To verify this he had opened a few of Oakeshott’s books, but these, he confessed with a wrinkled brow, would require further study. He consulted instead neighbours, a shopkeeper, a delivery man. They reported that the deceased was a kind man, a cheerful man, very helpful, generous, unpretentious and remarkably youthful. He had a sparkle in his eye, a vigorous gait and a rapport with children, and he drove to Swanage, the nearest town, in his blue MG sports car. Yet no one locally had the slightest idea what the sprightly octogenarian did. His wife, an
artist, had a studio in the village, but the philosopher never spoke of his own work.

The parson impressed upon his audience that the Oakeshottts lived modestly in Acton, a cluster of quarry-worker’s cottages on the outskirts of the main village. He was struck that so eminent a man should have dwelt in so humble a place. He compared Oakeshott to St. Francis, an analogy he found so gripping that he thenceforth referred to the deceased MG-owner as Francis rather than Michael, even as the coffin was lowered into the earth. As the funeral party walked to the churchyard and thence to the Village Hall for sherry and tea, the philosopher’s former colleagues and students from the London School of Economics mingled with his Dorset neighbours, his family and a few old friends. The conversation centered on the lucky change of weather and on Oakeshott himself. At sundown, Christmas Eve, the party dispersed.

His widow returned to their cottage and the visits of kind neighbours, who took with good humour the parson’s suggestion that they sat in a hermit’s hovel. By Acton standards the Oakeshott cottage was ample, formed of both halves of what had been a two-family house. A small kitchen, dining room, and upstairs guest bedroom and bath occupied what had been one dwelling; a living room, study and upstairs bedroom the other. What might have been a second upstairs room had been pulled out to give the living room a two story skylit space over the fireplace. The wall space that was not covered with book shelves displayed Christel Oakeshott’s abstract paintings. In all, the place had more standard amenities than the Oakeshott’s Covent Garden apartment, which had lacked a private bath during most of their residence in London.

The furnishings of the cottage were not so much rude as miscellaneous. The kitchen had two small refrigerators, an old stove, a toaster oven, a space heater and mismatched cabinets. A single piece of carpet, bought at a church rummage sale, covered the floor. Oakeshott had charted the irregular pattern of the appliances and cabinets on the back of the carpet, laid it out in the garden and cut it exactly to fit. The dishes, cutlery, chairs, rugs and sofas in the house were mostly second-hand, bought at the local flea markets and at the Swanage Oxfam shop where Oakeshott also assembled much of his wardrobe. As a young man he had been a dandy, famous for lecturing in a yellow velvet jacket with a red rose pinned to the lapel. His Dorset attire gave no clue to this past. A playful touch, a gift from devoted friends, brightened the living room: an antique musical bird cage with a tiny metal lovebird hung in a window facing out onto the garden. The small dining room had just enough space to seat three and house an upright piano, which the Oakeshottts made available to an Acton child for practice. But
the main furnishings of the cottage were Oakeshott’s books. He had disposed of most of those he considered merely informative and retained a consummately civilised library. In his later years he took to giving away some of his more cherished volumes, but still there remained shelves upon shelves testifying to years of enjoyment of history and fiction, philosophy and poetry, memoirs and essays, and pleasant hours of browsing in second-hand bookshops. In his last year he re-read the works of one of his favourite Americans, Willa Cather. Among his personal treasures were an odd assortment marking his own family and education: a Church of England missal translated into Latin, picked up as a curio by his father, a Fabian civil servant; a memorial volume from St George’s School, Harpenden, a Quaker-sponsored, progressive, coeducational public school that he had attended during the First World War; a green leather-bound set of Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, given him as a prize for undergraduate studies at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge; a carefully annotated paperback copy of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* from his university days at Marburg and Tübingen in the mid-twenties, with a batch of notes still tucked into the pages. A shelf above his desk held the several editions and translations of his own modest output. In all there were two major treatises separated by forty years, the second thoroughly revising the grounds of the first, about two dozen essays collected under overlapping thematic headings, an anthology of political readings, a critical edition and a co-authored book on horse racing. Though a gracefully bookish man, Oakeshott, as a philosopher, put little trust in the printed word. ‘A philosopher is not, as such, a scholar; and philosophy, more often than not, has foundered in learning. There is no book which is indispensable for the study of philosophy. And to speak of a philosopher as ignorant is to commit an *ignoratio elenchii*; an historian or a scientist may be ignorant, philosophers merely stupid.’

