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Review Article
Considering George Grant

George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations, ed. Larry Schmidt, Toronto, Anansi, 1978. pp. 233.

George Grant is a unique figure in Canadian letters. He has, in sometimes deeply moving prose, called us to self-recognition. He has, more than any other writer, made us rethink our deepest political convictions: that we have created and preserved a distinct and separate nation on this continent. For this alone our generation of Canadians must cherish him. We are also disposed to welcome a volume of essays offered as a survey of, and in tribute to, Grant's work and influence.

This attractive volume consists mainly of papers which scholars and admirers of Grant brought to a conference on his work. They do not represent what was learned there in the debate and the discussion of the papers. This is partly compensated for by the conviction and vivacity of the conversations with Grant, himself, which constitute a most valuable part of this book. I have a second reservation: The book is written by men (no women) who have come into contact with Grant's work during his two decades as Professor of Religion at McMaster University, but for almost as long Grant taught in the Maritimes as successor to Herbert Stewart, Professor of Philosophy at Dalhousie University. Grant's deep influence on colleagues and many able philosophy students during that period is not properly represented here. Given these limitations, however, *George Grant in Process* is a work of intelligence and dedication, containing essays and interviews which will interest an appropriately varied readership.

The book's presentation is most commendable. It is divided into four sections, and the three of four essays which comprise each section are preceded by conversation in which the contributors press Grant with challenging questions, and are well rewarded. The book concludes with a useful index of names and a very thorough Grant bibliography. I am aware of only three small omissions from the latter: the first is Grant's only contribution to the national philosophical review, a brief report on the Royal Society of Canada for the inaugural issue of *Dialogue* in 1962; the second is a review of Ellul's *The Technological Society*, in *Canadian Dimension*, 1966; the third is a

weighty preface to *Heritage*, a 1971 McClelland and Stewart book on early Canadian furniture by Scott Symons and John de Visser.

Part One: Canadian Politics, contains three essays. Barry Cooper begins with a brilliant survey of Grant's political writing. Cooper is very informative about the relevant history of the 'North Atlantic triangle', and reminds us that Grant had written even as early as 1945 that the real threat to Canadian independence was not that of being a British colony, 'but rather the danger of becoming a satellite of the U.S.A', and that, therefore, liberal rhetoric supporting independence from a scarcely-existing colonial relationship to Britain was mendacious and a real danger to Canadian nationhood. (These were, one remembers, Sir John A. Macdonald's motives, too.) This remains one of the touchstones of Grant's thought. Long after he ceased believing in the Commonwealth as the major force in Canadian foreign relations, he continues to argue that nationalism and internationalism go together in Canada. Our independence on the North American continent is a defense against parochialism, and a prerequisite for real international interests and relations. It is 'continentalism' which makes us tiny. Cooper finds other constant themes in writings from the mid-fifties: for instance, Grant's views on education and its institutions, or on the importance of the cultivation of attention to greater things than the practicalities demanded by our temporal masters. There is much more in this learned paper, including sensitive writing on love and loss. '*Weh dem, der keine Heimat hat.*'

A spirited essay by John Muggerridge explores among other things the paradoxes that Grant's conservatism was taken up by the left in the 1960's, and that his lament at the passing of an independent Canada inspired a new generation of nationalists. Muggerridge also reminds us that *Lament for a Nation* was written not, as some think, from nostalgia, but in white-hot indignation over a dirty political campaign. James Reimer reflects on Grant's Liberal up-bringing and 'Red-Tory' maturity, and on the inadequacy of our ordinary political labels. Undoubtedly the highlight of the opening conversation, in which Grant is also challenged by very forceful criticism of his approval of nationalism, is several pages of impressive fact and comment on Québec and the rôle of the French fact in the survival of Canada.

In the conversation which begins Part Two: Intellectual Background, Grant testifies to the influence which family, mentors and a few crucial authors have had on his life. There are thoughtful remarks on the difficult phenomenon of religious conversion ('the recognition that I am not my own'), and very clear insight into the nature and importance of Simone Weil. Edwin and David Heaven tell us about Weil and her influence, and then make the central observation that Grant is silent about his vision of the Good. (I believe they exaggerate.) They attribute this to Grant's humility, but it adumbrates a criticism made elsewhere in the book that if Grant cannot give an account of objective good, then the position from which he launches his criticism of modern liberalism as a form of relativism and irrationalism is itself without rational foundation.

John Badertscher writes about Jacques Ellul and Grant's ambiguous debt to his writings on technology and freedom, and Joseph Power explores some of Grant's objections to 'values talk', its illegitimate offspring 'value-free', and its dubious parentage the 'fact-value' distinction so much debated by philosophers.

