Apologia for Poetry and the Art of Conversation

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> [The poem is] 'its own question and answer, its own contradiction, its own agreement . . . A poem moves only towards its own end, which is the last line. Anything further than that is the problematical stuff of poetry, not of the poem' (Thomas 2000, 344).

It is only when our feelings become images of contemplation that they may be the stuff of poetry (Oakeshott 2014, 14 [36], p. 380).

In offering his thoughts on poetry to the reader, Michael Oakeshott tells us in the Preface to *Rationalism in Politics and other essays* (1962, p. vii), that he is retracting a foolish sentence he had written in *Experience and Its Modes* in 1933, where he stated that everything concerned with beauty belongs to the practical mode of experience. He says it now properly belongs in the 'vocabulary of aesthetic theory' (1962, p. 234).

In 1933 Oakeshott takes the 'practical' world of ideas to be quite expansive. It is not a random collection of hopes, desires and casual actions, nor is it confined to pursuing the satisfaction of 'vulgar ambitions'. Any attempt to escape practical life is to be achieved, not through 'art, music and poetry', but in science, history and philosophy which are categorially distinct (1933, pp. 296-7). Indeed, Oakeshott contends that the 'most thoroughly and positively practical life is that of the artist or the mystic' (1933, p. 296). He does not elaborate nor defend his opinion.

Oakeshott is presupposing here a postulate that is commonly attributed to poetic experience, namely, that in contemplation the artist has a deeper understanding, or sees the world more clearly -- as it really is. In an early essay, he is explicit that the artist is able to achieve a deeper and more complex understanding of life (1921, p. 61; Podoksik 2002, p. 718). Such an image evokes an emotion of wanting to change what is into this more desirable condition (1933, p. 296). Changing the what is into the what ought to be is the hallmark of practical experience (Greenleaf 1966, p. 30).

By 1936, the year in which A. J. Ayer's *Language Truth and Logic* (2001) was published, reflecting the contemporary dominance of positivism in philosophy, and particularly the influence of Cambridge philosophers such as the early Wittgenstein, Russell and Moore, Oakeshott complained of the growing threat to poetry from scientists who he believed to be a menace to civilisation, offering 'false hopes—desires—values'. In their 'crass insensitiveness' scientists had perpetrated the illusion that they had divested nature of its mystery. Consequently, the poets were driven

to the supernatural: 'to a world of ghosts, in order to satisfy their sense of mystery of life' (Oakeshott 2014, pp. 304-5, Notebook 13, April, 1936, 13[B]).

He was inspired to modify and enlarge upon his views on poetry after reading R. G. Collingwood's *Principles of Art* (1938). It came as a revelation to him. Writing to Collingwood, he exclaimed, 'I have just finished your Principles of Art and I would like to tell you with what excitement, delight and admiration I have read it. Sense at last in the philosophy of art. You have performed a miracle. Please accept my deepest thanks' (Oakeshott, 18 May, 1938). He went on to review the book in *The Cambridge Review* (Oakeshott 1938), where he exclaimed that it was the most profound and stimulating discussion on the question of 'what is art?' that he had ever read. He contends: 'I myself find it singularly convincing' (p. 487).

What was it, then, that Oakeshott found singularly convincing about Collingwood's discussion? Collingwood is famously the principal exponent of the theory that art is the expression of emotion. This, too, was a modification of his earlier position which he had shared with the Italian philosopher Croce, that art is pure imagination, and its practical counterpart is play (Collingwood 1924, 1994 [1925]). Art made for itself, Collingwood contends, two claims: first that it is pure imagination, and second that it somehow reveals the truth about the real nature of reality (1924, p. 87). Claims that for him were opposed because intuition (pure imagination) and expression (revelatory of truth) are contradictory.

Aesthetic experience, in *The Principles of Art,* however, is exemplified in the theory that art is the expression of emotion. Just as the thought and the words expressing it are not two separate things, an emotion is inseparable from its artistic expression.

Art includes fine art, literature, dance and the spoken word. Art performs an essential service to society and civilisation. The suppression of emotions, in Collingwood view, serves to pervert consciousness and it is in art that emotions are expressed which, for the individual expressing them, may not be practically attainable if it were not for artistic expression; they would be suppressed and denied, resulting in a 'corruption of consciousness' (Collingwood 1938, pp. 282-5; Ridley 1998, pp. 3-9). Longings and desires, for example, which are forlorn feelings when expressed in a poem or a painting, are confronted in the act of expressing them, rather than renounced or suppressed. The capacity to express emotions is imperative to the life of a civilisation.