Not one of his books had a proper bibliography. Even his magisterial edition of *Hobbes’ Leviathan* contained a list entitled ‘Books for Further Reading’, which was limited to five modern titles, the most recent being a 1934 work by Leo Strauss. His footnoting was sparse and meant to amplify or amuse rather than to engage in academic diplomacy or display. In scholarly discourse he never rattled off references, affecting instead an English amnesia for the names of works on which he was expert. Yet when it came to suggesting an apt title, he was like a wise old herbalist dispensing time-tested remedies. If one were working on a problem, he had just the volume to advance one’s thinking. If one were going on a trip, he would present the perfect travel memoir of that place. As a guest, he would rummage around for hours in second-hand bookshops until he found just the right volumes to leave as a present for each
member of the family. Shortly before his death he put into his wife’s hands Elinore Pruitt Stewart’s memoir of ranching in Wyoming, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*, which concludes: ‘I have tried every kind of work this ranch affords, and I can do any of it. Of course, I am extra strong, but those who try know that strength and knowledge come with doing.’ Having done most of the pottering around the house and garden during their thirty years of marriage, Michael also left at his desk a newly acquired *Reader’s Digest* home-repair book, *How to Do Just About Anything*, a title that gently mocked his famous critique of Rationalism.

His knack for prescribing the right book was of a piece with the tact that marked his conversation. Conversation requires entering obliquely into the world of others, and Oakeshott had an uncanny gift for it. He never held forth. He saw conversation not as a scored recitative but as a spontaneously improvised dance in which each participant responds to the movements of the others. A clairvoyance in anticipating the direction of an interlocutor’s thought enabled him to enter the flow with gravity or humour, a nod or a monologue, as the rhythm of talk required. He especially enjoyed conversation with women. In his own generation, this was taken as a mark of unsoundness, or worse, of amorous proclivities. Oakeshott was guilty on both accounts. He did love women. And he took them seriously as intellectuals. The combination was not always happy. Tending to romanticize the capacities of the women he knew, he was bound to suffer occasional disappointments. Should the rare student or colleague in whom he had placed high intellectual hopes turn out to be unexpectedly obtuse, he took it especially hard if the person were female. A conversation with Oakeshott on philosophy might take many unexpected turns and last for long hours, or might, as he put it in one of his essays, be ‘put by for another day but never concluded, . . . [with] the participants as playfellows moved, not by a belief in the evanescence of error and imperfection but only by their loyalty and affection for one another.’ ‘Loyalty and affection for one another’ – is the abiding memory of the student who had him for individual tutorial. His normal procedure was to ask the tutee to suggest a writer or a text with which to begin their weekly conversations. If he detected a spark of receptivity to philosophy or history, the two modes of understanding he was intent to teach, all rules were then off. Meetings scheduled for an hour might stretch to two or three. Sometimes the student would be asked to prepare a paper, but not as a regular requirement. Tutor and tutee might prolong the talk for an entire term before the first short essay was assigned. Oakeshott’s lack of assertiveness in these sessions was unfeigned. His view of what he had to teach left little room for eristic. He
believed that teaching was also learning. The teacher had to study his pupil, had to attend to the manner as well as to the lesson. Moreover, ‘some activities, like intellectual inquiry, remain always activities of learning’. In a university a tutor and his tutee were both learners, of differing degrees of competence and experience. The aim of a tutorial, opposed to a lecture, was not to convey organized information, or even to impart a sense of how to interpret and use it, but to bring the student along with oneself to a new level of understanding. Oakeshott’s tutees would come away from these sessions without notes but with an example that would, in time, strengthen their appreciation of what Oakeshott called ‘the intellectual virtues’:

How does a pupil learn disinterested curiosity, patience, honesty, exactness, industry, concentration and doubt? How does he acquire a sensibility to small differences and the ability to recognize intellectual elegance? How does he come to inherit the disposition to submit to refutation? How does he not merely learn the love of truth and justice, but learn it in such a way as to escape the reproach of fanaticism? And beyond all this there is something more difficult to acquire: namely, the ability to detect the individual intelligence which is at work in every utterance, even those which convey impersonal information . . . The intellectual virtues may be imparted only by a teacher who really cares about them for their own sake, and never stoops to the priggishness of mentioning them. Not the cry but the rising of the wild duck impels the flock to follow him in flight.

Conversation for Oakeshott was not merely the preferred pedagogical method. It was for him the very basis of education, and a metaphor for civilization itself. Each educational encounter was in its small way an initiation into civilized discourse – what Dilthey called a *geistige Welt*. The languages of science and mathematics, of arts and letters, of sport, religion, the trades and the professions were all for him part of a ‘conversation’ that made up the human inheritance. Only in entering this conversation could one become fully human. Education was everywhere the price of entry. For the human birthright consisted not in artifacts but in the modes of intercourse that gave rise to them. These one could possess only by learning them. The ultimate business of education, then, was learning to be a human being. It might include training in a trade or a skill or a discipline. But to focus on the merely employable or certifiable aspects of education truncated one’s vision of human possibility. The teacher, however, humble his sphere, had to be understood and respected, and to understand and respect himself, as the agent par excellence of civilization. ‘He may be excused if he finds the present dominant image of civilized life too disagreeable to impart with any enthusiasm to his pupils. But if he has no confidence in any of the standards of worth written into this inheritance of human achievement, he had better not be a teacher; he would have nothing to teach.’ The calling of the teacher was
neither more nor less than to initiate the pupil into ‘the conversation of mankind’.

