

COMMENTARY ON ELIZABETH COREY'S
INTERPRETATION OF MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

by Efraim Podoksik

Abstract. Elizabeth Corey suggests that in order to understand Michael Oakeshott's worldview one should pay special attention to two subjects, religion and aesthetics, and analyze the connection between these two realms and the idea of practical life in general and of politics in particular. Her book provides a sympathetic but also critical conversation with Oakeshott's ideas, ultimately offering us a coherent picture of the place of the religious, poetical, and political in the totality of his thought. Corey persuasively shows that the major ideas of the mature Oakeshott originated in his earlier religious convictions and that his philosophy of aesthetics, contrary to what his critics claimed, fit nicely in the general framework of his thought.

Keywords: aesthetics; Elizabeth Corey; Michael Oakeshott; politics; practice; present; religion; world

Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics, and Politics. By Elizabeth Corey. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006). xiv + 253 pages. \$39.95.

Michael Oakeshott was once known mainly as a thinker about politics. That this should have been so was in a certain sense unavoidable. Oakeshott held the chair of Political Science at the London School of Economics, taught the history of political thought, and published a few controversial essays on the subject of political life. Moreover, the *Zeitgeist*, or at least the mood, of the "progressive" reading public at the time was to regard political awareness as a leading virtue. This reading public was also used to a particular kind of deliberating about politics. From political thinkers it

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expected a doctrine—a set of specific recommendations about how to solve political problems. Instead, in Oakeshott the readers found a writer ostensibly cautious in the measure of significance he bestowed on political awareness and wary of suggesting practical recommendations. That this man was actually a professor of politics puzzled his reviewers. “I fail myself to see,” wrote one, “how a man can happily develop a subject unless he loves it—and certainly he cannot if he regards it with impassioned hate” (Corey 2006, 158).

Although the remnants of such an attitude are still apparent when one steps out of the cosy circle of Oakeshott connoisseurs, it is quite clear nowadays that Oakeshott’s political thought cannot be taken separately from other aspects of his philosophy that constitute a certain general worldview. But what is the essence of this worldview? To understand Oakeshott’s mind is not an easy task, and numerous disagreements exist even among his most careful readers.

Elizabeth Corey, in a lucidly written book, suggests an answer of her own to this question. In her opinion, in order to understand Oakeshott’s worldview one should pay special attention to two subjects, religion and aesthetics, and also analyze the connection between these two realms and the idea of practical life in general and politics in particular.

The presence of the religious and aestheticist sentiment in Oakeshott’s thought is an established fact, but putting them at the heart of his philosophy is an enterprise full of obstacles. Of all the issues with which Oakeshott was preoccupied, these two are perhaps the most difficult to decipher. In his youth, Oakeshott was a believer who wrote quite a lot about religion. But in his more mature writings, the theme of religion fades away. It is still a matter of controversy among commentators whether this shift signifies the abandonment of belief or the most intimate connection to it. The subject of aesthetics seems to be less idiosyncratic. Oakeshott did try to articulate a coherent philosophy of aesthetics in his mature writings. Yet this subject is not without its own difficulties. A popular opinion in the scholarly literature is that Oakeshott’s view of aesthetics is the least coherent part of his philosophy. This view persists despite the fact that one of Oakeshott’s most important essays, perhaps the one from which everyone should begin his or her acquaintance with his thought—“The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” (1962)—is dedicated specifically to the subject of aesthetics. Therefore, anyone who tries to describe Oakeshott’s philosophy of aesthetics as an indispensable element of his thought must address the prejudice that his views of aesthetic experience are incoherent.