Collingwood establishes his conclusions by way of a complex theory of mind, which in essence is this: in order to identify and distinguish *sensa* we must be conscious of them. Consciousness converts sensa into imagination. *Sensa* become imagination only when we are conscious of them. The connections and inferences between the converted *sensa*, however, require intellect. The categorization of *sensa* into those we want to acknowledge and those that we do not is achieved by selective attention. Emotions can only be expressed when they are elevated from the psychical level of *sensa* to that of consciousness. The act of attending to them facilitates this process. He goes further and suggests that an emotion cannot even be felt until it is expressed (Collingwood 1938, pp. 238, 327). Failure to express an emotion is effectively to disown it, which is a consequence of the failure of consciousness to convert psychical emotions into imagination. These emotions are not expressed, and therefore intellect receives distorted emotional expressions upon which an unreliable edifice of thought is built (Collingwood 1938, pp. 282-85).

Artistic expressions do not come from the cerebellum, the source of involuntary acts. Expressions can be distinguished, for example, from the involuntary dilation of one's pupils when physically attracted to another person. This is the difference between betraying one's emotions and expressing them. Expressions of emotion are deliberate voluntary acts of which we become conscious only in their expression. Self-consciousness of the emotion at the imaginative level of experience requires expression in controlled actions, that is, actions which are purposeful. The authenticity of such expressions is their intelligibility and lucidity. In expressing an emotion we become aware or conscious of what is being expressed, and it enables others to become conscious of the emotion in the person expressing it, and in themselves (Collingwood 1938, p. 214).

The justification for understanding a work of art is that it facilitates self-knowledge of one's emotional life. Engaging imaginatively with a work of art enables us to become conscious of the emotion it expresses.

Art is essential and imperative to the community in that it facilitates emotional self-awareness. We come to know our own emotional life better in understanding art, which enables us to maintain an emotionally robust and stable civilisation.

The relationship between theory and practice was always close in the writings of Collingwood, each form of experience has both theoretical and practical counterparts. In his aesthetics Collingwood is emphatic that he is not concerned to write a merely theoretical treatise, of interest only to philosophers (Boucher 1989a, pp. 51-57). His *Principles of Art* was 'written in the belief that it has a practical bearing, direct or indirect, upon the condition of art in England in 1937' (Collingwood 1938, pp. vi-vii). He devotes the third part of the book to investigating the practical consequences of his theory of art.

In contrast with Collingwood, Oakeshott consistently maintained a distinction between theory and practice. The philosophical investigation, for example, of the postulates of art, history and practical life have no bearing upon the conduct of any of those activities (1989b, pp. 69-89), and none of the modes is superior to others, nor can intrude upon the others without committing *ignoratio elenchi*. However, because Oakeshott identified Poetry as a distinct idiom within the practical mode of experience, as we saw, it did, for him, have a practical value. It is reasonable to conclude that in 1939 Oakeshott, like R. G. Collingwood, believed that art is the expression of emotion, and that it was of considerable practical importance to the continuing health of civilisation, yet it was not its business to prescribe particular outcomes.

In his contribution to a symposium on 'The Claims of Politics' in the journal *Scrutiny* (1938, reprinted in Oakeshott 1993), edited by F. R. Leavis, Oakeshott is at pains to distance art from politics and other practical engagements without completely divesting it of a practical role. He had already concluded that 'Politics are an inferior form of activity' (Oakeshott 2014, notebook 13, April, 1936, [80] p. 303), a necessary evil, before writing the article, in which he begrudgingly acknowledges that politics has its place, but not a predominant place in the life of a society (Oakeshott 1993, p. 94). In his contribution Oakeshott, like his fellow idealist Collingwood, believes poets, including musicians, sculptors and other artists, are valuable to society, and similarly disregards the suggestions that poetry may be a form of amusement, or a guide to practical activities, such as politics. The contribution of the poet and artist is more subtle, in that they, and to a lesser extent, philosophy, 'create and recreate the values of their society' (Oakeshott 1993, p. 95). He doesn't really explain what this means, but in describing Hobbes's *Leviathan* as a work of art, we get something of its meaning. Hobbes's art consists in creating and retelling the great civilizational myth of Adam and Eve, and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Oakeshott 1975b, pp. 150-54).

In an allusion to Collingwood in 'The Claims of Politics', first published in 1939, Oakeshott argues that through their activities a society becomes 'conscious and critical of itself', which protects it from a 'corruption of consciousness'. The poet attains a 'deeper consciousness', 'making receptive members of the community more conscious of its own character' (Oakeshott 1993, p. 95). He contends that: 'To ask a poet and the artist to provide a programme for political or other social action, or an incentive or an inspiration for such action, is to require them to be false to their own genius and to deprive society of a necessary service' (Oakeshott 1993, p. 95). The imperative necessity of this service is reiterated by Oakeshott, relying heavily upon Collingwood, almost a decade later when he argues: 'Art is the community's medicine for the worst disease of the mind, the corruption of consciousness' (1947-8, p. 450). Like Collingwood, and, for example F. R. Leavis, a fellow contributor (with other participants in the 1939 symposium), Oakeshott rejects at this stage the idea of art for art's sake, and instead acknowledges its vital role in our communal life, although the artist does not intend it to have such a role (cf. Rushton 2021, p. 67).