In Oakeshott’s essays, indeed, conversation is presented as ‘the appropriate image of human intercourse’, and it bears so integral a relation to his person and his practice as to make it also an accessible image with which to approach the more difficult parts of his philosophical work. The notion of conversation sets the tone of his later philosophy, reflects his leading sensibilities and suggests the programme of inquiry he followed. His view of conversation, like his practice of it, is non-hierarchical, non-directive and non-assertive. In a conversation, as opposed to a disputation, one voice cannot hope to dominate the others. There is no fixed agenda. There is no standard external to the conversation itself by which to judge the utterances made. There is no final point or destination or resolution or decision to be reached:

In a conversation the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no ‘truth’ to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought. They are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or refute one another, and therefore the cogency of their utterances does not depend upon their all speaking in the same idiom; they may differ without disagreeing. Of course, a conversation may have passages of argument and a speaker is not forbidden to be demonstrative; but reasoning is neither sovereign nor alone, and the conversation itself does not compose an argument.

Conversation is one way of translating – and reinterpreting – the Greek *dialektikê*, which from the earliest times has been central to philosophy. Oakeshott returns it to its most inclusive meaning. In contrast to the two philosophers he first admired, Plato and Hegel, and to Aristotle, upon whom he later came to rely, Oakeshott uses the notion of conversation to demystify philosophy itself. Instead of fastening on ‘dialectic’ as the aspect of reasoning that places philosophy at the very highest rank, he portrays the philosopher’s voice as merely one among many in a broader discourse. The essence conversation in his view lies in the diversity of voices that may enter into it, and the ability of each to enjoy and acknowledge another without losing its own integrity. The speakers pursue the talk for its own sake, both because they have something serious they want to talk about and because, as human beings, they enjoy the interplay. Philosophy is concerned with the character and limits of each of the voices. It may put its remarks affirmatively or critically, with ardour or resignation, in an appreciative or dyspeptic tone, but it always has the same kind of thing to say: that each voice is less than complete, that its truth to itself, its authenticity, emerges from a specific context, and that there can be discerned in each voice ‘languages’ that are at once the common heritage of humanity and open to the individual modulations of a given speaker. Because philosophy has no subject matter of its own, it
attends only to the conversation itself, listening carefully to each speaker. It is a quintessentially conversable voice because it limits itself to reflecting upon the utterances of others. The pace and cadence of Oakeshott's prose harmonise with the conversational image. His writing follows the rhythms of the spoken word without stooping to the colloquial. It presents, at its best, an elevated diction purged of the usual lecture-room tropes. There is rarely an enumeration of essential points to assist the taker of notes, little refutation of other writers, none of the logician's focus on paradox, scant analysis of cases, an absence of jargon. One theme seems to flow effortlessly into another with subtlety and nuance that may disconcert the reader accustomed to heavier hands: Can any writing this seductive be sound? And there may be more substantial causes for unease. The image of civilization as conversation does not clip the wings of philosophy alone. It dissolves the absolute claims of all other voices. It suggests that each and every human achievement is contingent upon others, that there is no preordained pattern, no standard for human intercourse not already present within it as an inheritance. It thus joins sensibilities not often found in tandem. On one side, it encourages reverence: everything we are and we have we owe to what has come before. On another, it frees the imagination to doubt and to dare: we become what we learn and choose to make of ourselves; our birthright is to find a voice of our own. Oakeshott's union of piety with adventure, tradition with individuality, seriousness with playfulness, reverence with skepticism, affection for human frailty with searing criticism of error is not easily classifiable in twentieth-century philosophy. In a world preoccupied with labels and isms, he defies easy categorization. To the reader who seeks in philosophy a fixed doctrine or method, his writing seems irritatingly elusive. Yet undergirding Oakeshott's eloquence and his imagery is a rigorous logical structure of his own composition. To make place for a conversational sensibility, he reworks the way in which western philosophy takes account of variety in experience. In doing so, he has left his mark on a central category: modality.

'Modality,' F.H. Bradley observed, 'is not an alluring theme.' Like critical philosophy generally, it lacks substantive content. Modal distinctions are the philosopher's way of dealing with variety without invoking facts, natural kinds, individuals or classes. One does not speak of the Golden Delicious, the Granny Smith and the McIntosh as modes of an apple, though they are varieties. But one does speak of modes of perceiving, cognizing or eating an apple, modes of being, modes of judgment, modes of the syllogism, modes of the musical scale, modes of transport and grammatical moods, a variant of modes. Modes mark the line at which judgmental distinctions are treated as differences of kind rather
than degree. Modes do not take up time or space though there may be temporal and spatial modes. Modal distinctions are compossible rather than mutually exclusive. Like the voices in Oakeshott’s conversation, they may coexist without conflicting. To speak of a mode is not simply to notice variety, but to insert some active principle of mind into the discussion of it. Modal distinctions follow some pattern, rule, or order that is the product of human intelligence. It is for this reason that Hegel rejected Spinoza’s view of intellect and extension as the two universal modes (Modi) of substance: since the notion of modality already presupposes a world mediated by mind, intellect cannot be modally coequal with extension. And it is for the same reason that philosophers hewing to a strictly empiricist line studiously avoid the category except in its narrowest technical usages within logic. Oakeshott’s first book, Experience and its Modes, proposed a conception of modality that has stamped his thinking ever since. He summarized the theme for the dust jacket of the first paperback edition in 1985 (the 1933 and 1966 hardback editions of one thousand copies each having been sold out):

Modality: human experience recognized as a variety of independent, self-consistent worlds of discourse, each the invention of human intelligence, but each also to be understood as abstract and an arrest in human experience. The theme is pursued in a consideration of the practical, the historical and the scientific modes of understanding.