These then are the obstacles facing any scholar who emphasizes the significance of religion and poetry in Oakeshott. In my opinion, Corey performs brilliantly in overcoming them whether or not one agrees with every aspect of her interpretation. She offers a persuasive, accessible, and still

nuanced account of what she considers to be the essence of Oakeshott's outlook, despite relatively limited resources at her disposal; after all, the bulk of Oakeshott's writings is not about religion and aesthetics. She provides a sympathetic but also critical conversation with Oakeshott's ideas, ultimately offering us a coherent picture of the place of the religious, poetical, and political in the totality of his thought. In addition, she packs the pages with interesting insights about many particular moments of Oakeshott's philosophy and includes a comparison of his vision with that of Eric Voegelin. In this review, however, I limit myself to what I see as the book's central argument.

In order to understand Oakeshott's worldview one should take seriously his early intellectual development, which is marked by deep religious reflections influenced by Augustinian writings and by the Augustinian element in modernist Protestant theology. From there Oakeshott absorbed the view that presupposed the dichotomy between the world and religion. True religion, according to him, is supposed to reject the world. Yet, whereas in Augustine this worldlessness appears as the anticipation of the world to come, in Oakeshott it is presented in a secularized form with certain mystical overtones. The world that Oakeshott wants to reject is the world of practical desire, the world of concern with past and future. The alternative to this world is not some future afterlife but the insight of the present.

One could even suggest that the major ideas of the mature Oakeshott—his emphasis on purposelessness and on valuing things in themselves, his rejection of the tyranny of practice and appetite, his affirmation of the present enjoyment—may have originated in this quasi-religious insight. Yet Oakeshott's treatment of religion is ambiguous already in his early writings. Religion is often described by him not as the liberation from prudential preoccupations of practical life but as the completion or even the highest expression of practice. Therefore, although the young Oakeshott does consider the option of escaping worldliness through a kind of religious insight, he does not fully articulate this religious alternative to the world of practice.

In order to find such an alternative, one should look instead at what Oakeshott has to say about poetry, or aesthetics. It is here that he explicitly develops the idea of the present experience untouched by the considerations of appetite. According to him, the world of poetry is an autonomous world of imagining with its own presuppositions, and it is undisturbed by practical considerations. The main characteristic of this experience is that this is the experience of contemplation and delight, which of course can exist only as immediate and present experience.

This is the point where the puzzlement usually enters. Oakeshott sometimes suggested that practical life, at least if it is to be lived fully and authentically, should possess a poetical character. But is this suggestion not contradictory? If he sees poetry as an independent world of experience,

how can he recommend an intimate connection between practice and poetry? And if he does recommend it, does he not commit what he himself regards as the worst philosophical error, that of irrelevance?

Corey rejects this criticism. Oakeshott, she maintains, did not confuse between modes; once he formulated the idea of the mode of poetry it remained for him an autonomous mode. Oakeshott should not be understood as saying that a properly led practical life would become the aesthetic life. Rather, it would become *like* poetry. In its essence, practical life will always remain practical, with all its deficiencies. Yet it still is possible to point to some aspects of practical life that emphasize present insight rather than future satisfaction. Such are the experiences of love and friendship. And to understand what this means—to live by putting an emphasis on the enjoyment of the present—we should look at the mode of aesthetic imagining as a model, although the emphasis on the present will never become the essence of practical life. Only poetry makes the present insight into its own essence.

Having thus described the origin of the notion of presentness in religion, and having followed the transformation of this notion into the essential characteristic of poetry, Corey proceeds to discuss how this insight helps to save practice somewhat from the tyranny of the appetite by mitigating negative features of the practical pursuit of the satisfaction of wants. It does so by intimating the possibility of the alternative conduct of life—one that values the present enjoyment, integrity, and adventure more than results. These two alternatives appear under various guises in Oakeshott's writings: as the morality of habit and the morality of reflection, as play and work, as the politics of skepticism and the politics of faith, or as the civil and the enterprise associations. These pairs represent of course two ideal types, two extremes. In the ever-ambiguous reality, these extremes are always mixed, though to varying degrees. One can never live absolutely in the present, completely ignoring the need to satisfy wants. It is important, however, to take care that this "poetic" element of life is given greater weight so that our life can be protected from being consumed exclusively by the demands of practice.

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