George Grant, Simone Weil, and the Contemplative Life

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Abstract: One of Grant's going concerns throughout his career was one of the very possibility of Canada, or any other distinct society, in the face of the homogenizing, technological impulses of modern society—the willful drive for the complete mastery of both nature and human nature, and the elimination of chance. In Simone Weil, the French mystic philosopher, Grant thought that he had found a light of radical spiritual and intellectual resistance to what he held to be the Western fate. There is, however, a great question as to what path of thought and practice Grant drew from Weil. In this essay, I seek to enucleate the contemplative practices and education which Grant seems to have apprehended both from Weil, and from their mutual teacher, Plato. In the process, I endeavour to unpack the meaning, in practice, of Grant's favourite paraphrases of Weil: "love is consent to otherness" and "faith is the experience of the intelligence illuminated by love." Essentially: how does one learn, in flesh, heart, and mind, how to contemplate, and therefore to not be modern, give-up the technological will to power, and open-up to the worthiness of difference, e.g. the possibility of a Canada?

Keywords: George Grant, Simone Weil, Plato, contemplation, meditation, education, Socratic method, political theory, Canada, Canadian nationalism, multiculturalism, interculturalism, pluralism, technology

INTRODUCTION

The present essay continues a line of pursuit commenced nearly two decades past, with my first exposures to the work of George Grant. It continues to ask the question that he raised, most famously in *Lament for a Nation*, of the possibility of a distinct Canada, in the face of the universal and homogenizing drives of modernity.

The first published fruits of my studies of Grant appeared as, "Grant, Time, and Eternity" in *Canadian Conservative Political Philosophy* (Cordner 2023). It continued into a rocky trail thereafter, eventually issuing forth "George Grant and Simone Weil on Consent to Otherness," published in *Reading George Grant in the 21st Century* in Cordner 2024. Even so, fifteen years into the study, it was clear that the end of the trail lay not quite yet in sight, let alone underfoot. Each forgoing leg on the journey has left open questions which required further reflection and investigation.

In "Grant, Time, and Eternity," an initial attempt was made to pigeonhole Grant in light of the remarkable "polyphony" of the works published in his lifetime (Planinc 1992, pp. 17-45). I queried honestly Grant's seeming self-identification as a Christian Platonist. To enucleate the problem, I proceeded by way of a textual exegesis of symbols, understanding by "symbol" a token (in this case words) that calls to mind an intelligible experience or relationship, for the sake of re-establishing it more deeply in the present through recognition, reflection, and understanding.

The symbols which I focused on, and could be reliably found throughout Grant's works, were *time*, *eternity*, *necessity*, and *freedom*. Through textual exegesis, I sought to trace the changes in Grant's thoughts regarding these primary experiences, and thus, through a careful winnowing, come to a settled opinion about his proper place among the many pigeonholes of philosophy.

The results of that winnowing-down of the path was the conclusion that Grant was some sort of Christian Platonist. But to my mind at the time, he was a rather odd exemplar of the model (if indeed it is even possible to speak of a "normal" Platonist). Odd because Grant's Plato was read through the French mystic philosopher Simone Weil, who is easily interpreted as a Gnostic Christian of some sort. Given the typical understanding of the path of *gnosis* as one of radical pneumatic transcendence of the world, and the belief that the world and material embodiment to be evil or delusory, it was difficult to reconcile with Plato's dialogues, let alone Grant's own tireless good works in the world.

To understand the paradox, it was then necessary in "George Grant and Simone Weil on Consent to Otherness," to glean insight into Grant's Weil, and to come to understand why he was so taken with her *as a thinker*, rather than simply a figure of religious saintliness and charity. Thus the follow-up study focused upon an experiential exegesis of two paraphrases of Weil that were often repeated by Grant: "Love is consent to otherness" and "Faith is the experience of the intelligence illuminated by love."

