

NEW STUDENT ORIENTATION

The undergraduate . . . is neither a child nor an adult, but stands in a strange middle moment of life when he knows only enough of himself and of the world which passes before him to wish to know more. He has not yet found what he loves, but neither is he jealous of time, of accidents, or of rivals. Perhaps the phrase from the fairy tale suits him best—he has come to seek his intellectual fortune.

—Michael Oakeshott¹

Welcome to Orientation! Any minute, the students should be arriving in Academic Affairs to learn about registration and degree requirements. Then they will head off on a get-to-know-your-campus scavenger hunt organized by Student Life. However, they must have lost their way. The students have ended up in Humanities Hall, seated around the campus's eccentric professor of political philosophy. And he is way off script . . .

We might think this purely fanciful, if not for a manuscript discovered in the archives of the London School of Economics, revealing a surprising fact about their 1961 new-student orientation: it concluded with a talk from the great theorist of experience, education, and political life, Michael Oakeshott.² Did they not realize that Oakeshott was a double agent? In my scenario, the students were literally lost; here Oakeshott made it his mission to lead them astray. Welcome to Reorientation!³

Oakeshott begins by acknowledging the inevitable orientation fatigue:

This I fear may be the last straw.

You have been talked to by the Director, by the Registrar, by the Librarian, by your Tutors; you have been prematurely advised about your careers; you have been told where the lavatories are . . . ; you have been received, paraded, welcomed, registered, and given a free tea. . . . I am left with nothing to say but what you have probably heard three times over.⁴

But of course Oakeshott does have something to say, something “not quite in line with what you’ve already been told.”⁵ While he wants to evoke what college can be, he knows that the students won’t be able to hear him unless he can first poke some holes in their received ideas. “The distinctive feature” of a place of liberal learning, Oakeshott later argues, is that “those who occupy it are recognized and recognize themselves preeminently as learners, although they may be much else besides.”⁶ At first glance, this seems pretty intuitive. You emphasize different aspects of yourself in different contexts; college foregrounds your student identity. As it turns out, Oakeshott is making a stranger and more interesting claim: it is precisely the identity of student that most threatens to derail our self-recognition as learners. Thus, begins Oakeshott’s anti-orientation:

Almost everything that has happened to you since you arrived here, and much of what was told you beforehand, has tended to turn you into self-conscious “Students.” . . . Indeed, some people seem to think that being a “student” is a sort of profession.⁷

At this point, we can imagine Oakeshott’s audience feeling more than a little confused. Did the chair of the Department of Government really just tell us to stop thinking of ourselves as students?!⁸ It might have helped if Oakeshott had explained that there is nothing wrong with the word “student” and nothing sacred about the term “learner.” Perhaps Oakeshott could not have foreseen just how adaptable the terms “learner” and “learning” would prove, giggling as press agents for late, flexi-capitalism; but he would have known that the Latin roots of “student” (*studere, studium*) suggest care, desire, zeal.⁹ In any case, the distinction Oakeshott is making is axiological, not verbal. He is pointing to what David Blacker, following Michael Walzer, calls “spherical capture,” the process by which one value sphere commandeers the vocabulary and practices of another.¹⁰ Like an ant invaded by the zombie-fungus, the concept of the student in late capitalism only looks educational on the outside. It is now piloted by the same logic that reduces everything to what Oakeshott calls the “enterprise of extracting from the world satisfactions for our wants.”¹¹

So, having gotten the kids to himself for a moment, Oakeshott wastes no time in staging an intervention. You have been bombarded with “propaganda,” he tells them,

designed to make you believe that you are here to learn how to be a more efficient cog in a social machine. Forget it. You are here for nothing of the sort.

You are here to educate yourselves, and education is not learning how to perform a social function. “Society,” no doubt, will make demands upon you soon enough, and you may find yourself (like the rest of us) a wretched cog in some vast machine which asks only that you perform what is called your function. But that is not what you have come here to learn; you have come here to get acquainted with truth and error, not with merely what is and what is not serviceable to a lunatic productivist society.¹² (333–334)

I wonder if the LSE director knew that Oakeshott, typically caricatured as an apologist for the Tories, would begin his orientation speech with a critique of capitalism!¹³

Throughout his remarks, Oakeshott is driving home the point that stance matters. To illustrate, let’s imagine a diverse group of people at a museum. The group includes an eager first-time visitor, a young artist sketching a favorite painting, an art-world connoisseur making the rounds, a graduate student applying critical theory, a donor cutting the ribbon for the new wing, a rival museum director sizing up the competition, and a security expert inspecting the alarm system.