After the intervention of the Second World War Oakeshott's views on poetry underwent considerable modification which involved the repudiation of his previous position in *Experience and Its Modes,* and any association of his own with the views of Collingwood on art as the expression of emotion. As late as 1950, in 'Rational Conduct', however, he had not formulated a clear demarcation between Poetry and other activities such as history, science and politics, concerned with the ordinary conduct of life addressing and answering questions of a certain type, relating to arguments, propositions, and establishing criteria for truth and falsity (1950-1, pp. 16-17).

In republishing 'Rational Conduct' in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays,* he did not include the artist and poet in the list of activities that addressed propositions and answered questions about truth and error. This is because in 'Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', published in the same volume as 'Rational Conduct', poetry no longer conforms to propositional logic. In other words we do not ask of its images whether they are true or false, right or wrong, we merely delight in them. In this respect Oakeshott confirms Sir Philip Sydney's contention: 'the poet nothing affirmeth and therefore never lieth' (Sydney 2013, p. xxix).

It is the emancipation of art from life, divested of its practical vestments, that released the poet's imagination from practical considerations. Oakeshott follows Johan Huizinga in believing Art in the Middle Ages was 'wrapped up in life' (Huizinga 1924, p. 246; Oakeshott 2014, 15 [39-40], p. 395). The function of art was decorative, persuasive, and emotionally evocative. It was essentially applied art. It was during the Renaissance that art for art's sake emerged from an abundance of artistic production, stimulating the urge to collect and admire, which liberated from practical utility.

Before exploring Oakeshott's theory of art as an autonomous and independent world of ideas it will be helpful to discuss his method. Too many criticisms of Oakeshott misunderstand the nature of Oakeshott's *modus operandi*. It is often assumed that he is offering recommendations, and that his philosophical conclusions are meant to influence the way the activities he explores are to be conducted.

In marked contrast with most other British idealists, and more faithful to the spirit of Hegel, Oakeshott considers such activities as philosophy, history or science, incapable of offering injunctions for practical conduct. The world of practice to which he initially assigned art, politics, religion and the moral life is modally distinct, and generates its own prescriptive conclusions for action. In *Experience and its Modes* the relationship between the modes is one of complete autonomy, and between them and experience as a whole, which for Oakeshott, is philosophy, is that they are co-equal arrests, or modifications of it. In *What is History*? (2004), Oakeshott uses the metaphor of a conversation to describe the relationship between philosophy and the different modes. The alternative is an argumentative relationship (1983, p. 26). Conversation is the analogy used for life (in preference, for example, to a game of cards). He contends that Plato civilized philosophy by portraying it as a conversation, positing a dialectical rather than eristical relation between the interlocutors (2004, pp. 193–194, 197). In his most famous discussion of the conversational relationship, Oakeshott uses the metaphor better to elucidate the relation in which each language or idiom of thought (including poetry) stands to each other (Oakeshott 1962, pp. 137–196).

The conversational character of philosophy

When Oakeshott elevated poetry to the status of an autonomous world of ideas equivalent to history, science and practice, he also sought to give a greater degree of clarity to the relationship which persists among them and of each to philosophy (1962, pp. 488-554). Previously the modes were implicitly characterized as mutually indifferent to each other, related only as arrests in the concrete totality of experience, that is, philosophy. Each had marked its boundary with an unwelcoming sign: Trespassers keep out. Each makes propositions about the world, but none can persuade the others of their merits.

The utterances of the poetic imagination are clearly not propositional. We do not ask if they are right or wrong; we merely delight in the images they conjure. In order to portray a less eristic relationship between the modes, without compromising their integrity, nor their relation to the whole, while at the same time accommodating the non-propositional character of the poetic world of ideas, Oakeshott suggested that the most appropriate analogy was that of a conversation. Oakeshott's own contribution to the conversation is as a philosopher, not a poet, or critic of poetry. The role of philosophy is not to tell others how they should contribute to the conversation, but instead to examine the character of the voices with which the other participants speak. In this respect neither poets nor critics will learn much to their purpose from the philosopher (1962, p. 203).

The introduction of the idea of a conversation is not a significant change of emphasis. It is a new analogy better able to characterise the kind of relationship he had in mind which persists between the modes and with philosophy. The image of a conversation is the answer to the question of how the different modes, or worlds of imaginings, are related to each other. It does not necessarily characterize the relationship that holds within a mode. A conversation is not an enquiry; nor is it an argument (Oakeshott 2004, p. 187). The participants 'are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to 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' (Oakeshott 1962, p. 198). Philosophy is a conversation in which the eristic relation of argument and confrontation is replaced by a dialectic relation. It was Plato's achievement that he united for all time the relation between philosophy and conversation (Oakeshott 2004, p. 194). Philosophy as an activity is itself conversational, but it is not itself a substantive 'voice' in the conversation between what Oakeshott had previously referred to as arrests in experience. Philosophy has a voice, but it is parasitic on the other voices. It is a voice that springs from the conversation, in its exploration of the quality and style of each in relation to the others (1962, p. 200).

