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The Mausoleum and The Searchlight: Two Views of Philosophy

What I wish to capture by the similes in my title has nothing to do with contending philosophical *schools*, or even widely different *approaches* to the subject. For example, European or more precisely Continental phenomenologists, affectionately known by analysts as “lotus eaters,” and predominantly Anglo-American analytical philosophers, equally affectionately classified as “logic choppers” by phenomenologists, are both followers of the Searchlight tradition in philosophy. Those who pursue the Mausoleum tradition, on the other hand, turn their backs on just about everything that has been done by philosophers since the time of Bacon and Descartes. It is all equally intellectual heresy, a corruption of the Good and the True: saving exceptions being the historical turning back to and thus partial rejuvenation of Ancient Verities found in Hegel and Nietzsche.

This difference justifies, I think, the Mausoleum label. The Logos of which the rational man is endeared has not escaped us; it is already in safe captivity, if only we would go back to the stately catafalque erected in the middle of the Fourth Century B.C. And of course it contains not only the giants of that age, but all those who later stood in their shadow and adapted their pagan insights to the revealed Word: most notably Augustine and the Christian neoplatonists, the scholastics and of course the culminating figure of all, Thomas Aquinas. If one has this view, then obviously modern intellectual history is going to seem a sickening aberration: at best a gross irrelevancy, at worst a perverse denial of Truth itself.

But it is rare that thinkers with this view of our past have any serious influence on others. They are usually to be found only in the backwaters of philosophical conferences, if they are present at all, quietly arguing differences in textual interpretation of what the Master said. Judging by the titles of conference papers, only about 5% of professional philosophers in this country and perhaps less than that percentage of English-speaking countries generally are reflexive

adherents to the Mausoleum view. (Of course not all those pursuing scholarship in Ancient and/or Medieval philosophy are Mausoleumers; it is possible to take a detached interest in antiquarian matters, and many sharp analysts, among others, have done so.) What seems to have changed that picture somewhat in Canada is the emergence of a Mausoleumer with undeniable gifts of written expression who is able brilliantly to combine his vision of the ancient unchanging Logos with trenchant political and social historical criticism, particularly as this relates to what he terms the lost cause of Canadian nationalism. In enucleating the Mausoleum view of philosophy it is appropriate and even timely, then, to select as my target of opportunity George Parton Grant and his legion of young and not-so-young followers, loosely but accurately labelled "the Grantians."

Before going on, I feel I should make clear that in what I am about to say there is, as the Sicilian jargon has it, nothing personal. I have met Professor Grant only once, on a social occasion, and that was for me a pleasant, even a humorous encounter. Of his books I would say I was not much impressed with *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, nor with *Technology and Empire*, nor with his Massey lectures, *Time as History*. But his *Lament for a Nation* I thought one of the most brilliant pieces of writing in the English language in this century; and I think almost as highly of his Josiah Wood lectures, *English-Speaking Justice*, though there I found much more to disagree with. For that part of his teaching which most interests Canadians but probably seems less important to Grant himself, I will say only two things critical, and without much confidence. It is not clear to someone who grew up in the midwestern United States how the worldwide American "Empire" established after 1946 should be simply lumped together with, for example, the earlier British Empire. The Yanks thought they were saving the Free World from Communist contagion; it was not a *conscious*, deliberate effort at Empire-building: where does one find the American Kipling, for instance? And what is so bad about Canada's branch-plant economy and culture? As long as the Americans only come north to see the quaint red postboxes and go sledding in Southern Ontario in July, Canadians may have the best of all possible worlds: a prosperity equal to that of the Yanks with much greater civility and kindness, and without their social problems and global responsibilities. Or so one could argue.

But I shall not. Instead I shall concentrate on that aspect of Grantian thought which most interests him. For underlying all his social, political and historical critique, that which makes George Grant a distinguished Canadian man of letters and perhaps Canada's premier essayist, there stands the Mausoleum view. It is simply astonishing how little of a positive nature he says about this in his writings. In the very, very last pages of *Lament* Grant says that the assumptions of this age, which he calls with extreme contempt "the age of progress," were made originally by modern thinkers like Machiavelli and Hobbes, Spinoza and Vico, Rousseau and Hegel, Marx and Darwin, in conscious opposition to the views of the ancient philosophers. These thinkers believed they had *improved* on Plato and Aristotle. In short, they were relentless Searchlighters.

