Turin in the days prior to his mental collapse? Indeed, it turns out that for Hutter not everything we call "dance" fulfils this function of affirmative self-fashioning. So what, exactly, did the dancing philosopher mean by dancing?

Finally, while contemporary Nietzsche scholars must sympathize with Hutter's claim about the impossibility of engaging all or even most of the vast secondary literature on Nietzsche, it is anomalous that he ignores Alexander Nehamas's discussions of Nietzsche throughout *The Art of Living* (his 1998 book which began as the Sather lectures). This omission is even more striking given the admiration Hutter professes for Nehamas's earlier work, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature.* That Hutter neglects Lou Salomé's work on Nietzsche is regrettable: there he would have found much to support and nourish his interpretation, including the term "essence" being used without irony or explanation when describing Nietzsche's thought.

–Ruth Abbey

OAKESHOTT AS POSTMODERNIST

Suvi Soininen: *From a "Necessary Evil" to the Art of Contingency: Michael Oakeshott's Conception of Political Activity* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2005. Pp. viii, 247. $49.90.)

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This book is one in a series of monographs published by Imprint Academic Press on the thought of Michael Oakeshott. This series, which already includes seven titles, testifies to the increasing scholarly interest in Oakeshott's philosophy. There are many reasons for this growing interest, perhaps the most important being that it has become increasingly clear that Oakeshott was one of the most important political philosophers of the twentieth century. He also had many interesting and profound things to say about the nature of philosophy, history, art, religion, and education. He is generally counted as one of the most influential conservative thinkers in post-World War II Europe and America. The other thinker who springs to mind in this connection is, of course, Leo Strauss; and perhaps another reason why Oakeshott has attracted so much attention of late is that his modest and skeptical conservatism differs fundamentally from the more dogmatic and universalist conservatism of Strauss's neoconservative followers in Washington.

In Suvi Soininen's well-researched book, however, the emphasis does not fall on Oakeshott's conservatism. Indeed, she is concerned to put some distance between Oakeshott and the traditionalist, Burkean conservatism with which he is often associated and for which he has been frequently criticized. In opposition to the traditionalist, Burkean conservative, Soininen offers us an Oakeshott who has far more in common with postmodernist thinkers who emphasize the contingency of the self and of political activity in general. The thinker to whom she most closely assimilates Oakeshott is Richard Rorty.

The argument of Soininen's book centers on what she sees as the fundamentally changing character of Oakeshott's understanding of politics. That she sees Oakeshott's conception of politics as undergoing fundamental changes by itself makes her argument somewhat revisionist with respect to much of the secondary literature. The prevailing view has been that Oakeshott's basic philosophical outlook did not change significantly over the course of his career. Soininen argues, however, that not only did Oakeshott's political philosophy change in fundamental ways, but that it did so in response to changes in contemporary political debate. This, too, marks a revision of the received view, which tends to accept Oakeshott's self-understanding of his philosophy as radically separate from practical or ideological commitments. Terry Nardin's otherwise excellent, recent book, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, falls into this latter category. But Soininen argues—rightly I think—that Oakeshott was not always or merely an academic scholar and that his philosophy often moves fluidly between different levels of thinking about politics, from the purely philosophical to the practical and the ideological.

The specific change that Soininen focuses on in her analysis is Oakeshott's movement from a contemptuous attitude toward politics in his earlier writings to qualified appreciation for the art of politics in his later outlook. She uses two quotes to capture this fundamental shift in Oakeshott's thinking about politics. In the 1939 essay "The Claims of Politics," Oakeshott wrote: "Political action involves mental vulgarity, not merely because it entails the concurrence and support of those who are mentally vulgar, but because of the false simplification of human life implied in even the best of its purposes" (quoted on p. 1). In his 1975 book *On Human Conduct*, he wrote that politics in a civil association requires "so exact a focus of attention and so uncommon a self-restraint that one is not astonished to find this mode of human relationship to be as rare as it is excellent" (quoted on p. 2).

With these two quotes framing her analysis, Soininen charts in careful detail the stages in Oakeshott's progress from his early, antipolitical view to his later, "republican" ideal. The most illuminating aspect of her analysis concerns Oakeshott's deployment and eventual abandonment of the concept of tradition to understand political activity. Oakeshott is perhaps most famous for his critique of ideological politics and his alternative understanding of political activity as the pursuit of the intimations of a particular political tradition. This anti-ideological, traditionalist understanding of politics found its most forceful expression in Oakeshott's essays on rationalism in the late 1940s and early 1950s; and it immediately came under heavy criticism for reducing political activity to nonrational habits and intuitions and for failing to provide a rational criterion for politics. Soininen thinks that some of these criticisms of Oakeshott's notion of tradition are not without merit, and, furthermore, she thinks that Oakeshott may have realized this. Without explicitly acknowledging it, he slowly began to modify his understanding of political activity, purging the notion of tradition of its natural and necessary character and giving more credit to the role of ideas,

norms, and principles in political discourse. This acceptance of an ideological dimension to healthy political activity culminates in Oakeshott's jettisoning of the concept of tradition altogether in *On Human Conduct* and his replacement of it by the concept of a practice. The latter concept places much greater emphasis on the intelligent responses of agents, over against unconscious habits and intuitions, and it highlights the contingency of political arrangements, over against natural growth.

All this is carefully and convincingly argued by Soininen. In the final two chapters of the book, she goes on to claim that Oakeshott's emphasis on contingency in his later works links him to antifoundationalist, postmodern thinkers like Richard Rorty and Zygmunt Bauman; she also suggests that his acknowledgement of the productive role of ideology in politics leads to a loosening of his rigid distinction between theory and practice. Unfortunately, these two claims are not sufficiently developed—the final two chapters of the book are only twelve pages long, whereas the chapter devoted to Oakeshott's "changing conception of politics" is a whopping 138 pages—and I would argue that they should not be accepted without considerable qualification. While there is much that Oakeshott shares with Rorty's antifoundationalist view of philosophy and human agency, in the end it is his differences with Rorty that allow him to make enduring contributions to our understanding of politics. Though his recognition of contingency in political life is important in this regard, no less important is his ability to abstract from the contingency and ambiguity of historical reality and theorize a relatively permanent ideal such as civil association. This nonhistoricist aspect of Oakeshott's political philosophy connects to the question of theory and practice as well. I do not doubt that the relationship between theory and practice in Oakeshott's political philosophy is far more complicated than the rigid distinction he draws between them often suggests. Nevertheless, it is one of the virtues of Oakeshott's political philosophy that he does not allow theory simply to collapse into practice and thereby fall prey to the kind of historicism and banal pragmatism that haunt Rorty's philosophy, and postmodernism in general.

–Paul Franco

DANCING ON THE GREASY POLE

Ian St. John: *Disraeli and the Art of Victorian Politics* (London: Anthem Press, 2005. Pp. xiv, 239. $85.00)

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Few figures in political life are as endlessly fascinating as the enigmatic figure of Benjamin Disraeli. Convinced that he possessed commanding