A Champion of Intellect in the Age of Technology

WILLIAM CHRISTIAN

Keywords: George Grant, Technology, Canada, Plato

About a dozen miles outside Halifax on the way to Peggy's Cove lies Terrence Bay. It is bleak in its beauty, the rocks smoothed by the incessant waves and wind. A lighthouse reminds us that this is a real Nova Scotia community that until very recently made its living from the sea.

Halfway up a hill, overlooking the water, is a cottage. George Grant, the renowned Canadian philosopher who died Tuesday, always apologized to visitors that it was "just a shack," but he was proud that, with an experienced carpenter in the early 1950s, he had helped build it with his own hands. More than any place in the world, he loved Terrence Bay. Now he and the rocks will keep company for eternity, for it is there he chose to be buried.

The last time I saw him, in July, he and his wife Sheila took my wife and me there for a picnic. We unloaded the cold salmon, potato salad and the rest from the car and made our way carefully through the rocks to a little cove. George sat on a boulder, his plate balanced precariously on his lap.

As soon as lunch was finished, he launched into conversation again; brilliant, incisive, witty, learned, elegant. He was a big man, although he had recently lost weight. He felt in good health; he was vigorous and happy. It would still be a month before he would learn of the pancreatic cancer that would end his hope of resolving the philosophical contradictions of the modern world.

Grant was best known to Canadians for *Lament for a Nation*, a slim book published in 1965. John Diefenbaker's government had been defeated in 1963 over the issue of nuclear weapons, and his Liberal successor, Lester Pearson, had knuckled under to U.S. pressure and allowed nuclear weapons on Canadian soil. Once I asked him why he had written Lament. I expected some arcane philosophical defence. Instead, he replied: "Because I was mad, damned mad. I hated what they were doing to poor old Diefenbaker."

The book was a masterpiece that affected the political consciousness of a whole generation of Canadians who thought about politics and cared about their country. It gave intellectual sustenance to those who wanted to preserve in British North America a vision of the good which differed from that which prevailed in the Great Republic to the south. The modern world had, in Grant's view, become a technological dynamo whose very heart lay in our southern neighbor.

It is important to understand Grant's analysis of technology. He was not concerned with machines. The lasers, CAT scans, space shuttles were merely the products of technology. Technology was a state of mind, a philosophy, whatever its practitioners thought they were doing. Its origins lay in now obscure philosophical quarrels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but at its core was the domination of nature, first non-human nature, and more recently the mastery of human nature as well.

For Plato, his favorite philosopher, nature had been something different. Nature provided for human beings a guide or a standard that told us what we should do. Justice was something for which human beings were fitted by nature. But the modern view saw nature as something that existed to serve mankind, to be subject to human willing. It was our instrument, and the goal of modernity was to free us from all limitations on our will.

This tidal wave of technology was threatening to overwhelm Canada, and Grant sought to warn his countrymen of the danger. You can easily imagine his reaction when he read an article by a sociologist who contended that the whole argument in *Lament* was motivated by the fact that Grant represented a declining social class. His grandfather had been principal of Queen's University; his father was headmaster of the prestigious boys' school, Upper Canada College; he was merely a professor of religion at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont.

No one who ever met him could have doubted his profound commitment to the life of the intellect. He would sit and engage in dialogue for hours, and at the most intense level. By the force of his personality and his interests he would draw you slowly up toward his level.

Although he loved to talk, his great talent was as a listener. Gently but firmly he would pay you the ultimate courtesy of taking seriously what you said. You tried to live up to his expectations. Even harder, you tried not to be distracted by the cigaret ash that would grow to excessive lengths just before it cascaded down his tie to his vest, where it would add a little to that deposited by its predecessors.

His tastes were genuinely catholic. He lived in the small Ontario town of Dundas but was a devotee of the British science-fiction show, *Dr. Who*, and would not brook a word of criticism against Martina Navratilova, his favorite tennis star. He loved the spy novels of John Le Carre, and Anthony Powell's synoptic social comedy, *A Dance to the Music of Time*. More recently he was overwhelmed by the trilogy of novels by the French fascist writer, Louis-Ferdinand Celine. He despised Celine's politics, but he thought him the greatest modern writer, and found in his novels an unparalleled unmasking of the nature of contemporary civilization.

But more than anything else, he loved Shakespeare and Mozart. As he wrote in his last major essay, "Faith and the Multiversity":

> To some cultures and to some people their attention is more agreeably occupied by Rhapsody in Blue than by Mozart's K.482. This fact raises inevitably the question: are there some works that are more worth paying attention to than others? What is given in those that are most worthy of attention? What is it that enraptures us about them, so that even in the desolation of King Lear or K.491 we are enraptured? Can we describe that enrapturing as the immediate engrossment in the beauty of the work, which points to good which is quite unrepresentable?[1]

In such writings as these, we know we are in the presence of genius.

Once I paid the price for not taking Mozart seriously enough. We were at the dinner table, and I put on a Mozart piano concerto for background music. As soon as George heard the melody, he raised his hand and pronounced: "We must listen to this." We moved to where we could hear better and the whole company listened in silence to the end.

"After all," he explained, "you wouldn't continue with your coffee if there were a performance of King Lear going on in the room." This passionate intensity affected nothing as much as his concern for the abortion debate. Along with Sheila, he was absorbed by the right-to-life movement for the last 15 years of his life. There were, for him, intensely important philosophical issues involved, as well as deep moral ones.

Although he did not parade his faith in his writings, he had become a devout Christian when he was a student at Oxford during the Second World War. From that day until his death, his faith never wavered.

However, he believed that, in the old phrase, faith and reason were allies, not enemies. In the modern world, religion without philosophy was ultimately impossible. "Without Plato's writings," he once told me, "I couldn't have made head nor tail of Christianity."

If, as is reasonable to suppose, the heavenly choir gives frequent performances of Mozart's music, George Grant will be happy. Especially if he gets to talk to Plato during the intermissions.[2]

NOTES

1 Grant 1986, pp. 46-47.

2 This article was originally published in The Globe and Mail on September 30, 1988, to coincide with George Grant's funeral.

REFERENCES

Grant, G. P. 1986. *Technology and Justice*. Concord: Anansi.