Maurice Cowling (1926-2005): RIP

My encounter with Maurice Cowling started in 1963 with the publication of his first two books: *Mill and Liberalism* and *The Nature and Limits of Political Science*. The book on Mill was important to me because I was starting work on a doctoral thesis on John Stuart Mill, still struggling to clarify what I wanted to say. Cowling's *The Nature and Limits of Political Science* was an astute Oakeshottian critique of the modern science of politics. I had already discovered Oakeshott when studying Hobbes as an undergraduate and I used Cowling's book as one of the readings when I first taught the philosophy of the social sciences. But it was the Mill book which was of first importance to me. Along with Gertrude Himmelfarb and Wilmoore Kendall, Cowling was a dissenter from the ranks of those who elevated Mill as the patron saint of the liberal tradition. Cowling detected in Mill a strand of moral totalitarianism, an idealistic progressivism and elitist intellectualism, which made him dangerous from Cowling's acerbically skeptical standpoint. At the same time, the University of Toronto's great project to publish a definitive edition of all Mill's works was underway, in the hands of those who, by and large, defended the traditional view of Mill as the theorist of the open, individualist society. Cowling was an uncompromising controversialist. Thus I decided that in my dissertation I would adjudicate the controversy over Mill's political theory by reviewing the arguments on both sides and testing them against careful reading of his major political texts. My conclusion was that Cowling's view had considerable merit, if overstated (which is a compliment in his view). I

owed my direction in this respect to Cowling long before I met him.

Much later I learned from Cowling himself that he was a Londoner, educated at the Battersea Grammar School before entering Jesus College, Cambridge in 1943. His university career was interrupted by military service which took him to many far-flung places before he returned to Cambridge in 1948 to complete his history studies with a Double First. In the 1950s he spent time in government service and in conservative politics. He was elected a Fellow of Jesus College in 1961, and then of Peterhouse in 1963. He continued his activity in conservative politics and for a year was the literary editor of *The Spectator* (1970-71), thereafter helping to found the Salisbury Group and writing essays in defense of conservative politics although skeptical in a way that Margaret Thatcher and the Thatcher revolution were not. By the time he retired from the History Faculty in 1988, and from his Peterhouse Fellowship in 1993, he was identified as the inspiration of the so-called "Peterhouse School of History," an approach to the study of modern Britain through the dissection and critique of the works of the major figures who shaped English public doctrine in the period from the early 1800s to the present. Exemplary of this is his magnum opus, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (three volumes, 1980-2001).

We finally met in the following way: In 1979 I was a Visitor in the Department of Government at The London School of Economics with the great good fortune to share Oakeshott's room (office) at LSE. Oakeshott was then in retirement and used his room only on Tuesdays in term time when he still attended the general seminar of the History of Political Thought program which he had founded in the early 1960s. I had already come to know him in 1974 and through him had been introduced to Shirley and William Letwin in 1977 and to Kenneth Minogue in 1979. Shirley Letwin was teaching political thought part-time at Cambridge. She arranged an invitation for me to visit Peterhouse in November 1979 to give a talk to the Perne Club, and it was thus that I met Cowling for the first time. He was hard at work (at his stand-up desk) completing the first volume of *Religion and Public*

Doctrine in Modern England, which was published in 1980. He presided at high table dinner before the meeting and I offered praise of his two early books, on Mill and on political science, which had been important to me. "Oh," he said, "I can't stand those books, I never want to talk about them again!" For the first and only time in my experience, I was confronted with a scholar's vehement and public repudiation of his own work, compounded by the embarrassment of my own commitment to them. Every effort of mine to offer him praise and gratitude was turned aside. Interwoven with this was a vituperative exchange with Edward Norman, then the Dean of Peterhouse. Norman was to be the subject of a chapter in Cowling's new book, and Norman, apparently without knowing what was in the chapter, was threatening across the dinner table, in front of the assembled guests, to sue Cowling if he published it. To this Cowling replied, "Sue me, Edward!" Eventually it was published and there was no suit. This made me realize that the novels of Tom Sharpe are surprisingly realistic. I managed to salvage the occasion when I finally, and somewhat desperately, said, "Mr. Cowling, I fear that I am being tediously agreeable." He liked that, and from that moment forward we were friends.

After the Perne Club talk (on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*) we spent several hours into the night in conversation about Oakeshott (Cowling had long since ceased to be an Oakeshottian), Elie Kedourie, the Letwins, and others of the Oakeshott circle who were to have a place in *Religion and Public Doctrine*. We continued the following day and, as I was leaving to return to London he thrust the manuscript of Volume I into my hand and asked me to read it and give him my opinion. I started reading it on the train to London, finished it a day later. Thereafter I made several visits to Peterhouse to discuss the whole project with him, a pattern which persisted through his writing of Volumes II and III.