Oakeshott’s usage is unusual in restricting modality to ‘self-consistent worlds of discourse’ or (in the book itself) ‘worlds of ideas’. A mode for him is not, as it has been for most philosophers, a general principle of differentiation; it is a coherent construct, a world unto itself that portrays the world at large under a set of abstractions peculiar to itself. Thus, science is a way of looking at the entire world through a limited set of (mainly quantitative) ideas. A similar pattern of abstractions defines history, practical activity and, in a later essay, poetry. The philosopher’s role is to discern the leading ideas that each mode postulates. Much as an accomplished portraitist evokes a human face with a few strokes, Oakeshott captures the organizing abstractions of a mode of human discourse. This he originally conceived as an idealist enterprise inspired by Hegel, who saw the business of the philosophical sciences as ‘the derivation and cognition of . . . particular modes (Weisen)’. Similar efforts in this century can be found in the delineation of ‘forms’ of the spirit by Collingwood and Croce. Unlike these two writers, Oakeshott refuses to give any ranking to the modes. He declines to put philosophy at the top of a scale, with history and science below. He also severs philosophy radically from the history of it. Though much of his work was devoted to the history of political thought, he considered the activity of being a historian modally distinct from
philosophical reflection proper. The philosopher makes use of a tradition of inquiry, but for him it is timeless, present in his imagination as a store of examples and suggestions. Oakeshott followed his first university lecturer in philosophy, McTaggart, in excluding the dimension of time from a purely philosophical criterion. Yet in other respects Oakeshott’s approach betray his early academic training as a historian. (An undergraduate degree in history was his only formal certification.) His distinctive use of modality transposes to a philosophical idiom the historian’s everyday practice in identifying persistent patterns of thought and action. A history of an architectural style, for example, or of a literary genre, an institution, or a political doctrine depends upon identifying a shifting but relatively stable set of characteristics that compose an identity (the baroque, the novel, the modern university, Rationalism). Oakeshott’s modes raise such characteristics to the level of a coherent ideal construct. They set forth patterns that have achieved a logical as opposed to a merely circumstantial or doctrinal integrity. Oakeshott concedes that his modes have developed historically. Their interest to philosophy, however, consists in their having achieved an ‘ideal character’ that may be sketched without reference to time and place. He recognises a limited number of self-consistent modes: at first, science, history and practice; later, in The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind (1959), ‘poetry’, which stands for aesthetic experience generally; still later, in On Human Conduct (1975), he revises his terms to recognise ‘modes of association’ in practical life, of which the most notable is ‘civil association’ or the rule of non-instrumental law. (This fulfilled a project laid out in his first extended discussion of law, ‘The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence’, which appeared in 1938.) In On History and Other Essays (1983) he returns to the discussion of the historical mode and to the rule of law – two topics on which his work, spanning half a century, will not soon be surpassed. Each of his modes is a systematic composition of ideas. One might, following Locke, call them complex as opposed to simple modes. They correspond to only one of the terms Hegel uses for modality, Weise, as opposed to Modus. The German Weise suggests a way or manner of thought and action, and this captures exactly Oakeshott’s intention. A mode for him qualifies the world ‘adverbially’; it modifies on-going activity, enabling us to experience the world historically, practically, scientifically, poetically, as we choose. In the conversational metaphor, the modes are the ‘voices’ by which we can develop our own way of speaking. Though Oakeshott’s portrayal of modality as a world of discourse shares the concern with language common among philosophers in the English-speaking world, it contains a speculative dimension lacking in the (largely Viennese) fashions that came to dominate the post-war Anglo-American mainstream. It
leaps beyond the method of ‘concrete cases’; Oakeshott cannot examine a case without enquiring into the organizing ideas that are presupposed in recognizing it as a case. And since Oakeshott’s modes define their own standards of truth and relevance, they rule out the view that language is meaningful only if it is ‘falsifiable’ with respect to some external reality; the reality to which a mode refers is always internal to it. Oakeshott’s philosophical gift is connoisseurial rather than analytic. He identifies the provenance and excellences of each mode, and within it distinguishes what is generic from what is merely incidental. This requires a systematic intelligence, but one weighted toward l’esprit de finesse rather than l’esprit géométrique. Oakeshott has a philosophical discernment akin to the practical acumen that makes someone a good judge of character. He fastens on the ideal character of whatever comes his way, distinguishing what is coherent and enduring from what is merely idiosyncratic. The same capacity carries over to his non-philosophical writing. In his studies of political thought, his reviews, and even his polemical essays, he is able with great dispatch to enter into thought remote from his own, give an account of it on its own terms, and evoke the unstated sensibilities that it conveys. His discussions of individual writers are exemplary for exposing the underlying structure and pinpointing organizing concepts. An especially influential example is to be found in a book of readings first issued in January 1939 entitled The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe. It contained original texts for the doctrines of Representative Democracy (or Liberalism rightly considered), Catholicism, Communism, Fascism, and National Socialism. Oakeshott selects texts that let each doctrine speak for itself, with one exception. Hitler at that time permitted only an expurgated version of Mein Kampf to be translated into English, and the German publisher would not allow the Leader’s fundamental tenets to be translated in Oakeshott’s reader. In the absence of direct quotation, Oakeshott provided ‘Some Notes on the Doctrines of Mein Kampf’, a précis of the systematic elements of Nazism – its theories of race, blood, leadership and individuality – that ‘separate it firmly from every other current doctrine’. ‘It is surprising,’ he remarked, ‘that so empirical a doctrine should have come out of Germany.’ Oakeshott’s few published writings on religion (and, as he early considered taking a degree in theology, there are doubtless unpublished materials as well) give further evidence of his eye for the way in which ideas hang together. He would appear to have viewed Western Christianity as having achieved a flexible character that made the historical element dispensable, philosophical rationales irrelevant, many dogmas open to radical reinterpretation, but certain images, such as the Fall and the Crucifixion, essential in
some form to its doctrines of consolation, moral responsibility and divine love.