While the GPS shows all of them at the same location, they are not truly occupying the same space. The connoisseur stands in a hall of mirrors, ringed by reflections of his own cultural capital. The grad student finds herself behind enemy lines, surrounded by hegemony. For the donor, the gallery is a big trophy case; for the rival director, a portfolio; for the security expert, a vault. It is likely only the artist and the first-timer who have begun to travel with the paintings into the variety of worlds they open. For the others, even while they stand in its midst, the museum remains closed.¹⁴

Similarly, you can be dropped off at college, move into the dorm, attend classes, ace exams, complete requirements, and toss your mortarboard . . . without ever arriving at the university as a *place of learning*. Oakeshott titled his remarks “On Arriving at a University,” and the gerund is important. While these students have already arrived on campus, arriving at a university will require an intentional process. Though they are new at LSE, these are inveterate students; without an intervention, they are likely to assimilate learning to studenting.¹⁵ Oakeshott reserves the term “learning” for the active and reflective pursuit of our formation. To be a learner is to accept the “responsibility of self-definition” and embark on “adventures in human self-understanding.”¹⁶ By contrast, what I am calling “studenting” is the

familiar business of navigating the bureaucratic structures set up to make sure that you are progressing through degree requirements.

Admittedly, this contrast seems both romantic and reductive. Of course universities need to have some way of organizing and tracking student progress. Why assume that this credentialing function warps or supersedes learning? And why should we accept this monolithic picture of student life? Standing on the quad, we see students heading every which way, taking different classes, pursuing a range of majors, working on a variety of projects. The Oakeshottian response to this is that we must gain some distance before this scatterplot reveals its underlying linearity. To help us defamiliarize contemporary higher education, Oakeshott develops three untimely ideas: a distinction between instrumental and liberal learning, a recovery of the ancient notion of *skholē*, and a reversal of our received ideas about insularity. Let's explore each in turn.

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Oakeshott is the first to acknowledge the value of instrumental learning, appreciating both its diversity and its depth. He applauds the way we proliferate practices from contract law to contract bridge, pipefitting to periodontics, midwifery to mortuary science. He finds it wonderful that we have “schools where one may learn to cook, to drive an automobile or to run a bassoon factory.”¹⁷ In the “vast variety of instrumental . . . practices,” Oakeshott sees both constant innovation (“A human art is never fixed and finished”) and genuine understanding (“To learn an instrumental art is not merely being trained to perform a trick”).¹⁸ Even so called “physical education”—Oakeshott gives the example of gymnastics—involves apprenticing oneself to “an intellectual art.”¹⁹ Refusing to reduce instrumental practices to generic skill sets, Oakeshott insists that the “arts and practices we share with one another are nowhere to be found save in the understandings of living, individual adepts who have learned them.”²⁰ In communities of practice, we learn not only procedures and skills, but languages of description, modes of relation, and even ideals of conduct.²¹ Thus, Oakeshott credits his “Sergeant gymnastics instructor” as the first person to show him the meaning of “patience, accuracy, economy, elegance and style.”²²

Oakeshott has only one concern about instrumental learning, but it is a big one. It stems from his reading of the human condition as one of inevitable parochialism. Recall the passage we considered in the prologue: “Each of us is born in a corner of the earth and at a particular moment of historic

time, lapped round with locality.”²³ Thus, we pursue our formation “not in some abstract, ideal world, but in the local world we inhabit.”²⁴ By the time we are self-aware, what we are aware of is a self that is already defined by “its place in . . . an identifiable mode of imagining,” by its ability to “move about in an appropriate way among images of a certain kind.”²⁵ We inherit local dialects, as it were, of “sensing, perceiving, feeling, desiring, thinking, believing, contemplating, supposing, knowing, preferring, approving, laughing, crying, dancing, loving, singing, making hay, devising mathematical demonstrations, and so on.”²⁶ Whether we are from the twelfth century or the twenty-first century, whether we hail from Paris or Provincetown, we are all provincial.

