

## Anthony Powell and Michael Oakeshott

THE RECENTLY COMPLETED twelve-volume series of novels by Anthony Powell (*A Dance to the Music of Time*) invites comparison with the thought of Michael Oakeshott, former professor of political science at the London School of Economics. Superficial similarities exist: the men are about the same age; both read history at the university during the 1920s (Powell at Oxford, Oakeshott at Cambridge); both were against the political grain of their youth (which was left-wing); both emerged as important figures in their respective fields in the post-World War II period; both are traditionalists and English patriots. A study of Powell's work reveals further similarities in thought and pattern with that of Oakeshott.

The leisurely unfolding of Powell's narrative in *A Dance to the Music of Time* — the allusive, serpentine style — is in contrast with his lightweight pre-World War II novels, which did not have an overall theme. Similarly, the dense structure of Oakeshott's political thought, best expressed in essays rather than book-length treatises, matches his argument, which is noted for its opposition to ideology and "rationalism." Both men are emphatically not crowd-pleasers but have still won such renown that they cannot be dismissed merely as cult figures.

Powell and Oakeshott are un- or anti-intellectual. They value habit, custom, and tradition more than doctrine, intuition over reason. Both believe in a commitment to personal values such as conscientiousness rather than to any religious or secular creed. Each is remarkable for a lack of focus on all mankind; indeed, despite the million or so words of Powell's novel, huge areas of English life are untouched (e.g., the urban working class). Yet Powell, like Oakeshott, is intensely English, rooted in English values and with a firm but understated patriotism.

Powell has a sense of duty that reminds one of Kipling. The son of a regular army officer, he makes some of his most appealing characters soldiers. For example, General Alymer Conyers is a quiet hero, the embodiment of common sense and commitment to duty (not to ideology). He improves his own little corner of the universe. Powell favorably contrasts the steadfast regular army officers with the temporary ones (including the narrator, Nicholas Jenkins) in the three novels of the series that deal with World War II. Oakeshott makes a similar point in his most famous essay, "Rationalism in Politics," comparing the shallow knowledge of war-time officers who learned about military matters out of manuals with the bred-in-the-bone qualities of the professionals.

When Oakeshott writes (in "Rationalism in Politics"), "Indeed, there are no origins; all that can be discerned are the slowly mediated changes, the shuffling and reshuffling, the flow and ebb of the tides of inspiration, which issue finally in a shape identifiably new," he is very close to expressing Powell's reaction to a painting by Poussin of the seasons dancing to time's lyre:

The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality: of human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure: stepping slowly, methodically, sometimes a trifle awkwardly, in evolutions that take recognizable shape: or breaking into seemingly meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle: unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps of the dance.

This is the theme of Powell's novel, and his style throughout is as stately as the above quotation would imply.

It is clear that both men are gradualists who see history as evolving, and W.H. Greenleaf has a point when he describes Oakeshott as being a "libertarian Whig." Whiggish Oakeshott certainly is, and one

suspects that the phrase "dialectical materialism" would be as obnoxious to him as the phrase "social science" would have been to Edmund Burke. To Oakeshott, politics is a work of art; to Powell, society is a work of art, as shown by the richly textured panorama which he presents to us. Both men could agree with the duke in *Measure for Measure* when he says, "Thou hast nor youth, nor age, / But as it were an after-dinner's sleep / Dreaming on both. . . ."

Oakeshott, who succeeded two socialists (Graham Wallas and Harold Laski) as professor of political science at the London School of Economics, is interested in what he calls "the political economy of freedom" (it is the title of one of his essays). His is a morality which is like Montaigne's in that it is based on custom and habit and not on a pursuit of impossible ideals. As he says, "My theme is not a creed or a doctrine, but a disposition," and to be conservative is to make certain choices and not to indulge in general principles. Like Anthony Powell he seems to have little use for Conservative party politicians. At times he reminds one of Vilfredo Pareto, who talked of men being moved by "persistent aggregates" and "residues," while again he resembles Burke in his recognition of the force of feeling and emotion.

In his most famous essay, "Rationalism in Politics," Oakeshott expresses contempt for rationalism and sympathy for custom and tradition. The rationalist, in Oakeshott's opinion, is too full of book learning. Oakeshott divides knowledge into technical knowledge, which can be formulated (a driving manual is a perfect example), and traditional knowledge, which can be acquired only through practice. The rationalist stresses only technical knowledge and denies traditional knowledge. According to Oakeshott, this view is shallow. John Henry Newman expressed a similar thought when he talked of man's "illative sense." Theories spun out by reason restrict man's freedom in the long run — even those that appear affirmative and plausible on the surface.

Much better in helping a person arrive at a philosophy of life are custom, habit, "prejudice" (in the Burkean sense), and experience. Furthermore, advocates of the natural law or organized religion may be as prone to rationalist error as more self-conscious intellectuals, such as Marxists. To Oakeshott, the British tradition is one that favors individualism and the rule of law and is against the concentration of power in society. Here again there is the comparison with Burke, who praised the "little platoons" while deprecating the centralizing effect of the French Revolution.

Oakeshott says that the rationalist sees political life as a series of problems to be solved and that the rationalist therefore strives after both perfection and uniformity. Powell would argue that the former is impossible and the latter is undesirable. Oakeshott would make a distinction between a connoisseur and an expert and would assert that the former imparts knowledge by example that cannot be formally taught. The pupils of the great humanist and art critic Bernard Berenson all indicate that Berenson's way of instructing was to allow them to observe him analyzing and classifying art in his study, not in didactic lessons. Berenson was both a connoisseur and an expert, but his students, such as Kenneth Clark, John Pope-Hennessy, and Carter Brown, were exposed to the grace and vitality of the former, while the latter is seen in Berenson's books, which are seldom as good as a person of his gifts would indicate that they should be.

Similarly, Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* series is more than the sum of its parts. Read separately, the twelve novels are interesting, but the entire set brings part of an age to life. *A Dance to the Music of Time* is a novel of manners that invites comparison not only with Proust's *oeuvre* but also with the efforts of Oakeshott as a commentator on politics. Powell thus joins

Oakeshott in treating left-wingers as absurd. This is an obvious point of comparison. The attitude is held by Powell partly because of the views of members of the Left, but also because of the latter's ambition and conviction that they can change the world for the better. This philosophy is generally denied by both Oakeshott and Powell. Powell, in effect, joins Oakeshott by repudiating the rationalism of his left-wing characters, while approving or remaining neutral about the views of his nonpolitical ones. As mentioned before, both men are fearful of an all-powerful central government.

Has there been any better description of the rich and well-placed parlor pink of the 1930s than Powell's fictional Erridge (Lord Warminster)? He was "a rebel whose life had been exasperatingly lacking in persecution, had enjoyed independence of parental control, plenty of money, assured social position, early in life." Or consider one who is probably the major character in the entire series, the hyperaggressive, worldly, yet at times curiously naive Kenneth Widmerpool. Widmerpool and his doting mother refer to Stalin in their private conversations during the war as "Uncle Joe" and complain that the Poles who protested the Katyn massacre "are rocking the boat in the most deplorable manner." At times like this Powell uses the novelist's prerogative to become serio-comic, while such light touches are understandably rare in Oakeshott. But both men are allusive and can say a great deal with understatement. Both are also skeptical of any commitment to schemes designed to alter society beyond a Burkean natural evolution. They are among the most important moral influences in contemporary English life and letters in this commitment to freedom and to tradition.

— John W. Osborne