Some of the voices, such as the practical and scientific, have a tendency to allow what is said to become loosely attached, or even to break away from its manner of utterance. This gives the voice the appearance of a body of conclusions, which has become eristic, having discarded its conversational manner of utterance (1962, pp. 201-2). The versatility of philosophy is assured because 'there is no body of philosophical "knowledge" to become detached from the activity of philosophising' (1962, pp. 202-3).

The view of philosophy that emerges from Oakeshott introduction of the analogy of conversation, has three prominent features. First, it is not eristic. It does doesn't attempt to persuade. Second, it is parasitic on the other voices. And, third, it is not a body of knowledge. On the first point Oakeshott was consistent throughout his life. Philosophy, he contended in his first book, does not consist in 'persuading others, but in making our own minds clear'. 'It is', he argued, 'something we may engage in without putting ourselves in competition. It is something independent of the futile attempt to convince or persuade' (Oakeshott 1933, pp. 3, 7). He always remained faithful to the view that experience, or what is going-on, is one undifferentiated whole, and that our attempts to understand it involve making identifications in terms of postulates. This is defended in all his major books *Experience and Its Modes, Rationalism in Politics, On History* and *On Human Conduct*. Identifying and questioning the postulates that differentiate each mode is the activity of philosophy, and consequently necessarily parasitical.

The metaphor of a conversational relationship between the variety of voices is not a proposition about the terms on which each voice tolerates the others. It is instead an 'appropriate image' in terms of which to comprehend the 'manifold' which constitutes the 'meeting-place' of 'diverse idioms of utterance which make up current human intercourse' (Oakeshott 1962, pp. 198-99). Philosophy is one voice in the conversation, reflecting upon the other voices and their relation to one another, but having no 'specific contribution' to make. Rorty finds Oakeshott's imagery conducive to his own views on human intellectual activity. Indeed, he uses the notion of conversation, like Oakeshott, in a special sense (Rorty 1983, p. 52). The idea of a conversation is a shorthand account of what stands for 'the whole human enterprise-culture'. Rorty's view is that 'it is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions' (Rorty 1979, p. 12; cf. p. 163). In this respect the idea of a conversation is understood to be a metaphor evocative of an image of human endeavour as a civilized, congenial, good-humoured, and polite. A relationship of mutual toleration rather than one of hostile confrontation and provocation. The 'high-toned' sense endowed by Rorty upon the notion of a conversation is addressed to the question what is it that philosophers do?' In other words, he is attempting to discern the character of the philosophic enterprise.

For Oakeshott the proper and appropriate business of the theorist, including the philosopher, is to understand differently something that is already understood, not in order to recommend or prescribe anything, but for its own sake. Oakeshott is not a methodologist (1983, p. 4). He is concerned not with methods but with the postulates, which differentiate such activities as history, art etc., from each other, and from

philosophy itself. In among the diversity of what historians, scientists and poets do there will be some statements and presuppositions that uniquely belong to one, and no other. This is not to say, of course, that the historian, scientist, or poet does not make statements of a different kind, but when they do, they are not engaged in history etc.

The question is, then, what is the status of the character Oakeshott attributes to the different worlds of ideas he demarcates in terms of their postulates? It is imperative that we recognise that Oakeshott is not attributing a concrete existence to any of his constructs. Oakeshott asserts when characterising the modern European state, for example, that no 'historic state' corresponds exactly to it because there are always contingent conditions which have to be considered (Oakeshott 1975a, pp. 192, 247). With reference to the three traditions he identifies in western political philosophy—Reason and Nature, Will and Artifice, Rational Will—Oakeshott confesses that: 'It is difficult to find a "naturalism" which is pure, and difficult to find an "artifice" theory which does not make a bow to some form of "naturalism" in order to avoid the imputation of making moral values arbitrary' (Oakeshott letter, dated 24 October, 1977). This is because what Oakeshott designates are 'Ideal characters', or 'ideal types'. He says that they are aids to reflection, instruments of inquiry, and what he is doing is identifying the 'conditions of relevance in terms of which an enquiry may be recognized' as, for example, the poetic (1983, pp. 2, 23 n8). There are intimations of the poetic mind in ancient Greece and Rome, but the aesthetic character of poetry failed to emerge fully from practical considerations, until surviving works of art became detached from their practical and religious functions, and thereby facilitated a disinterested aesthetic experience, which is 'comparatively new and still imperfectly assimilated experience' (1962, p. 239).