That Oakeshott should have become known as a political philosopher says more about the cast of the twentieth century than of his own mind. He appears to address politics mainly because it displays the most egregious of the confusions he wishes to dispel. The word politics does not appear in the body of his first book, which presents religion as the epitome of ‘practice’. But the view of modality that he develops puts him on a collision course with modern political rhetoric. If practice is modally distinct from science, history, philosophy and poetry, it follows that a politics which purports to be derived from scientific, historical, philosophical or aesthetic truths is fraudulent. Oakeshott is unflinching in drawing out this conclusion. He dwells not on the easy targets – Nazi racial theory, dialectical materialism, the mythic claptrap of the Italian futurists and Fascists – but on the attempts to ground democracy in self-evident philosophical truths, to root religion in the ories of nature and history or, indeed, to put any activity on a rationalized basis. He lets his criticisms fall where they may. The founders of the American republic, whose political wisdom he admired, are faulted for their excessive rationalism. Augustine, whose Christianity is perhaps closest to Oakeshott’s own, is footnoted in tandem with Trotsky for the error of seeing in history a design with practical bearings. Hayek and others with whom he sympathises on matters of policy are criticized for making a theoretical fetish out of an ideal of freedom. As Oakeshott sees it, ideological excess is deeply embedded in Western Christianity and thence in modern thought. The conditions under which Christianity became a proselytizing religion in its first four centuries gave undue prominence to a ‘morality of ideals’ over a morality of custom and habit. Organized for conversion, Christendom was prone to mistake moralizing for morals. When in modern times its ingrained weakness for creeds combined with the vocabulary of modern science, a new die was cast. Rationalism emerged on the scene. Rationalism consists in an exaggerated faith in what is technical, premeditated, rationalisable, and (in its misreading of the mode) scientific. It recognizes only articulated as opposed to tacit forms of knowledge. It views the world as a series of problems to be solved by direct means and the application of the most advanced knowledge. In politics it supports the demand for a theoretically grounded ideology; in morals, for explicit ideals deduced from nature; in education, for vocational training in the techniques rather than the languages and modes of civilized discourse. The past four centuries have, according to Oakeshott, been especially favourable to its growth. The enfranchisement of new classes, the establishment of new nations, the rise of new industries demanding trained workers, a mobile and
expanding population – such factors give rise to ‘new men’ seeking an abridgement of tradition, looking for quick answers, preferring progress to precedent, and often deeply resentful of the individuality they have not had the leisure to cultivate. Rationalism is a syndrome Oakeshott describes, deplors and accepts as an enduring element in modern Western thought. Its dominance is evident in ‘the politics of the felt need’, which afflicts parties of both Left and Right. When politicians speak of the need to solve social problems and the aim of the state as policy, or planning, or national purpose, they fall into the language of Rationalism, regardless of the substantive content of their prescriptions. Oakeshott has no direct remedy – the search for direct remedies is, after all, a rationalist trait. But in essays and reviews published between 1947 and 1949 in the *Cambridge Journal*, which he also edited, he does focus on three countermeasures to abate the worst excesses. The first is the dispersion of power to limit the monopolistic appetites of the state, the labour unions and large corporations. The second is adherence to the rule of law, which guarantees the rights of property and association that enable people to pursue self-chosen rather than collectively imposed visions of the good. The third is an insistence on a spacious view of education, in opposition to the rationalist’s narrow focus on manpower training and civic indoctrination. Oakeshott’s anti-Rationalist essays have a polemical edge that his work loses after the immediate post-war years. He was concerned to draw a firm line between wartime thinking and civilian life. At other times his interest in current political affairs quickens only when they touch on the university.