This, according to Grant, is the Cardinal Sin. Plato and Aristotle, he confidently asserts, would not have admitted that their teachings could be used in this way. "They believed that their own teaching was the complete teaching for all men everywhere, or else they were not philosophers." There it is, out in the open. Philosophy for Grant is not the patient probing of dark corners with a searchlight, always attempting to illumine and add to our picture of the world out there. No, it is a one-shot thing, the building of a complete monumental structure that will withstand all storms and turmoil through the ages: it is akin to revelation. (This connects with the CBC hour-long *Spectrum* special on Grant, where he said the Truth was revealed to him when he closed a pasture gate; one wonders what his reaction would have been had the revelation consisted in conveying to him that there is no God and are no eternal verities. It connects also, though perhaps less fairly, with the closing *Spectrum* shots of Grant's friends casting his statue: a neat Caesarian touch.) Grant goes on: only the thinkers of the age of progress looked upon the classical philosophers as a preparation for later thought; to think so today is to think within their assumptions and thus to beg the question when the issue at stake is whether these assumptions are true; the tragedies and ambiguities of our day are raised by this very issue. But to adopt the view of the ancients is to have a very different view of man's freedom, to see this not as his essence but as his taking the place in nature for which he is fitted by the eternal structure of reality; indeed, it implies a science different from the modern one, which Grant characterizes as aimed at the conquest of nature through technology. All of this, according to Grant, is also intimately tied in with Christianity and man's salvation. However sadly the content of the world changes, it does so

against the background of and within an eternal order not itself affected by such changes, and in this we may find our ultimate consolation. Similar passages are easily located in the Massey and Josiah Wood lectures.

What is one to say about all this? Well, it won't hurt to take a closer peek into the Mausoleum. It should be clear that when Grantians talk about classical or ancient philosophers they don't mean just *any* notables from the period before Alexander's conquests ended the Hellenic stage of Greek antiquity. We may be sure that Leucippus and Democritus, for example, or Epicurus and the Latin Lucretius in the Hellenistic period which followed, have no hallowed niches within: at most they are relegated to subterranean chambers as best forgotten anomalies. No, for the Grantians this great stage in human thought and spirit is dominated by just two figures: Plato and Aristotle.

I once heard a presumed Grantian say that all the great classical philosophers taught the same single Truth, and that apparent differences between their teachings are but apparent. But even if he meant by "great" only Plato and Aristotle, there are enormous differences. Here I do not intend to take sides. I have heard Platonists say Aristotle's work is but a series of footnotes to Plato, and Aristotelians rejoin that Plato's work was just an introduction to Aristotle's. Whatever their ranking, Plato taught that there are Pure Forms in which things of this world partake; Aristotle denied this after leaving the Academy and insisted that all forms are inmattered, as all matter is informed. It simply cannot be both that there are Pure Forms and that there are none, so both teachings cannot be true.

However, this may get overlooked by Grantians because what really matters to them is that on either version the kinds of things in the world are guaranteed immutable permanency: the "eternal order" not itself affected by changes that Grant alludes to. And of course that concept is congenial to believing in an eternal order of values as well, majestically underwritten by Christian revelation in the great synthesis of Thomistic thought. All this was a kind of consolidative process, no doubt, which makes it easy to date the seeds of decay from the birth of modern science with Galileo and the concomitant scepticism about scholastic teachings that we find in Descartes and Bacon, which just steamrolled down through the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment and Nineteenth Century, to culminate in Nietzsche's infamous cry that God is dead. If there is no eternal or-

der of things there are no absolute values and man is free to shape his own destiny without constraint. That is what Grant and his followers reject, and back to which all modern evils can be traced on their view.

Note in passing that Grant has charged modern thinkers with begging the question against the ancients by coming to think within the post-Mausoleum assumptions of those who dared to doubt the completeness of their teachings (consolidated later with Christian belief). This is ironic, since the charge itself begs the question as to whether the teachings of the ancients are true. It seems never to occur to the Grantians that professional philosophers almost without exception have read Plato and Aristotle and Aquinas, but did not find their arguments convincing, and so came to share the "assumptions" of later thinkers that their work was only a preparation for further thinking.

Some of the ideas that dominated classical and medieval thought, and were indeed seriously adhered to as late as Leibniz in the Seventeenth Century, are just silly. For example, beginning with the Neoplatonists we find much talk of a Great Chain of Being. An offshoot of this had it that the universe must manifest complete Plenitude, in spite of all that seemingly vast empty space we see between the stars on a clear night. Why? Well, the intuition seems to have been that if there really were any empty spaces those would be areas of reality God *could* have filled with Being, but didn't, so He would not have fully exercised His unlimited power to create. This idea was quite independent of what kind of stuff God used to make the physical world, which is why Leibniz could postulate the stuff as composed of monadic points of energy. But suppose Leibniz was wrong and for some inscrutable reason God chose faecal matter as the stuff of the universe. In that case, this would not be God's world unless the universe were completely full of it.

But to return to the Grantians. On their staggering assumption that the task of philosophy was essentially completed by Plato and Aristotle, and properly supplemented by latin Christian thinkers, it is no wonder that they hold in contempt efforts to erect a theory of justice on utilitarian or contractarian grounds. Such attempts just *assume* that man has no purpose for being here, that there is nothing which he is specially "fitted for." One could only be motivated to fall back on considerations of mutual interest to escape chaos in a state of nature where the weak devour the strong. But for Grantians this is anathema, since Plato already showed in *The Republic* and elsewhere that justice is a state of mind promoting internal harmony just

because it is right and good to be just, no matter how one can temporarily profit from being unjust. And this is explicable only on the assumption that we are capable of apprehending, intellectually, justice as a Pure Form, which then becomes a moral imperative to be followed always in one's own interest as well as society's. To have to calculate the happiness or misery consequent upon one's act, or to insist on a general contract in advance to ensure justice, when this is already written in the stars and inscribed on our souls, is crass and disrespectful. Something like this enucleates the Grantian position, consistent with the Mausoleum view.