Ideal characters composed of characteristics are required for achieving understanding. They are the instruments of identification which may be crude and unsophisticated or refined and complex. It is always open to us to modify what at first is an ideal character composed of relatively few characteristics into ideal characters far more complex. What is identified, Oakeshott argues, 'is always as intelligible as the terms in which it is being understood allow it to be' (1975a, p. 6) The activity of theorising, or philosophizing, entails the identification and isolation of the postulates and characteristics of the ideal characters in terms of which, say, the historian, poet, or scientist, understands the world.

This is a completely different exercise from what Oakeshott disparagingly terms abridgement. Rationalists and ideologists typically abridge traditions, privileging and accentuating some aspects of experience at the expense of others. Marx's emphasis upon economic conditions, for example, as the primary sub-structure of explanatory factors in history is an abridgement in that it distorts and ignores the array of other factors which may serve to provide a fuller and more satisfactory explanation. Oakeshott's characterizations, of say poetry and history, are ideal not because they present us with the perfect condition of things to which we must aspire, but because they are 'abstracted from the contingencies and ambiguities of actual goings-on in the world' (Oakeshott 1975a, p. 109).

We may think, then, of Oakeshott's attempt to delineate the postulates of the world of imaginings he calls poetry an ideal characterization, and its features are intimated or glimpsed throughout early modern European history (1975a, p. 6). Each person, we may conclude, is related to others in 'a contingent assemblage of a variety of different modes of association', including poetry (Oakeshott 1975a, p. 109). The subject of such a relationship as the ideal character of poetry is an abstraction, 'a *persona*, a person in respect of being related to others in terms of distinct and exclusive conditions' (Oakeshott 1975a, p. 120).

Beauty is unlike a word such as truth, because it does not require us to admire the poetic image as we would a noble deed, or something well done, but instead simply invites the 'contemplative spectator' to delight in the image (1962, p. 234).

Oakeshott uses the terms contemplation and delight in relation to poetry interchangeably. He tells us that the images that are contemplated in poetry are timeless and unique. They cannot be replicated or substituted. 'Contemplation', Oakeshott contends, 'does not use, or use-up or wear out its images, or induce change in them: it rests in them, looking neither backwards nor forwards' (1962, p. 218). Past and future are therefore categories inapplicable to the poetic image.

Oakeshott is not therefore concerned to offer a definition of beauty because that implies that there is an object that must conform to the criteria. The essay emphasises the subject who delights in the images, rather than the objects or images themselves (Corey 2012, p. 87). Anything, when invoked appropriately and consistent with the postulates of the poetic mode of imagining, is eligible to be delighted in (Grant 2005, p. 298). Aesthetic appreciation is therefore not confined to what we may conventionally designate art. It's our disposition and manner of invoking the object that makes it art.

Oakeshott contends that the poetic impulse is not a stimulus into exploring or giving an explanation about the nature of the real world, and susceptible to conformity to the criteria of truth (1962, p. 229). This contrasts with Aristotle's claim that poetry is 'more philosophical and more serious than history: poetry utters universal truths, history particular statements' (2013, p. 28). The poetic impulse, for Oakeshott, however, is similar to the scientific and historical in that it springs from wonder. The poetic impulse lacks the restlessness that generates the curiosity, speculation and research that characterises history and science. The wonder of the poetic impulse evokes only delight, and produces no conclusions that are separable and capable of translation into the practical idiom. In science and history the results and conclusions, may be commandeered for practical use, but the research and manner of reaching the conclusions may not. Technological advancement, for example, may exploit scientific conclusions, or a legal dispute may be settled with reference to the conclusions of land ownership in the seventeenth century. By contrast, a work of art cannot be treated as an outcome or end-product. If a poetic image is exploited for practical purposes, the authenticity and integrity of the work of art is undermined, because we are trying to fix it in time, as well as derive something more than imaginative delight from it, and what remains has nothing to do with poetry. We are left with what is 'merely unpoetic—the theology of Dante, the perishable religious convictions of Bunyan, the verisimilitude of Ingres. . . .' (1962, p. 243).

Oakeshott takes poetry to be a certain way of imagining, distinct from practical, scientific or historical imaginings. What distinguishes the voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind from the other voices is its manner of being active. This activity is contemplating or delighting in the making of images. They are, as opposed to the images in other idioms of discourse, 'mere' images. They are not facts about the world because they are not propositions, and here truth and falsity are inappropriate terms in which to appreciate them. You do not ask of the images, could this have happened, is it possible or probable or just an illusion or make-believe, because to ask these questions assumes the distinction between fact and not fact which is out of place in poetic contemplative imagining.

Furthermore, they are present images, they have no past nor future. They are delighted in for what they are, rather than for what they are related to, that is, the occasions that may have inspired them. A photograph may lie if it purports to be a true likeness of its subject, but a poetic image cannot lie because it affirms nothing. It is irrelevant to the work of art that it does not faithfully represent the subject. Cézanne's 'Rocky Scenery of Provence' is a composition of irregular shapes of colour comprising an image whose aesthetic quality has nothing to do with whether it looks like Provence. Nor should we be disappointed if the women in Avignon bear no resemblance to those abstract shapes in Les Demoiselles d'Avignon by Picasso.