Parochial though it may be, each corner of the earth comes richly appointed. One finds nuance in its language of appreciation, depth in its inventory of desirables, complexity in its arts of production. There are always new models to get and new ways of getting them. In every local world, life can become, as it were, all consuming. And so we might never even notice that the persistent instrumental question, “How do we get what we (happen to have already learned to) want?,” begs the more fundamental question of what is worth wanting. What is truly worth wanting to have, to participate in, to achieve, to become? This is liberal learning’s defining question, but it is an inevitably fugitive one. It can be discovered, and it can be rediscovered, but it cannot be left running, as it were, like a fountain. “It has taken many shocks of awareness,” Maxine Greene writes, “for me to realize how I existed within a tradition . . . as within a container.”²⁷ Liberal learning begins again each time we confront the fact that we have shrunk reality to the circumference of our horizons, that there are other ways of world-making, that our worlds may be reworked.

The question is how to get this project off the ground. For we are apt to approach the scene of learning instrumentally. If someone asks you to give them a huge sum of money—not to mention four years of your life—it is understandable that you would expect an answer to the question, What is this good for? The problem is that any ordinary response will be self-defeating. The educator is being asked to demonstrate the value of liberal learning in terms the student already recognizes. In effect, the student is asking, How does liberal education help me get what I have already learned to want? This is impossible to answer, since the value of liberal learning lies precisely in its ability to interrupt this question-begging, instrumental

posture, to reopen the question, What is worth wanting? At the end of the process, Greene is grateful to have learned that what she thought was the world was but one container within it. But that doesn't make it an easy sell. Here is the kind of extensive and illuminating dialogue we can expect at the threshold of liberal learning:

EARNEST LIBERAL EDUCATOR: It is valuable and interesting to crack open containers and build passages between them. I can't wait to share this experience with you.

CITIZEN OF CONTAINERLAND: Huh?

We seem to be stuck in a vicious circle: since the educational imagination is itself cramped, we need liberal learning in order to become aware of the possibility of liberal learning.

Given that liberal education does occur in various places, sometimes even in universities, its logical impossibility must be overstated. So what's the solution? Basically, you need to dodge the question while keeping the conversation going. The trick is to bring students along to the point where they shift from looking at liberal learning from their old vantage point to looking at everything, including their old vantage point, from new angles.²⁸ But let us not minimize the difficulties of unlearning, as if scales just suddenly fall from our eyes.²⁹ As Plato was the first to point out, if we do manage to turn the soul toward undiscovered aspects of reality, we initially see less, not more.³⁰ And no one likes to be partially blinded. We should not be surprised, Socrates says, if the person we have reoriented is "pained and angry at being treated this way."³¹

A classic psychology experiment illustrates just how uncomfortable we feel when stuck between gestalts.³² A set of playing cards was doctored so that some of the hearts were black, some of the clubs red, and so on. Participants were asked to identify a random sequence of cards, some normal and some color-reversed (or "incongruous"). Each card was displayed repeatedly until recognized, at durations stepping up from 10 to 1000 milliseconds. The findings illustrate just how hard it is for us to sit with ambiguity, and how crafty we can be at preempting it. The most common response was obliviousness. Participants simply failed to perceive the incongruities, often repeatedly so. One participant perceived the black three of hearts as a three of spades through twenty-four consecutive exposures, another through

forty-four straight viewings.³³ Participants also hallucinated compromises. Red spades and clubs were described variously as brown, purple, rusty, “olive drab,” blurred, reddish but blackening, black on a reddish card, black with red edges, black but cast in a red or yellow light, and so on.³⁴ Finally, some participants experienced a breakdown of their ability to perceive the card in any coherent way. The experimenters noted not only gross perceptual failures (e.g., an inability to count the number of pips on the card) but strong affective responses. One participant blurted out, “I don’t know what the hell it is now, not even sure whether it is a playing card.”³⁵ Another, when shown a red spade card for a full 300 milliseconds, began to unravel before the experimenters’ eyes: “I can’t make the suit out, whatever it is. It didn’t even look like a card that time. I don’t know what color it is now or whether it’s a spade or a heart. I’m not even sure what a spade looks like! My God!”³⁶