If I disagree with this stand, it is not because I wish to dishonour the ancients. Plato had the greatest mind our race has ever seen, for he combined superb philosophical originality with artistic and dramatic power of the first rank. But life is short, and if one wants to find something true about man and our place in nature, Plato is not much help. For the truth is that neither Plato nor Aristotle, nor indeed any of the great European philosophers including Leibniz and Spinoza, had an inkling of what every school child knows now: that the kinds of things we find on our planet were not always, whether that mean eternally or just since a hypothetical Creation, as we find them to be today. In a word, every kind of natural thing in the world, from stars to rocks to trees to man, is the outcome of evolution.

Grant in *Lament for a Nation and English-Speaking Justice* shows that he is aware of Darwin, but he treats Darwin's work as but another symptom of "modernity," in brief as one in a long series of *intellectual* footnotes to modern history. Nowhere does Grant, so far as I am aware, take seriously the *scientific* import of Darwin's discoveries.

And small wonder. Who can forget those glorious moments in the voyage of the *Beagle* when Darwin found the bones of an animal unlike any then roaming the earth; the occasion when he chipped rock away from a mountain top in the Andes, 16,000 feet above sea level and in a snow storm only to find he held fossilized sea shells in his hand; or when he learned that natives in the Gallopagos could tell you from which island came the land tortoise they were dining on, just by noting significant differences in the contour of its shell? What all this told Darwin, and tells us with enormously increased supporting evidence today, is that the earth is very ancient indeed and that its present forms of life emerged in a long course of gradual change and adaptation. But then so did man, and indeed relatively recently in evolutionary history. If so, this does not prove there are no Pure

Forms from eternity, but it certainly does tell us there is no unchanging eternal order of things for which man is specially "fitted," and renders at least implausible the Platonic theory of justice being rooted in apprehension of an eternal Form for this which could have served no function before the emergence of sentient and socially organized species like our own.

Let me make more clear what I am suggesting here. Study of the ancients as our cultural forebearers is a fitting and fine thing. But to expect to find in their writings truths about the world of nature in which man evolved and which shaped man as we know him is futile. Philosophers of course want to learn the truth, but the last place to look for this is in the work of thinkers who were writing long before an important part of the evidence was in; that is like expecting to solve the jigsaw puzzle with key pieces missing. I am not, of course, saying that science has superseded philosophy and left philosophers with nothing to do. But I am saying that one cannot expect to reach truth about man's nature in philosophy without taking into account what science discovers to be true of man's origins. And the worst one can do is to turn one's back on science as if it were irrelevant to the "deeper" questions already satisfactorily answered by ancient thinkers in their scientific ignorance. It is not that thinkers like Plato and Aristotle lacked wisdom, or did not sincerely and indeed brilliantly pursue it. They were the greatest Searchlights of their day. But they could not even guess the truth about the natural world of which man is a part, and which in turn determined his nature. What they lacked was the kinds of facts Charles Darwin painfully pursued, and which give the lie to claims about an immutable order underpinning a system of absolute values that settle once and for all questions about justice, abortion, nationhood, war and technology.

No doubt it is comforting to douse the searchlights and re-enter the mausoleum of the past. At least there are no unpleasant surprises awaiting one there. The turnings are all familiar and the niches richly tapestried. If one can convince oneself that Truth itself glows there, then one can lean out the mausoleum door from time to time and carp at those outside who are still probing the surrounding darkness. And if one has the gifts of a George Grant, one can even make the mausoleum a platform for penetrating social and political criticism layered over with respect for our enduring traditions. Less gifted, perhaps, followers can then join in his sallies against modernity; and they can from time to time foregather in "thinking" our present impasse.

At the conclusion of *English-Speaking Justice*, Grant seems to face the difficulty squarely. He says it would be folly simply to return to the ancient account of justice as if the discoveries of the modern science of nature had not been made. But, he adds, it would also be folly to take the ancient account of justice as of no more than antiquarian interest, "because without any knowledge of justice as what we are fitted for, we will move into the future with a 'justice' which is terrifying in its potentiality for mad inhumanity of action."

But if Darwinism is correct, we are not "fitted for" justice by nature and must, like it or not, fall back on mutual self-interest as the basis for a just social order. Here as elsewhere one cannot eat one's cake and have it too. Grantians and other sympathizers often speak as if Professor Grant needs only a little time to link his vision of the Good to modern problems in a precise way that will dispel the latter. They are going to have a long wait.