Why, then, are poetic images mere images? It is because the relation between symbol (language) and meaning (thought) is different in poetry from the relation in other modes of experience. This is a view Oakeshott shares with Collingwood who, in *Speculum Mentis* (1924), distinguishes, art, religion, science, history and philosophy with reference to their different relations between symbol and meaning.

Oakeshott argues that the language in which we conduct everyday practical life is symbolic. There is a relatively settled fixed non-resonant usage which serves as a medium for confident communication (1962, p. 211). In our everyday practical lives each symbol, or word has a determinate referent or signification. The more determinate the better the communication. If I ask for a pint of milk I am using a symbol to evoke an image, not to create one. I am not trying to give a novel nuance to the symbol, merely to be understood in a settled language. In other words meaning and symbol are distinct, but not radically separable because in this mode 'every word has its proper reference or signification' (1962, p. 211). The symbol is separable from

344 and the means by which we convey meaning. The reason why art or poetry is different is because there is no
345 separation of symbol and meaning: 'A poetic image is its meaning: it symbolises nothing outside of itself'
346 (1962, p. 235). This view is confirmed by a fellow Idealist Henry Jones in his study of Browning. He contends
347 that the worth of a work of art 'must be recognised as lying wholly within itself', and that in it 'thought and
348 expression are inseparable' (Jones 1896, p. 3).

349 This is the reason why poetry does not offer us a deeper reality, or the perception of things as they re-
350 ally are. Such a view denies the interdependence of the self and its images and is a confused representation
351 of the view that all experience is inquiry (Abel 2012, p. 160). To believe that the poet accesses a deeper real-
352 ity relies upon the belief that all utterances are symbolic. It is Oakeshott's contention, however, that the poet
353 says nothing about things. Truth and poetry are mutually exclusive. To know things as they really are is to
354 depart from poetry (Oakeshott 1962, pp. 229-30).

355 The poetic voice differs from, for example, science and practice, in that its images are of a certain kind,
356 brought into being by contemplation or delighting, which is the unique voice in which poetry converses as
357 opposed to desiring and obtaining, and inquiring and understanding, which belong to practice and science
358 respectively (1962, pp. 223-4). In the poetic imagination the distinction between fact and not fact is irrel-
359 evant, and whether the images are possible or probable, illusory or make-believe, do not arise. They are im-
360 ages that have no antecedents or consequents. They are merely present, having no past and no future (1962,
361 p. 217).

362 In addition, Oakeshott explicitly denies that poetry is the expression of emotion designed to evoke
363 the same emotion in the audience because such an activity belongs to practice where expressing emotions
364 in words and actions is commonplace, and where the images are symbols for those emotions (1962, pp.
365 230-31). A variation, exhibited by Wordsworth, Sir Philip Sydney and Shelley, is the idea that an emotion is
366 experienced, contemplated and then expressed, in order to instruct or offer some insight. Oakeshott com-
367 pletely rejects this view. The poet is presented as a person of heightened feeling, necessarily having to have
368 undergone the emotional experiences expressed, but the 'spectator-like mood of contemplation would be
369 more likely to establish itself if the emotion had *not* been experienced' (1962, p. 231). Contemplating an
370 emotion that is being experienced is for Oakeshott an impossibility, because an emotion is a practical image
371 and it is only when feelings are imaginary, that is, not being felt, that they become the poetic.

372 Although the target may appear to be Collingwood, it is not the position that he held. Collingwood is
373 unequivocal in ruling out a means-ends relationship in art, which the idea of design and execution pos-
374 its. The emotion is only discovered in its expression, it is not first experienced and then expressed or rep-
375 resented. The ability to evoke that same emotion in others is the criterion of good art. Oakeshott argues
376 that although the idea that art is the expression of emotion is commonly held, it rests on the mistaken view
377 that poetry must be in some way informative and instructive. The poet must have undergone the emotion
378 from which the poetic image derives. This, Oakeshott argues, 'makes a necessity of what is no more than an
379 unlikely possibility' (1962, p. 231). It is important to emphasise that Oakeshott is trying to establish what
380 makes the poetic utterance unique, he is not suggesting that poets only contemplate or delight in images,
381 only that when they do anything else it is not poetry.