There are ways to mitigate these risks, including hospitality, humility, and a sense of humor. You can ask your students what they need to be comfortable in this new place and try to provide it. You can explain that people who dig tunnels between containers are themselves a strange tribe. You can tell stories of your own container navigation, sharing how you have managed to cut out some windows and why you enjoy the view. And you can fess up that, just like everyone else, you still like to spend most of your time cozying up with warm cup of familiarity. Transformative educators can also take comfort in the fact that their students will arrive already feeling some dissatisfaction with their corner of the earth, since every container language simplifies, distorts, or simply redacts crucial dimensions of experience. Even as we take our world to be *the* world, we sometimes manage to tune into wavelengths that fall between the local stations. And we find ourselves looking for some way to boost the signal. John Donne understood this search for expanded articulation, understood that a container can be both a comfort and a coffin. For now, let’s give him the last word on why liberal learning matters:

To know and feele all this, and not to have
 Words to expresse it, makes a man a grave
 Of his owne thoughts . . .³⁷

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So Oakeshott is trying to help his audience begin to stretch their imaginations about what a university education might be so that they can go on to stretch their imaginations about everything else.³⁸ If we wanted to be

fancy, we could call it meta-liberal-learning. I prefer “deprogramming.” Three times in the first four pages, Oakeshott pleads with his audience to “forget” something they have been told (333, 334, 336). To the idea that their task is to fulfill the requirements of a major, Oakeshott counters:

You are not here to get a degree—that is a by-product. Nor are you here to “follow a course.” A university is a place where you educate yourselves and one another, and that is what you are here to do. (336–337)

In response to the idea that students are like a professional guild, Oakeshott counters that

you are members of something much more like a confraternity of strolling players—to which I am, also, glad to belong. The police sometimes move us on; but we are tolerated, and to live in an area of toleration is much pleasanter than having a niche in society. (334)

In passages such as these, we find Oakeshott working to interrupt that familiar stance, the grind. When it is time to name the alternative, he reaches for an ancient Greek term, *skholé*. As Oakeshott points out, the typical rendering of *skholé* in English is “leisure,” “but it is a lame translation” (335). For us, leisure is just the inversion of modern, alienated labor, “a holiday designed to make us work better when it is over, or merely . . . ‘work’ of another sort.”³⁹ Leisure suggests dissipation of focus and relaxation of effort, all in the service of readying us for our impending return to the grind. By contrast, *skholé* “is at once a discipline and a release,” involving a “continuous and exacting redirection of attention.”⁴⁰ One experiences *skholé* not as empty but as “fully occupied.”⁴¹

The untranslatability of this untimely concept thus exposes a blind spot in our understanding of effort and activity. We have a tendency to assume that we are “doing nothing,” Oakeshott explains, unless we are “contributing to that blessed 4% per annum increase in productivity.”⁴² In moments like this, Oakeshott is working to trouble the image of ourselves as *Homo laborans*, “a creature composed entirely of wants, who understands the world merely as the means of satisfying those wants.”⁴³ For Oakeshott, “there is something lacking in this happiness and something unsatisfying to human beings in this satisfaction.”⁴⁴ Oakeshott explains:

It is not only that everything that is produced in satisfaction of a want rapidly perishes, or that many wants demand recurrent satisfactions, but that the satisfaction

of every want generates a new want that in turn calls for satisfaction. Doing, and the attitude to the world it entails, is (as the hymn says) “a deadly thing.” It is an activity of getting and spending, of making and consuming, endlessly.⁴⁵

Caught in this endless cycle, Oakeshott concludes, *Homo laborans* “is a creature of unavoidable anxieties.”⁴⁶

No one denies the need to unwind, nor the pleasures of goofing off. However, in reaching for the concept of *skholé*, Oakeshott suggests that college represents the greater gift of being “freed for a moment from the curse of Adam, the burdensome distinction between work and play.”⁴⁷ Labor is a burden demanding rest and recovery. It is, however, also a burden to move through life under the weight of thinking that we might be nothing more than what we see of ourselves when spending or spent. It is the lifting of this second burden, Oakeshott suggests, that makes college such a gift.

