

mortal voice to awaken it in time from the fatal security into which it has fallen.”¹²

In his influential essay, Oakeshott argued that conservatism “is not a creed or a doctrine, but a disposition.” Specifically, he thought, it is a disposition to enjoy the present. Not because the present is better than the alternatives or even because it is good on its own terms. That would imply a level of conscious reflection and ideological choice that Oakeshott believes is alien to the conservative. No, the reason the conservative enjoys the present is simply and merely because it is familiar, because it is there, because it is at hand.¹³

Oakeshott’s view of the conservative—and this view is widely shared on both the left and the right—is not an insight; it is a conceit. It overlooks the fact that conservatism invariably arises in response to a threat to the old regime or after the old regime has been destroyed. (Oakeshott openly admits that loss or threatened loss makes us value the present, as I argued in the introduction, but he does not allow that insight to penetrate or dislodge his overall understanding of conservatism.) Oakeshott is describing the old regime in an easy chair, when its mortality is a distant notion and time is a warming medium rather than an acrid solvent. This is the old regime of Charles Loyseau, who wrote nearly two centuries before the French Revolution that the nobility has no “beginning” and thus no end. It “exists time out of mind,” without consciousness or awareness of the passage of history.¹⁴

Conservatism appears on the scene precisely when—and precisely because—such statements can no longer be made. Walter Berns, one of the many future neoconservatives at Cornell who were traumatized in 1969 by the black students, takeover of Willard Straight Hall, stated in his farewell speech when he resigned from the university: “We had too good a world; it couldn’t last.”¹⁵ Nothing so disturbs the idyll of inheritance as the sudden and often brutal replacement of one world with another. Having witnessed