What came of that second stage of exegesis was a better understanding of Weil's own kenotic theology and what it meant to Grant. In resumé, Weil—at least the Weil of *Awaiting God*—presents the creation as an act of supreme self-denial of the divine.[1] Rather than the world being posited as arising out an act of power and will—a typical conception of God's nature in the West—the world is conceived as born from a sort of divine emptying-out. It is a sort of withdrawal of God that allows beings to exist independently and in full dignity, outside of the divine presence. This is the primordial consent to otherness—God's utter consent that there should be something other than God. This "consent to otherness" too, is the symbolic expression of the mystery of divine, or supernatural, love and of the contemplative intelligence which is able to patiently love, behold, and apprehend the real just as it reveals itself.

Thus, Grant's Weil presented a mode of existence and a *logos* of the divine mystery which directly addressed his principle concerns: how human beings should live, and how, in principle, moderns may recover their senses, understand themselves, and overcome their endless drive towards the mastery and control of nature and human nature. It thus became clear why Grant could take Weil as a thinker of the highest order.

Still some very significant questions remain. The fundamental one is this: what is the path forward, even if we admit the grounds and intended fruition are good? Having enucleated a theoretical view of the good, what, if any practices of attunement to the good can we take from Grant? Some may perhaps say none, that Grant's pessimism was an obstacle to any positive practice of the true and the good. They may even legitimately point to Grant's own statements of his self-professed inability to follow Weil in living her faith in intelligence and love, *encarnata*.

I am not dissuaded, as I have long been convinced that there is more going on with Grant than this. His lifelong public engagement, intellectual and spiritual openness (despite his very definite opinions on everything), and acceptance of his need to continuously rectify his own thoughts and bearings vis-à-vis the good suggest as much.

Therefore, I intend to stake out here a sketch of a Grantian praxis that Grant seems to take from his two closest teachers—Plato and Simone Weil. More precisely, I aim to draw out how Grant seemed to have practiced a path of Socratic-Weilian contemplation and dialogue. Textually, or biographically, I will make use of Grant's published Graduate Seminars on Simone Weil, 1975-6 as a case in point.

I: THE SOCRATIC GRANT–MIDWIFERY AND APORIA

In "George Grant and Simone Weil", I wrote:

> Whatever else one may think of Grant's thought, one cannot accuse him of a philodoxer's preoccupation with mere opinions and ideas. Rather, his concern was clearly and consistently the adequate and true expression and enucleation of primary experiences (e.g. the experience and meaning of transcendence and immanence, being and time). Such experiences, over the long chains of human history, find expression in mythic, philosophic, theological, and mystic symbols. These then must be subjugated to analysis, elaboration, correction, or rejection.
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> To perform such an analysis of symbols, one must then have some adequate knowledge of the primary experience given expression in the symbol. This, at the very least, demands a sympathetic imagination and engaging in the partnership of dialogue with that person or tradition evoking the experience through the symbol. One must also be capable of submitting the substance or fruits of the dialogue to critical investigation, ending wherever it will. We may recognize in this procedure the analogue of the familiar Socratic method of zetema ("questing"), with its accent on dialektikos and elenchus, noesis and dianoesis, and frequent aporia (Cordner 2024, p. 36).

At this juncture, it would be best to unpack this Socratic structure of contemplation to better understand Grant's contemplative praxis as a thinker. To begin at that requires us to begin at the beginning of the Socratic tradition, with Socrates himself, as he is remembered in the works of Plato and, to a lesser extent, Xenophon.

Setting to one side for the moment the issue of Socrates' irony as a special problem, and as a practice not adopted by Grant (I've never heard of Grant accused of being round-about or exoteric), one is perennially struck by Socrates' persistent questioning of his partners in dialogue. Be they wary or unwary, guarded, combative, or open, the questioning itself takes centre stage. Socrates' partners respond to this *elenchus* in a variety of ways—dogmatically, with annoyance, hostility, bewilderment, dullness, or open-ended partnership in the pursuit of better understanding (*episteme*).