“The characteristic gift of the university,” Oakeshott declares, “is the gift of an *interval*.”⁴⁸ With this awkward word, Oakeshott is gesturing toward the idea of an episode with its own temporal-educational logic. Clearly, undergraduate education is neither a beginning nor an end: “No man begins his education at the university, he begins it in the nursery; and a man’s formative years are not at an end when he takes his degree.”⁴⁹ But neither is it well described as the middle of some continuous process of schooling, socialization, or career preparation. “Whenever an ulterior purpose of this sort makes its appearance,” Oakeshott insists, “education (which is concerned with persons, not functions) steals out of the back door with noiseless steps.”⁵⁰ College education is concerned with personhood, with individuals working out the direction of their formation, the terms of their self-understanding, the compass of their freedom. It is this existential frame that helps us understand Oakeshott’s cryptic term, “interval.” It is an “interim”⁵¹ inserted between two main chapters of our lives, when one has simultaneously been emancipated from the “the frustrations of childhood” and granted a “merciful postponement of having to take up the often dreary responsibilities of an adult.”⁵²

Conventional wisdom has it that adolescence represents a transition from the carefree days of childhood to the responsibilities of adulthood. Oakeshott rejects this view, observing a deep continuity between our school days and our working lives. College represents not a transition between but an alternative to two different forms of what is ultimately a single existential

mode, the grind. Experiences of self-direction and “flow” are the exception. Schoolchildren and adult workers alike usually find themselves driven by necessity, performing for others, and laboring in an alienated, timeclock mode.⁵³ By contrast, college represents a “reprieve from the ‘rat race.’”⁵⁴ It allows a “release from old commitments entered into in the semi-conscious years of childhood, and the absence of haste to contract new ones.”⁵⁵ It offers a glimpse of life as something other than an endless cycle of “getting and spending,” a glimpse of yourself as something other than a hamster in a wheel.⁵⁶

Thus, Oakeshott imagines college as a wedge between two periods of our lives ruled by necessity, prying open a temporary experience of *skholé*:

Here is a break in the tyrannical course of irreparable events; a period in which to look round upon the world and upon oneself without the sense of an enemy at one’s back or the insistent pressure to make up one’s mind; a moment in which to taste the mystery without the necessity of at once seeking a solution.⁵⁷

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If you told readers unfamiliar with Oakeshott that his writings on education appeared in the “fifties and sixties,” they might well think that you meant the 1850s.⁵⁸ He seems closer to Newman’s *The Idea of the University* (1854) than to the Open University (founded in 1969). Oakeshott’s contemporaries were calling for an expanded university, one that enrolled more diverse students, included new sources of knowledge, engaged contemporary social issues, and provided a wider variety of more practical majors (needed by a more economically diverse student body). By contrast, Oakeshott warned of the dangers of expansion, extolled the virtues of a centuries-old tradition of humane letters, railed against presentism, and stressed the tensions between liberal and instrumental learning. Then there is his disconcerting claim that “there is something properly and unavoidably ‘cloistered’ about a university.”⁵⁹ The scare quotes suggest that Oakeshott is not ready to fully embrace a monastic conception of undergraduate education. Still, the imagery of detachment, seclusion, and shelter runs throughout his educational writings.⁶⁰ To celebrate universities in this way, as “places apart,” flies in the face of what are now well-accepted ideas: campuses inevitably reflect surrounding cultures, academic inquiry is shaped by the prejudices of the day, and institutions of higher education in every era have served economic and political functions.⁶¹ Even if isolation were possible, it would be undesirable, since contemporary social issues can enlarge

and reinvigorate fusty disciplines. If we grant these points, as we should, must we then dismiss Oakeshott as a kind of academic survivalist, holing himself up with his rhetorical weapons in what remains of the ivory tower? While there is a grain of truth in this image, it is important to get clear on what Oakeshottian detachment is all about.

It is hard not to read Oakeshott's talk of detachment and shelter as nostalgia for college gates and pristine quads, as a reactionary wish for an enclave in which the privileged might enjoy undisturbed the addition of a few final coats of polish to groom them for polite society and the halls of power. While I am convinced that this is not what he had in mind, Oakeshott was undeniably ambivalent about the rapid democratization of higher education occurring during his lifetime.⁶² I speak of ambivalence rather than pure aversion because, even in his earliest writings on education, we find him anticipating the charge of classism and taking pains to qualify his claims that liberal learning is a "luxury," a "privilege," a "gift," and a form of "leisure." It is a luxury, "but not in the sense that it is superfluous to all but the very sophisticated."⁶³ It is not a tithe but an unexpected gift that "inspires . . . gratitude" and "is understood as a repeated summons rather than a possession, an engagement rather than an heirloom."⁶⁴ It is a privilege, "but it does not depend on any definable pre-existing privilege or upon the absence of the necessity of earning one's living in the end."⁶⁵ It is not "something suitable only to a 'leisured class.'"⁶⁶ Indeed, logic dictates that it is not suitable to such a class at all, since liberal learning represents the gift of an interval, the offer of an unexpected period of *release* from the grind.