From these experiences I began to learn something of the peculiarities of Cambridge but especially of Cowling. Among his traits was a profound fear of self-deception coupled with an

equally profound skepticism, approaching cynicism, about the human condition. He suspected all forms of praise even though, as I came to know later, he had a deep affection for students and his friends which he could express in startling, counter-intuitive ways. In later years he visited Colorado College twice giving talks based on chapters he was writing for the second and third volumes of *Religion and Public Doctrine*. He was stern with the students, exactly as he was in his Cambridge supervisions, and they loved it. He was a great teacher, not fitted to contemporary pedagogical science, but all the more successful for it.

Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England showed what Cowling really cared about. This vast work written over more than twenty years, sought to understand the dismantling of the directive authority of Christianity in England over the last two centuries. Cowling considered this work his penance for not having devoted the whole of his career to this subject. This was his admission of his retreat from his Anglican vocation into academic history, a reflection of his fear of joining up, perhaps a fear of his own motives. This work is anything but academic history in the usual sense. The work is an enormous achievement in digesting the writings of virtually every prominent figure in English intellectual life over a 150 year period. In Volume III alone there is serious discussion of upwards of 100 thinkers. The work is polemical, malicious, gossipy, frequently unkind, but always presenting those dissected in their own words taken from the whole of their writings.

Cowling's way of doing history was distinctive to say the least. He had early on imbibed Oakeshott's view of the historian's task which had been shaped by Oakeshott's admiration for historians like Maitland and by F. H. Bradley's philosophical understanding of "critical history." He thought that the historian, qua historian, should study the past "for its own sake" in detachment from all ideological and political motives, showing how changes occurred but eschewing "Why?" questions. The study of history for him was to be a field unto itself. Oakeshott was in part responding to the politicization of the academy in the twentieth century. At one

time, Cowling had agreed to this. But he came to believe that struggle was unavoidable and there is no way out, especially where Christianity is concerned. He criticized Oakeshott and others whom he felt had evaded the struggle and had thus permitted the radical undermining of the English religious tradition. Cowling came to think that all history is polemical. One is on the side one is on, and one writes history accordingly. If truth is to be found, it will be through assertion, sarcasm, irony. He made no apology for polemical writing, he reviled pretensions to any other kind.

Cowling wanted, rather like the nineteenth century Tractarians, to shame those of us who care for Christianity when we avert our eyes from the assault on Christian doctrine or try to rationalize it. Cowling asserted that the attempt to "modernize" Christianity had only more radically undermined it. He denied that the retreat from Christianity was irreversible, and he rejected the claim that modern science had rendered religion unnecessary. He noted that the Socialist claim to historical irreversibility has been thoroughly refuted, and he warned against submitting to theories of historical inevitability. He sought to bring "progress" out of its "ghetto" to be confronted with all its paradoxes and concealed failures. He denied that philosophy could ever do for us what religion does, and he was especially skeptical of the philosophy which begins in suspicion of all verities. As a "cynical Conservative" with no enthusiasm for the "rhetoric of progress, virtue or improvement," he engaged in "conservative deconstruction" against political correctness. Against the modern grain, he analyzed and accused in terms of the reasons thinkers gave for their views. There is no "sociology" at work here. Individuals are, for Cowling, agents operating under powerful constraints, but they are still agents. They are responsible and should be judged.

Exactly at this point one finds the deep ambivalence in Cowling's thought. He resolutely also deconstructed himself in fear of self-deception, and to anticipate the rejoinders of those whom he deconstructed. He was incapable of reentering the Church. His penance was to assault the assaulters of Christianity

while denying to himself the fellowship of those whom he would defend. Cowling's was a Christian mentality fearful of grace. What he wanted was what he called an "effective myth of tradition and continuity" and he knew that this was what we have lost. He thought, perceptively, that theology had been so displaced in our time that we would have to approach theological questions indirectly through literature, criticism, politics, philosophy, history, poetry and science.

Since an effective myth of tradition and continuity has receded, we must now recollect it in hostile territory. But because for Cowling real religion is a virtually unconscious habit, the conscious act of retrieval is in tension with the goal of the act. Cowling was a radical in quest of tradition; he radicalized the radical critique; he turned the genealogical technique against the genealogists. Having abandoned the Christian "bias," the learned committed themselves to the "bias against bias." This turned into a bias against "truth," suggesting to Cowling that the ancient confessional university had greater openness to truth than the modern secular one. Nonetheless, the modern sensibility is pervaded with a religiosity and idealism of its own (consider Tony Blair) which suppresses its encounter with self-awareness. Cowling, thrown into the ordeal of an unchosen self-awareness, determined to do for his enemies what they had done to his tradition. This he came to see as his religious vocation.

My wife and I last saw him two years ago when we, with Ken and Bev Minogue, visited him and his wife and extended family in retirement on the Welsh Coast. He was not well but he was still lively and cantankerous. I reminded him of how we had first met, how he and Edward Norman had verged on fisticuffs, how he had rebuffed my praise, and we reminisced about Michael Oakeshott, Maurice Cranston, Elie Kedourie, Shirley Letwin and others who did and do, and always will, with Maurice Cowling, occupy a central place in my life.

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