382 Although Oakeshott did not return to poetry to examine its postulates in any sustained way after 1959,
383 the fact that it occupies a distinct idiom, separate from history, science and practice, is a position he main-
384 tained. Oakeshott had increasingly become dissatisfied with his characterisation of practice in *Experience*
385 *and Its Modes*. In the first essay of *On Human Conduct* he offered a much-improved exploration of what he
386 now came to call conduct.[1] It suffices to say that Oakeshott makes a distinction between conduct and po-
387 etic activity—acting and fabricating (1975a, p. 35). In conduct we look as the wished-for outcome in the re-
388 sponses of other people, as well as our own, to what we have done. Fabrication has as its wished-for outcome
389 an artefact, a complete product, but not all artefacts are works of art. He implicitly returns to a distinction
390 that Collingwood had made between art and craft. The craftsman, for Collingwood, has a means ends rela-
391 tionship with the artefact. It is preconceived and executed to fulfil a particular purpose, and even though it
392 may be beautifully crafted, that is secondary to the purpose it is made to fulfil (1938, pp. 15-41). Similarly,

Oakeshott wants to distinguish between fabrications that are acts which have a use, or preconceived purpose, and which are instrumental in achieving it, such as a bridge or ship. Such acts have an idiom within conduct. What is unique to fabrication, is a work of art proper, serving no preconceived end, or having no instrumental value in achieving it (Worthington 2002, p. 301).

On the relation of poetry to morality I think that a few stray remarks have been exaggerated to compose a position that compromises the integrity of Oakeshott's commitment to modal autonomy (see e.g. Grant 1990; Worthington 2002; Corey 2006). In the 'Tower of Babel' for example, Oakeshott suggests, as Collingwood did, that nothing exists in advance of the poem. In other words, an intention or plan is not first conceived and then executed. Oakeshott argues, as Collingwood did in relation to the expression of emotions, that what a poet says and what he wants to say are indistinguishable. He doesn't know what he wants to say until he says it. 'Nothing exists in advance of the poem itself, except perhaps the poetic passion' (1962, pp. 72-3). He goes on to suggest that 'what is true of poetry is true also, I think, of all human moral activity' (1962, p. 72). We do not first formulate a decision to do what is morally right in the circumstances, or plan to act morally, we simply act morally habitually, and mostly unreflectively. This is not to say that morality and poetry are identical, only that they share this characteristic of rejecting a means/end relation. It does not detract from the claim that poetry also has unique differentiae in its contemplative delighting in its imaginings.

The world of practice is dominated by, but not exclusively, the satisfaction of wants. In comparison with philosophy, science and history, which are explanatory activities, the poetic imagination is more securely 'insulated' from, and less likely to be corrupted by, the satisfaction of wants. In practice dreams are pursued to make them come true, whereas in poetry the dream is enjoyed for its own sake. In the poetic imagination the world is not material for the satisfaction of wants, or preliminary to doing something else, but instead it is something to be contemplated (Oakeshott 2004, p. 312).

CONCLUSION

Is it the philosopher's job to understand what is, or change what is into what ought to be? Preston King, for example, suggests that Oakeshott is engaged in the latter prescriptive endeavour (King 1983, pp. 118-9, 120, 121-2, 126). Oakeshott, however, begs to differ and thinks philosophy, art, history and science (though not applied science or technology) incapable of having a practical impact upon the world. Elizabeth Corey introduces considerations that are ultimately irrelevant to the theory Oakeshott offers. In identifying what differentiates poetry from other modally distinct and categorially separate activities in terms of their postulates, it is irrelevant to present counterfactuals, such as 'what are we to make of the inescapable fact that certain artists clearly *intend* their creations to teach moral lessons?' (2006, p. 113), or Seamus Heaney's passionate belief in the poet's 'truth telling urge' (Williams 2002, p. 168). Criticism of a different sort suggests that Oakeshott rejects any attempt to make literature an example, or exemplar, of general precepts about life. Poetry, like history, resists reduction to didactic considerations, and it is regrettable, for such commentators as Williams, that practical life should be deprived of such moral exemplars (2002, p. 165).

It is a mistake to think that Oakeshott is legislating against the use of historical or aesthetic characters to teach lessons about practical life. There are plenty of emblematic heroes in history, and paradigmatic villains in literature, and they may often be used to draw lessons about life. The point is that when such characters are appropriated for moral or practical purposes they cease to belong to the historical past, and the aesthetic present, and we no longer understand them historically, or delight in the literary imagery. They have simply been (re)constituted to conform to the idiom of a different mode, from history and from aesthetics (Oakeshott 1983, p. 18). When considered in terms of different modes they owe their existence 'to a categorially different set of conditions', and they have not, strictly speaking, been 'dissolved' in order to provide materials 'from which an object of another sort might be conceptually constructed' (Oakeshott 1983, p. 24). Machiavelli, for example, is constituted by different conditions, according to which mode he is

required to inhabit, historically as he converses with the ancients by candlelight; aesthetically as he struts the stage in a Restoration play; or practically, as a study of pure evil.

Should poets, musicians and artists of any kind convert the non-symbolic language of poetry into propositions about the world, at those points the poet ceases to conform to the practices of the activity of being a poet, artist etc. Oakeshott is not denying that poets often do this kind of thing (Worthington 2002, p. 289), so to cite Tolstoy, as Corey does (2006, p. 113), and one could add Aristotle and Ruskin (Aristotle 2013, p. xxxi) in denying that there is such a thing as art for art's sake (2006: 113), is to offer a rebuttal rather than a refutation.