The conversation in Part Three: Theology and History, is quintessential Grant on love. He defends the view that love of one's own (body, children, country) is the beginning of, and a component of, Christian love, against the view that a rejection of such things is a prerequisite of true faith, and then underlines it with the egalitarian claim, 'The supreme acts seem to me open to any human being, and do not depend on the degree of our intelligence.' (p. 107) Darrol Bryant offers interesting thoughts about the literary style of the 'meditative lament', about the character and possibility of prophesy, and a more elaborate version of the Heavens' request that Grant give expression to the light that he sees as well as to the suffering which he laments. D.J. Hall then bravely rushes in, hopes to find social conditions in North America from which renewed Christian faith may spring, and, rejecting Grant's 'resignation', proceeds to give several reasons for hope. (I might say that it is amusing for a philosopher used to philosophers saying that Grant isn't really a philosopher, to hear theologians suspecting that Grant isn't really a theologian. Grant is the first to admit his limits, and of course his not fitting the usual categories is part of his appeal.) Larry Schmidt ends the third section with a rather independent essay. He defines two theoretical positions in philosophy of history, rebuts them with admirably concise, but I think over-simple arguments, and then, claiming that Grant offers no alternative, sketches a 'symbo-theological' conception of history as a 'symbolism by which human beings express their participation in the mystery of being.' (p. 137) One would like to hear more, and, in fact, the essay reads like a précis of a more elaborate work.

In the Fourth Part: Philosophy, three of the four papers assess Grant's account of modernity. William Christian and William Mathie write particularly about the degeneration of liberalism, as the forces of secularism and technology have undermined its classical nobility. Mathie, in particular, draws a fine contrast between the classic and the contemporary liberal using American examples; President Lincoln on the rights of slaves and Mr. Justice Blackmun on the rights of the foetus. But though Mathie and Christian disagree about the use of the Blackmun example, they do not debate it. Mathie notes that Lincoln had the constitutional assurance that slaves are 'created equal', and that Blackmun no longer has this theological basis for equality; he nonetheless accepts Grant's equating of Locke and Hobbes despite its often being noted that the same difference separates them: God and natural law offer very un-Hobbesian protections in Locke's State of Nature. Again, although both Mathie and Christian make extensive use of Grant's lectures on *English-speaking Justice*, they together manage just four brief references to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, a work which is at the

centre of discussion for nearly half of Grant's book. Now, Grant is right to treat Rawls so seriously; his book has inspired extended critical response from an extraordinary range of political philosophers. Serious examination of Grant's view of Rawls would be both interesting and useful, and its absence is one of my disappointments with the present collection of essays.

The conversation which precedes the Fourth Part is also mainly about modernity. Grant attempts to see clearly the understandings about the human condition which our contemporary, Western lives manifest, and he attempts to see this in contrast to, and as a development of, earlier stages of human history, especially the Ancient and the Christian. On the one hand, one is reminded not so much of philosophy as of writers like Erich Heller and his subjects ('It was Kierkegaard who said (and Karl Kraus who quoted) that "the individual cannot help his age; he can only express that it is doomed"'). As Lawrence Lampert puts it in his splendid essay, there are *uses* of philosophy here. On the other hand, there is more than just 'uses'; in defending Grant against the now familiar question, 'What is *your* vision of the Good?', Lampert argues that, like Socrates, Grant 'knows nothing' for a purpose.

Lampert notwithstanding, I should like to conclude by focussing on the 'now familiar question'. Bernard Zylstra advances the problem a stage by articulating the twin foundations of Grant's view: the Greeks' conception of wisdom and contemplation as the highest good, and the Christians' placing of love above all other moral concepts. Although he is clear about his rejection of 'mastery', modernity's governing concept, the great problem facing Grant is to say how it is that the two sovereign concepts, love and the intellect, fit together. Grant knows better than his commentators just what is required if his lamentation and his critique of mastery are to be complemented by a substantial account of the Good. In his own words, the problem is captured in this paradox: 'Ellul's account of modernity seems to me to fail because it comes out of a type of Christianity which scorns the discipline of philosophy.' (p. 146) 'Anybody whose life is given over to philosophy needs to read the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians regularly'. (p. 107)

Now I take it that Grant's thought is deeply continuous. The present book makes much of his 'periods', but the 'hope' and 'deprivation' which mark them are surely superficial to the Christian conversion, the understanding of Canadian nationhood, and the Classical alternative to Empiricist accounts of reason ('the slave of the passions'), which have been clear to Grant since before he began teaching. (He was never an Hegelian, whatever the rhetoric of the 1966 preface to the second edition of *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, and, as Lampert observes, that preface repudiates a progressivism which is not much to be found in the text.) It is the last of these, the account of reason, which is, to my mind, most portentous. His main line of thought is clearly stated in a 1952 paper ('Pursuit of an Illusion', in *The Dalhousie Review*) which criticises Bertrand Russell, and the same claim, that the place of reason in moral life has been undermined in modern thought, is of central

importance in his 1974 lectures on John Rawls. Thus identifying the acatalepsy of morality and politics as his target, Grant appears as the champion of reason against the sometimes disguised irrationalisms of our day. Spelling this out is the philosophical challenge which confronts him. But the challenge is compounded by the paradox. Anyone who can mount a critique of Ellul, Russell and Rawls on the grounds that they can only conceive of reason as a tool in the service of sentiment and private goods, but who then 'submits his philosophy to the magistry of revelation' and declares the 'dependence of intelligence upon love', owes us a major, positive account of the nature and function of reason and its proper subservience. It may well be that this is exactly what Grant is currently pondering.