In 1951, when he succeeded Harold Laski as Professor of Political Science, the London School of Economics was not the most congenial place for a man of his views. It had been founded by the Fabians, Oakeshott’s father among them, as a trade school for a new governing class. Undergraduates from all over the world had flocked there in the expectation of learning exactly what Oakeshott averred could not be taught. Like a pacifist at a military academy, an anti-Rationalist at the London School of Economics had to give an account of himself. All the more so since Oakeshott’s chair carried with it the chairmanship of the Department of Government. For fifteen years, until the London School of Economics moved to three-year rotating chairmanships, Oakeshott ran the department. By all accounts he presided over an era of good feeling unusual in large academic departments devoted to politics. But he still had to answer the question of what it was, given his views, he presumed to teach. His response was to reaffirm in a ringing series of essays the liberal character of the university. ‘Greed or the desire to appear abreast of the times’ often led universities to accept chairs dedicated to negligible topics. The political interests of the dons
themselves, many of whom had been seconded into government, led them to devote courses to their current projects. 'But if every don were to teach undergraduates what he himself is interested in, and if every professorial chair were held to entail or to authorize a counterpart to itself in undergraduate education, there would be little in these days to distinguish a university from a mad-house.' What universities could teach about politics, he said, is no different from what they could teach generally: the explanatory modes of discourse – science, history, and philosophy – and the intellectual virtues that might be imparted with them. The study of politics, therefore, had to use that topic as an occasion for initiating students into these modes. Happily, in two of them, history and philosophy, there was a literature serviceable to the task. When Oakeshott retired in 1969 he devoted himself to further contributions to this literature. It was in that year that I first met him. I came not as his student or colleague but as an admiring, dissatisfied reader of Experience and its Modes. The book suggested questions about the character of practical knowledge that could not be addressed without violating its own modal categories. If science and history were categorically distinct from practice, how were we to describe the way in which, for example, case histories and scientific research inform the practice of medicine? His critique of Rationalism seemed to me to sidestep this question; it exposed the abuses of technical knowledge without providing a nuanced philosophical vocabulary with which to discuss its intelligent use. Conversely, there was the problem of the practical aspect of science and history. Were not scientists and historians practitioners of their disciplines and to that extent also in the practical mode? And if science, history and philosophy all had an explanatory or theoretic character that made them fit for a liberal university, did they not all in this sense partake of a common practice of inquiry that blurred the modal distinctions among them? I visited him in his office to air these questions, and I returned a year and a half later for a longer discussion. Such issues had occurred to him as well. He was working on a book that would, among other things, deal with them. A correspondence developed. In 1974 when he came to America for a lecture he asked if my wife and I had an extra bed to break the monotony of academic guest suites. A year later, on another such trip, he again spent a few days with us. Everyone in our family had the benefit of his conversation.

When On Human Conduct appeared in 1975, I already knew from his letters the refinements that would resolve the anomalies of the earlier book. He now treated any settled activity as a practice, so that he could speak of the practice of history or of science or of theorising generally. The coherence of each of the explanatory
modes he now rooted in the order of inquiry pursued: science inquires into a world seen in terms of processes, history in terms of contingent conduct, philosophy in terms of the conditionality of experience generally. He was thus able to retain the integrity of the several ‘voices’ in civilisation in a way that gave more scope to the interplay of the modes. The greater suppleness of this approach also enabled him to accept a limited role for ‘theorem-making’ (or what the Poles and others call praxiology) within the non-theoretical practices. In all, he now had the basis for a conspectus of modes of theorising. But what I had not anticipated was an extension of his concept of modality into the arena of law. Oakeshott’s eye for ideal character had discerned a ‘small composition of related ideas’ in the emergence of the states of modern Europe, and in philosophical reflection upon them. He called this composition ‘the civil condition’ and the form of human relations it specified ‘civil association’. This denoted not a doctrine or a political tendency, but a self-contained mode of association more commonly called the rule of law. As a modal complex it could be detached from historical contingency and understood philosophically in terms of a few organising ideas. Much as an explanatory mode like science or history defines its own standard of truth and relevance, a legal system defines its own sphere. It is a self-consistent and self-authenticating world in which law (lex) serves as a language of civil intercourse among citizens (cives) in accordance with a set of public conditions (respublica). Oakeshott uses Latin terms for such matters to create a technical vocabulary (his first attempt at jargon) to distance his discussion from everyday political rhetoric. He uses the terms civil and civility in the root sense to pertain to citizenship. And he limits the word politics to the activity within civil association of debating the desirability of lex. His civil association is thus neither an empirical generalisation nor a prescription for action but a leap of philosophical imagination to define the minimal conditions for a rule of law regime. Oakeshott shows that the postulates of civility are few. Democracy is not among them; nor is the free market, an economy, a bill of rights, an army, a monopoly of police forces, an executive branch, a national parks system, a civil service, foreign policy, or indeed any policy, religious belief, old-age pensions, stable families, public schools, modern sewage treatment, rockets to Mars, divine justice, natural law, or the salute to the flag. Such things may be desiderata from many points of view, to be debated and legislated upon in civil politics, but they are not defining features of civil association as such. All the rule of law requires is a body of formal equals who understand the law as authoritative, recognise an obligation to comply with it, and subscribe to procedures for enacting, amending and interpreting it. Moral restraint, not mere conceptual parsimony, prompts Oakeshott to apply Ockham’s razor to the rule of law. Unlike other modes, the
A legal system is compulsory. Its subjects are human beings most of whom fall under it by accident of birth. They have an obligation to comply with disagreeable laws, even as they try to amend them. The law presumes to define their personhood, to lay down the conditions of its own authority, and to specify the procedures by which they may appeal to this authority. Any excess in the definition of what is essential to it, therefore, opens the door to unexamined abuse, or worse, moral enormity. Oakeshott’s is the first philosophical definition successfully to relieve the rule of law from reliance on the category of purpose, to show that civil association has a different logic from that of everyday life. As individual human beings, Oakeshott tells us, we are full of projects, plans, policies and purposes. Collectively, we may pursue these in a variety of institutions – in ‘enterprise association’, as he calls it. But civil association is modally distinct from this: cives accept not a set of common aims but a commonly recognised system of rules. As with the English language, which facilitates each of our projects, grows with them, but cannot be adequately explained as an instrument for getting them done, civility has a purely procedural integrity independent of the purposes that this or that law may seem to serve at this or that time. Its conditions are not substantive but adverbial, enabling us to conduct ourselves ‘civilly’ throughout our many enterprises.