Quite typically, those who are hostile in the dialogues with the old Satry are also those whom accuse him of using irony to dissemble. That is to say, they accuse him of secretly harbouring ideas, perspectives, and opinions (*doxa*) of his own on whatever subject they are discussing—say, whether virtue can be taught or what justice is—but that he feigns ignorance to avoid a fair fight.

On the other side are those who seem to take Socrates' earnest professions of ignorance as somehow true and honest, even if they are perplexed at what exactly Socratic ignorance *is*. Socrates, after all, is obviously not an idiot. Nor does he claim to be without knowledge or understanding of anything. Famously, he claims knowledge of the art of midwifery (learned from his mother, Phaenarete) and the art of love (*eros*, learnt from the prophetess Diotima). In spite of his professedly lax industry, we may assume that he was a more than competent practitioner of his father's craft (*techne*) of stone-working—particularly if there is anything to the ancient tradition that holds that he crafted several works that once stood in the Athenian Parthenon.[2]

Whether or not his partners accept his ignorance, Socrates' elenchus—persistent questioning in pursuit of perennial verities—has a typical result: it produces *aporia*. Like a midwife, Phaenarete's son prods, encourages, walks, and massages his charges until they give birth to their *doxa*. These are then submitted to inspection, and, if they turn out to be "wind-eggs" (that is to say, sterile or lifeless), they are put aside. This process of giving birth and inspection of *doxa* is the essence of the *elenchus*. And, most often, the inspection reveals a *doxa* which is not fecund—it is a dead-end, a bit of ignorance mistaken for understanding.

Existentially, the end-result of the *elenchus* is thus aporia. One feels emptied out, like a womb after birth. Whether one reacts with anger, anxiety, or relief at having one's wind egg taken away, one aspect re-

mains the same: the womb of the psyche is returned to a state of full, receptive potential. There is again the space to try again to conceive knowledge. Or, at least "beautiful doxa"—those with more life and potential to them.

It is worthwhile to note that, in his own classroom practice, Grant followed the outline of *elenchus* in his graduate seminars: (i) frequently begging the question, (ii) questioning his own understanding of the subject of his lectures, (iii) by bringing his student's essays in as the immediate subject of a present inquiry, and (iv) his insistence to students that one must battle-out within oneself the contradictions one seems to find in a thinker—using the paradox like the two limbs of a pair of pincers to grope towards an understanding otherwise out of reach.[3] Clearly, no seemingly settled opinion laid safe in Grant's presence, and one can only take studying with him as a prolonged education in withstanding intellectual and existential discomfiture.[4]

II: GRANT'S SOCRATES–*DIALEKTIKOS* AND *NOESIS*

To this extent at least, one may recognize the worth and necessity of Socrates' own professed *aporia*—and Grant's too—even when they sting others with it: one cannot honestly know in advance where the birthing will take one. We may also be reminded by Grant's dictum, taken from Leo Strauss, that to be a good teacher is to be before the class of students knowing truly that one or more may well be of nobler heart and clearer intellect than oneself.[5] This sort of humbleness, meekness, or open-minded self-awareness (all connoted by *aporia*) is a sort of philosophic virtue. It may then be that Socratic humour, or irony, playfully disguises actual humility under a cloak of feigned humility which one knows will be mistaken for a trick.

Be that as it may, talking oneself and others into a state of *aporia* clears the way for a reorientation and ascent. To that end, Socrates, and Grant, did not eschew relying on established, seemingly wise, traditions, notions, teachings, and hypotheses as guiding stars. Plato's dialogues are littered with references to Homer, Hesiod, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Aeschylus, Simonides, and Aristogoras, to name a few. In addition, obliquely, one senses behind those explicitly named, those traditions whom lay behind them. One recalls to mind at least the Orphic, Pythagorean, and Eleusian traditions.