Though his progress is hampered by his own class anxieties, Oakeshott eventually arrives at an unqualifiedly universal argument for liberal learning.⁶⁷ "So valuable is this experience," Oakeshott declares in his 1967 Calgary lecture, "that I would not know how to deny it to anybody."⁶⁸ The syntax here is certainly suggestive, as if Oakeshott would like to justify exclusive admissions but simply cannot find a defensible principle. However, by the late essays, Oakeshott has graduated from a weak rejection of exclusivity to a strong defense of universality. Liberal learning is rooted not in the prerogatives of a particular class but in the predicament in which all human beings find themselves. All of us must respond "gaily or reluctantly, reflectively or not so reflectively, to the ordeal of consciousness."⁶⁹ We must make sense of ourselves through the hermeneutic resources (languages and locations, practices and traditions, histories and exemplars) that

we find in and seek from our corner of the earth. But neither the meanings of these formative resources nor the relationships among them is simply given. These must be discerned through particular (and peculiar) efforts at understanding. As Oakeshott puts it, “A human being is condemned to be a learner,” because “everything is *known* to him in terms of what it *means* to him,” and “meanings have to be learned.”⁷⁰

Thus, liberal learning is a birthright, but not of a gentlemanly class. Indeed, even as they prepare another round of ringers, the Eton’s and Andover’s may breed a certain numbness to the need for liberal learning. Oakeshott suggests that, if anything, this need may be more keenly felt “upon the banks of the Wabash, in the hills of Cumberland, in a Dresden suburb or a Neapolitan slum.”⁷¹ While Oakeshott’s geography of marginalization needs updating, there is sense in his claim that life on the margins “nurture[s] a disposition to recognize” the value of liberal learning whose

reward is an emancipation from the mere ‘fact of living’, from the immediate contingencies of place and time of birth, from the tyranny of the moment and from the servitude of a merely current condition; it is the reward of a human identity and of a character capable in some measure of the moral and intellectual adventure which constitutes a specifically human life.⁷²

This is the egalitarian implication of Oakeshott’s reading of the human condition: liberal learning is not a special privilege; it is a human requirement.

Why then does Oakeshott balk at opening up the university? In Oakeshott’s judgment, the expansion of the university is primarily an excuse for its ever further transformation into a credential distribution machine. Oakeshott is pointing out what amounts to a societal sleight of hand: we leap from the unquestionable premise that college is a good too valuable to hoard to the unrelated conclusion that everyone deserves a chance to queue up for a valuable ticket into the labor market. What Oakeshott wants for the kid from Naples or Indiana is the chance to experience the gift of an interval. Far from granting wider access to the experience of *skholê*, this bait-and-switch makes it increasingly difficult for anyone to attain the existential goods of college.

Worse, it turns out that there was a second bait-and-switch hidden within the first. First, credentialing replaces the quest for self-understanding. However, the credential is not the BA itself but a branded diploma, and it is precisely selectivity that secures this college-name-brand-recognition.

Thus, precisely to the degree to which higher education becomes enmeshed with credentialing it becomes a “positional good,” one that is “valuable to some people only on condition that others do not have it.”⁷³ In a positional market, increased access leads to increased stratification, which is precisely what we see in higher education.⁷⁴ While much is made of the financial rewards of various majors, institutional selectivity proves to be a much clearer predictor of future earnings.⁷⁵ There is nothing egalitarian about widening access if the newly admitted are accommodated by adding dilapidated cars to the back of the train, creating undergraduate “Tailies” as in the vivid class allegory, *Snowpiercer*.⁷⁶ Indeed, it is likely that expanded, stratified access increases inequality, since higher enrollments further cement the social norm that college is the proper way to establish one’s merit on the job market, devaluing noncollege routes.⁷⁷