Civil associates may, at choice, enter into relationships of affection, of discourse, of gainful enterprise, or of playful engagement, but in respect of being civilly associated they cannot be either required or forbidden to do so; they are required only to subscribe to the conditions of respublica . . . In short, the civil condition and a state understood in terms of civil association postulates self-determined autonomous human beings seeking the satisfaction of their wants in self-chosen transactions with others of their kind.

Civil association, then, requires a spirit of indirection that must be widely diffused. It presupposes human beings with purposes, plans, and projects of their own who recognise the law as not sharing these. It requires of them a non-managerial, non-anthropomorphic view of the state. For it follows from Oakeshott’s modal categories that to the extent that the state is understood as a civil association, without human personality and without purposes, plans, and projects of its own, cives shall have unfettered conditions under which to choose their versions of human personality. That civil association as an ‘ideal character’ can exist only in compromised form does not diminish the force of this argument. On the contrary, it suggests a programme of fine discrimination among the varieties of state action, and renewed attention to the ideal and literature of the Rechtstaat.
In the fifteen years that remained to him after the publication of *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott stayed in England, spending more and more time in Dorset and finally giving up his London apartment altogether. He had a further book to finish, *On History and Other Essays*. It contains some of his most sure-handed and well-balanced philosophical writing. He had declared early that 'philosophy has less place for what is second-class than any other field of intellectual endeavour’, and this slim volume is a fitting endpaper to his youthful aspirations.

