

FOR A CANADIAN PHILOSOPHY: GEORGE GRANT

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On September 27, 1988, George Grant died, bringing to an end an iconoclastic intellectual career engaged with national and international political events of the last fifty years. His defence of Canada's membership in the British Empire as a buttress against the U.S., his famous lament for the defeat of John Diefenbaker's Conservative government, his opposition to the Vietnam War, his positive response to the independence movement in Quebec, his opposition to the testing of the Cruise missile — time after time he met the challenge of speaking to the central political currents that have formed the country. For this he was marginalized by the intellectual establishment in Canada. In particular, the guardians of the title "philosopher" refused him the hard-earned recognition of his original contribution to the creation of a truly Canadian philosophy.

I first met George Grant in 1972 when he gave a lecture at the University of Waterloo on "Ideology." At that time students were well aware of the dismal failure of almost all of our professors to address Vietnam and Canadian complicity in the war, which was the central issue facing us at the time. Many further concerns circled out from this centre — the opposition of the Western governments to self-determination by colonized people in Africa and Asia, the obedient kow-towing of successive Canadian governments to American pressure, the vast inequalities of wealth and power existing within relatively affluent societies, and the key role of universities in providing apologies for this system and technical improvements to sustain it. Only a miniscule proportion of Canada's so-called intellectuals

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would even discuss these issues, let alone help provide us with the tools we needed to come to some understanding of the situation and act on it.

That evening George Grant spoke of the colonization of Canadian universities by American professors and their liberal ideology and of the role of so-called value-free social science in maintaining order in an unjust society. Most important for us, he connected this general analysis to the horror of Vietnam and the truth it bespoke of the imperialist drive of the American empire. He was willing to call this empire "capitalist," as we insisted, but he also called it "technological." We were less sure of this word, though it did seem to clarify the way in which recent technological advancements were used for destruction, rather than for meeting human needs. To our surprise, we had found a conservative who felt keenly the public responsibility of the philosophical calling, who spoke both passionately and analytically of our subordinate position in Canada, and of the global consequences of the American empire.

The lecture ended with a discussion of whether conservatives and socialists had more in common than either had with the liberal establishment. I didn't realize it then, but this dialogue cut to the root of what is most distinctive in Canadian politics — the centrality of community, ethnicity, and history as against the liberal focus on individuals and their interests.

Grant was always at the centre of discussions like this. The "Red Tory" appellation, though it was used widely and loosely later, emerged from his example. How many other conservatives, either then or today, would address these radical questions about contemporary society? His conservatism was more like the conservationism of the ecology movement than the Conservative Party. As Grant said, like the liberals, they have bought into the ideology of profit and progress. In the end, Grant thought himself beyond conservatism too. During his later years he described his goal as "simply to think what we are doing." But the beacon of his philosophical formulations were always vivified by his passionate concern for the good life as it could be lived here and now.

What better description of a philosopher? But there have been many who did not think so. In a characteristic gesture, David Gauthier, then (1979) Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Toronto, reviewed a volume of essays on Grant entitled *George Grant in Process* for the Bulletin of the Canadian Association of University Teachers. He outlined the disparity between professional philosophers who have chosen to concentrate on the tools of thought (such as logical or linguistic analysis, or on the methods of scientific research) and those, like Grant, who have directed themselves to the real issues posed by living. Gauthier concluded that Grant avoided the confrontation of his views with the methods of current philosophical analysis, that he was unknown by such professional philosophers, and that, therefore, he could not be Canada's foremost political philosopher. As he said, "If he will not speak with the

current philosophical tongue, then they will not listen to his lamentation." This quasi-official rejection, the kind of view that has expelled and persecuted genuine philosophical thinking for decades in this country, states that because Grant does not talk to them he is not a philosopher. Thus, the basic criterion for a philosopher is the holding of a position in a university philosophy department — not only a positivistic, but a circular and self-serving, definition. No wonder Grant chose to direct his energies elsewhere! That our greatest philosopher has been treated this way is bad enough, that this situation continues to haunt successive generations of Canadians who have attempted to find a philosophical articulation for the politics and history of Canada is inexcusable.

When I began teaching in the Department of Communication at Simon Fraser University in 1981, I had all my students in communication theory read Grant. In lectures there was no difficulty in getting across. They all knew that Grant was saying something important and that it went to the heart of what this country is. Certainly they wanted clarification of what was said and why. Certainly they wanted to argue with him and to bring their experience to bear on his formulations. This is as it should be — each generation contributing to the dialogue that forges our idea of ourselves. But not for a minute did they doubt his honesty, his clarity and boldness, his grasp of some part of the truth. While the establishment apologists marginalized Grant, it was possible to speak over their heads to students and others who are engaged with passionate thinking of this country and their place in its future.

In Canadian Studies, on the other hand, Grant was lionized. In a sense, his position was a justification of their existence. Yet the forces pushing university and intellectual life to conformity and self-satisfaction are alive and well there too. Grant's presence was always unsettling. At a Canadian Studies after-dinner speech at the Learned's in Halifax (1982), Grant addressed the question of what it meant to study ourselves. He quoted Heidegger to the effect that the modern conception of knowledge involves "summoning forth to give its reasons." Bowing to those from outside, mostly the U.S., he acknowledged that others could summon us forth and demand our reasons, but argued that we would not do well to look at ourselves that way. Unlike his writing, which begins with a sure and clear statement of an issue, his speaking voice began slowly, tentatively, clearing a common ground. It gathered direction and conviction, and thundered to a paradoxical conclusion. "My study of Rousseau is a Canadian study." Some were amazed, some outraged, and some carry with them still such characteristic Grantian sayings that have helped in forging intellectual direction and in gathering strength.

Grant was four-square against parochialism. He meant: Take up the task to think Canada, put your questions to the past and the future, and put them to the best thinkers. Without their help in bringing our national, bi-national, multi-national, experience to philosophical articulation, we will

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remain a backwater, and will deserve to be so. Argue with Rousseau; argue with Plato; through this dialogue we will make Canadian philosophy.

With his death, there will come a pressure for canonization. He will be respected and quoted, probably at the cost of being read and criticized, which is what every philosopher wants. Let us not forget that George Grant was only able to begin to formulate Canadian philosophy by going outside the canons, by disturbing the boundaries between disciplines and the boundaries between thought and life. The tradition of philosophical questioning that forges a national tradition is yet to be accomplished in Canada. Grant began that doing, which will take generations to complete. The future will memorialize him, the past has ignored him, the present needs to continue the dialogue with him.

Let us press against the boundaries, trudge into the wilderness, risk snow-blindness, and bring the bush to thought. That is our solidarity with George Grant — our needing, remembering, and questioning the George Grant trail, some markers as we go our own way. Let them have their chairs of philosophy, their self-congratulation in stuffy rooms. There are many of us who will not forget George Grant.

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