In my view, while Oakeshott should have been much more worried about expanding the community of existential learners, he was not wrong to be skeptical of the idea that egalitarianism lay behind the version of expansion we underwent. Some have gotten rich through the massification of higher education, but not the masses.⁷⁸ Perhaps Oakeshott was writing for neither 1950 nor 1850, but for 2050. Consider David Blacker’s recent observation that there may be an educational silver lining in the storm cloud of late capitalism.⁷⁹ Blacker certainly does not minimize the damage from the whirlwind, from social upheaval and existential disorientation to economic precarity and ecological peril. As an increasingly automated capital ransacks the planet for a last carbon fix, it turns out that “planned obsolescence awaits not just our consumer goods but we ourselves as well” (13). On this point, Blacker quotes the dark prediction of Yuval Noah Harari: “By 2050 a new class of people might emerge—the useless class. People who are not just unemployed but unemployable” (17). There is no sugar-coating this experience of being consigned to an “outcast humanity,” of having to confront a “vertiginous uselessness whose implications threaten everything to which we have become accustomed” (35). For one thing, it means cutting loose the vocational anchors of our identity. For another, Blacker writes, it means letting go of the mythos of education-fueled, meritocratic social mobility:

Stay in school, study hard and get ahead. “Maybe you will get ahead, maybe you won’t” is now the only honest response to this zombie mantra. A few

will, to be sure, a few are still needed and will be for some time. But fewer and fewer. In the American experience this tectonic change in education's relation to the economy is all the more worrisome because it threatens to sever the long-cherished presumed linkage between educational effort and social position. This has long been a core legitimating ideal of our quasi-meritocracy: positions in society are deserved because of an individual's virtue, talent and hard work, etc. rather than merely guaranteed to them in the feudal sense via heredity. (11)

For some two centuries, formal education has profited by defining itself as an economic investment. However, live by the sword (of economic utility), die by the sword. As the economic argument crumbles, education enters an ever deeper legitimation crisis. Strange as it may seem, this is where the silver lining comes in. For the apotheosis of the "economy-education nexus" reveals its true nature (16). Guided by "no regulative image of the type of person it wishes to foster," our schools and colleges are "axiologically directionless" (24). As "this twilight of our institutional idols deepens," what stands revealed is their abiding nihilism (16). Though unpleasant, this insight is liberating. "With the yoke of economic utility shucked off," Blacker suggests, "our schools and colleges may now be freer to remake themselves in a different image" (10). "Without economic utility preempting every conversation and restricting every horizon," he explains, "there could be a mini-philosophical renaissance where alternative aims and purposes are considered" (13). Education could become "aesthetic or discovery oriented" or "humanistic in the classical sense of promoting a specific vision of the human good, a *paideia*" (13). Thus, if the planet will still support us, we may find something surprising at the end of the treacherous road to the post-work economy: education rededicated to questions of meaning and purpose.

Thus, it is quite far from obvious that Oakeshott's call for *skholé* and his critique of instrumentalism is the inegalitarian option here. It is true, Oakeshott was not particularly interested in social mobility. But neither is the jobified university. Increased access is a powerful slogan, but the question is what we are accessing. Expanding the "sorting machine" serves capital, not the *demos*. What the people need, in important part, are spaces in which to make sense of their liquified identities and articulate inhabitable social imaginaries.

This is the reading of Oakeshott and his reorientation that I prefer, as an invitation to rethink the economy-education nexus in our "lunatic

productivist society.”⁸⁰ What first appears as a call for insular universities, for privilege preserving enclaves, turns out to be a call for universities still capable of interrupting our insularity. Such an untimely university would serve as a conservatory of practices and resources for raising and reraising that annoying and indispensable question, what is worth wanting?⁸¹ Unless this question is to be preempted by the instrumentalist’s hasty question—what is this good for?—there must be some buffer between the place of learning and the marketplace. There is no drive-through version of *skholé*. All Oakeshott asks for is a speed bump on the way to the quad.

You don't need me to tell you what education is. Everybody really knows that education . . . is the process of waking up to life. . . . It takes a heap of resolve to keep from going to sleep in the middle of the show. It's not that we want to sleep our lives away. It's that it requires certain kinds of energy, certain capacities for taking the world into our consciousness, certain real powers of body and soul to be a match for reality.

—MC Richards¹

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By: Chris Higgins

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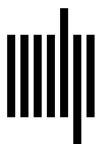
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