A piece entitled ‘The Rule of Law’ puts into crisper form his definition of civil association and adds a discussion of justice (‘the jus of lex’). As a lighter counterpoint, a midrashic retelling of ‘The Tower of Babel’ turns the biblical tale into an anti-utopian allegory of enterprise association. Three essays on historiography form the core of the collection. They take up the discussion of history as a mode that Oakeshott began in 1933. If R.G. Collingwood was correct in calling that earlier effort ‘the high water mark of English thought upon history’, the essays published fifty years later must be the flood tide. They move with Oakeshott’s usual elegance and economy to deflate the leading pretensions. The central essay treats the category of relation appropriate in the writing of history. Oakeshott rejects ‘the fortuitous, the causal, the similar, the correlative, the analogous’ in favour of ‘the contingent’. He suggests that historians can explain events only in terms of antecedent events that ‘touch’ them. By his he means that the antecedent events that the historian notices must make a significant difference in shaping the subsequent. The evidence is only nominally ‘the past’. What historians really do is make certain kinds of inference from the present – from documents, artefacts, and other survivals that are available when they write. The inferential relations are designed not to support an argument but to show how one event is best explained in terms of others that bear upon it. The Purbeck region of Dorset, rich in quarries, provides him with his most telling image: the dry wall, in which the stones are held together by their shapes without premeditated design. ‘It is what its components, in touching, constitute.’ There is no mortar for the historian – no laws of history, no necessity of events, no grand design, organic growth, divine purpose, national destiny, permanent essence, teleological unfolding. The historian has no set rules, only the exercise of judgment in relating human events to others in a continuous chain of contiguities. Locale may make a significant difference for one event but not for another, and the same holds for any other factor. The only constant in history is human conduct itself, always unpredictable, always open to intelligent choice. The response to this book, as to *On Human Conduct*, spared him too hectic a retirement. The reprinting of *Experience and its Modes* and the consequent demand upon him for two sentences on the dust jacket
might be attributed to interest stirred by the essays on history. But otherwise, the world did not beat a path to his door. He sat for a portrait to be hung at his old Cambridge college, cooperated with the authors of two books and a thesis written on his work, attended a reunion of his Second World War unit, ‘Phantom’ (an intelligence group that made reports from the front), took an occasional trip to London, accepted a few honours, attended the odd conference, kept up with his correspondents, wrote letters of recommendation, made aphoristic entries in a notebook, dusted and reshelved his books, pottered about in the garden, and entertained a few house guests. From time to time I was one of these. I last visited him the summer before his death. I was on my way home from a philosophy conference in Poland, a country where the late attempt to organise the state as an enterprise association will give many readers instant rapport with the translation of Oakeshott’s work in preparation by the former underground publisher, Respublica Press. He came in his little blue MG to fetch me from the station. We arrived in time for tea, which was Christel’s speciality. Michael did all of the heavier meals, she the lighter ones. During this stay Michael insisted on preparing all the dinners at home. He was an excellent short-order cook who made imaginative use of ready-made and local ingredients. His soups were tasty combinations of French and Swiss powdered varieties; his sauces likewise. He took care that the four main meals alternated beef, veal, chicken, and fish. The chicken, as I recall, was served with pasta and the Italian flag colours of pepper – green, white and red. The dessert that night was strawberries with a cointreau-flavoured vanilla ice cream made locally at Corfe Castle. He was the most considerate host. This time, he had saved for me a clipping of a long review of the early works of C.S. Peirce. He knew that in pursuing the problem of modality I had become interested in Pierce’s work, which I found rich in approaches lacking in his own. He also put in my hands Sarah Orne Jewett’s Country of the Pointed Firs, a memoir of Maine that he joined Willa Cather in admiring. Its words (p. 46) about hospitality applied to Oakeshott as well:

Her hospitality was something exquisite; she had the gift, which so many women lack, of being able to make themselves and their houses belong entirely to a guest’s pleasure, - that charming surrender for the moment of themselves and whatever belongs to them, so that they make a part of one’s own life that can never be forgotten. Tact is after all a kind of mind-reading, and my hostess had the golden gift. Sympathy is of the mind as well as the heart.

He showed me also a few recent things on his own work that I had not seen: a new Japanese translation of Rationalism in Politics, a Harvard PhD thesis, a book of essays – The Activity of Politics – by a promising young scholar, and the clippings of four reviews of his collected essays on education. We did a tour of the garden. He was
wearing the yellow sweater he had worn in a photograph sent the previous fall of himself flanked by two towering sunflowers. He had planted many more sunflowers this year. The laburnum had been blown over and needed to be restaked and tied down. We did this together. He showed me the improvements he had made in the shed since my last stay. The rest of the visit was spent walking, talking, reading and viewing Christel’s drawings and paintings. Michael was alert to European affairs. How long would it take the Poles to free themselves economically from the Russians? What was Budapest like these days? And what about the coming reunification of Germany? He had misgivings about locating the new capital in Berlin. His abiding interest, however, was people. He kept track of many friends and their children, and of his two grandsons as well. He was especially interested in those who had ventured off the beaten paths. Through his memories, I had been introduced to a gallery of adventurous characters, a few of whom I met for the first time at his funeral, more of whom were either dead or in faraway places. I had heard most about his teachers, whose idiosyncrasies he dwelled upon with affection. In years past, he had joined me on long walks along the seacoast. On this visit he accompanied me only to the first stile and dry wall at the edge of Acton. At night he apologised in advance that he might be up with a catarrh. He had tried all sorts of patent medicines for it and had even given up smoking. When I mentioned that my grandfather had had the same problem and had given up cigarettes at ninety-three, Michael grew wide-eyed. Ninety-three! What an age! Christel reminded him that he was not so far from that age himself. One morning he excused himself to go into Swanage for a medical checkup. It was only after his death that I learned, as did Christel, that these were weekly trips for cancer treatments. A letter from him six weeks later was written in a slightly scrawled deviation from his usual precise script. He confessed to being in pain. His wife noticed something unusual when for two days in mid-December he failed to rise early to make the fire. He died in his bed around midnight on December 18/19, just a week after his eighty-ninth birthday. In re-reading some of his writings after his death, I noticed that I had marked an aside in an essay on history that poses further questions about his view of modality. He says that the ‘universe of practical discourse’ may be seen ‘in terms of moral (that is, non-instrumental) considerations and compunctions but not in the poetic terms of affection, friendship, and love which belong to another world.’ Elsewhere he identified the poetic mode as a world of images contemplated for the sheer delight of them. Placing ‘affection, friendship and love’ in this modality suggests that the line between fact and fiction is irrelevant in such matters. I had meant to ask him about that.