Oakeshott pejoratively designates those who are not faithful to their calling *theoreticians* or *philosophes*. Such theorists are mistaken about the nature of the undertakings in which they are engaged, and fail to recognize that there is a categorial distinction between theory and practice which is insurmountable. Oakeshott argues that: 'This deplorable character has no respectable occupation. In virtue of being a theorist such "charlatans" purport to be concerned with the postulates of conduct, but they mistake these postulates for principles from which "correct" performances may be deduced or somehow elicited' (Oakeshott 1975, pp. 26; cf. Oakeshott 1931, ??).

What are we to make of Oakeshott's attempt to identify the differentia of the poetic voice? How do we go about critically appraising it? To answer these questions we have to return to his *modus operandi* in going about a philosophical investigation. Essentially, in exploring the postulates of the poetic experience Oakeshott is engaged in a metaphysical enquiry, and it is an exercise that has a close affinity with R. G. Collingwood's *Essay on Metaphysics*. Collingwood argued that metaphysics (and other branches of philosophy) is a 'historical science' (1940, p. 68). Some explanation of what he meant by this is necessary.

Despite being a vehement critic of positivism Collingwood was impressed by A. J. Ayer's formulation of the principles of logical positivism. Ayer acknowledged only synthetic, or analytical, and empirical, or inductive, knowledge. Analytic propositions are true by definition and empirical propositions are capable of being tested -- verified. Collingwood made an ingenious attempt to circumvent Ayer's argument that metaphysical statements were neither analytical nor inductive, and therefore not susceptible to conforming to the criteria of truth. They could not be verified. Metaphysical statements, for Ayer, were nonsense statements.

Collingwood agreed with Ayer that metaphysical statements were not propositions that could be verified. He disagreed with Ayer, however, when he claimed that metaphysical statements were absolute presuppositions, that is, they were ideas upon which the rest of our knowledge is built: they are the foundations upon which thought rests. An example would be belief in God, upon which our whole world view may be predicated, but of whose existence we could not provide proof. In identifying God as one of the fundamental absolute presuppositions of Christianity, we are not required as metaphysicians to prove that God exists, only that Christians absolutely presuppose that he exists. Metaphysical statements are absolute presuppositions and not propositions. The same may be said for Oakeshott, when he says that a postulate of the historical mode of experience is that there is past, which he calls the historical past, the historian is not required to establish whether there is or is not a past, only that historians believe it. Indeed, if an historian questions whether there is a past he, or she, ceases to be doing history. In other words, a postulate for Oakeshott, is an Absolute Presupposition.

Collingwood argued that Ayer was mistaken in arguing that the verification principle had to be applied to metaphysical statements if they were to be meaningful. Instead, the work of the metaphysician is to uncover what absolute presuppositions were being absolutely presupposed at any given time. That is why he argues that metaphysics is a historical science. Collingwood contends that Ayer was correct in claiming metaphysical statements were not propositions capable of verification, but completely misunderstood what sort of statements they were. Propositions are answers to questions and are either true of false, whereas metaphysical statements are not answers to questions, but instead give rise to questions, and are either absolutely presupposed or they are not. We do not derive Absolute Presuppositions from experience.

If we think, then, of Oakeshott's exploration of the Absolute Presuppositions of poetic experience, the question is not whether contemplation and delight are the true or false criteria for judging whether something is art, but instead whether poets, artists, writers, dancers, etc. absolutely presuppose contemplation and delight when they engage in the activity of being an artist and a contributor to the conversation of mankind. Complementarily, we may think of Oakeshott, inspired by Heidegger's disciple Hans-Georg Gadamer (1980), as asking an ontological question, and this takes Oakeshott out of the line of fire of those who claim that his theory of poetry is too narrowly confined to answering the question 'What is Poetry?' and ignoring the question 'is this a good poem?' (Alexander 2022, p. 179). Considered from Gadamer's perspective the question Oakeshott is addressing is not 'what is Poetry?', but 'what happens to the poet each and every time he, or she, has a poetic experience?'. The answer is that the poet becomes contemplative, delighting in images, divorced from considerations to which they give rise if the images were symbols.

NOTES

1 At a conference organised by Liam O'Sullivan in Southampton anticipating his 80th birthday Oakeshott referred to his chapter on the practical mode in *Experience and Its Modes* as a mess.

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568 Michael Oakeshott (18 May 1938) to R. G. Collingwood, West End, Little Shelford, Cambridge. GLTR068. Letter in the
569 possession of Teresa Smith (Collingwood's daughter).
570 Michael Oakeshott (24 October, 1977) to David Boucher. Letter in the possession of the recipient.