Similarly, Grant draws upon thoughts and traditions ranging from Plato and Aristotle, to Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, to say nothing of Weil, the Latin Christian tradition, and the eastern traditions with which he is familiar. Grant's books, recorded talks, and even classroom notes are nothing if not a profound presentation and interrogation, in good faith and even vigorous *philia*, with each thinker or tradition that he approaches. The most obvious example of this practice is *Time as History*—Grant's good-faith enucleation of Nietzsche, whom Grant forthrightly judged had most deeply revealed the Western fate as will-to-power, while also holding that that philosophy was unfit for human beings.

These then represent the Socratic poles in Grant's philosophic practice: (i) a suspicion of one's ignorance, (ii) a rigorous querying, bringing to light, and laying bare a line of thought (Grant's famous "enucleation"), (iii) some level of *aporia* which begs for further inquiry, (iv) the recognition and contemplation of paradox or essential contradiction as a means of grasping intelligible truths that lay hidden and out of reach.[6] This is the basic, explicit structure of *elenchus* and *noesis* (seeking to understand first principles), within the framework of philosophic dialogue (*dialektikos*).

The more implicit element in the process is the rectification of *eros* or desire. The desire to know is implicitly aroused by the inquiry itself, and by the loss of surety of one's own bearings as one's opinions are laid bare, either in their barrenness or in having unwanted implications. In this vein, one may wonder how many Canadians have been turned off of Hegelian thinking by Grant's implication that living it out entailed Canada's absorption into a Universal and Homogeneous State defined by American liberalism.

On the other side of things, the desire to know the good is sparked by intimations of deprival—a nagging sense that something is missing or amiss. In *The Apology* of Plato, Socrates employs the metaphor of being a gadfly stinging and thus stirring a slumbering horse—namely Athens. Waking from the dream is irritating, but one finds the phenomenal world already revealing itself in the light once the cobwebs of

dream images are chased away. Perhaps more importantly, existentially, one finds oneself needing to find a path to the good in waking life. The desire for the good and the true is thus renewed when *elenchus* and *aporia* have stung one awake and revealed one's deprival.

Most important to the recovery of wakefulness is the separation of necessary from unnecessary desires, as Grant acknowledges (Ibid. p. 836). We might say that we need to know what is needed for a good human life, and what is unneeded distraction. Grant follows Weil in affirming that, in practice, this sort of moderation (*sophrosune*) comes about from anchoring desire on higher things by liberating it from dead-ends—that is to say, from our will to autonomy, or *libido dominandi*—rather than through repression or Freudian sublimation.

Perhaps interestingly, Grant follows and interprets Weil in understanding that the ascetic exercises (*askesis*) which produces moderation involves the soul using the body as a lever against (or, "to lift") the soul. Contrary to a common modern opinion that moderation is achieved by turning the will against the body, Weil's *askesis* is to use the body (tacitly understood as good, and naturally unburdened by unnecessary desires—say for luxury yachts) to discipline the imagination (Ibid. pp. 836-7).

The imagination, and our habit of trying to expand ourselves over the universe, comes to the fore in Weil and Grant's exposition of Weil, as the chief culprit in our immoderation. The body, after all, is already always in the present, and its needs are easily satisfied. It is the unhealthy psyche that seeks to be in another now, in the past or in the future, thus already imagining something different, unnecessary, and often quite self-important.

Disciplining the imagination, therefore, is the prelude to being able to desire what *is*, the necessary and the good. Meditation on the body is a good ally in the endeavour. I believe that it is correct to say that for Grant and Weil, the *elenchus*, which unmoors our imaginations from their false or lesser goods, serves the function of clearing the way for us to again desire and seek the truly good and beautiful.

III: CONTEMPLATION OF BEAUTY AND NECESSITY

In her highly fecund work, *Awaiting God*, Simone Weil outlines various paths of contemplative love which would serve to reorientate one's being to the good, or God. These practices are *love of neighbour*, *love of beauty*, *love of religious ritual*, and *friendship*. Interestingly, Grant seems only to give attention in his writings—classroom notes included—to Weil's exposition of the love of beauty. This is a curious omission, but his attention to the love of beauty at least accords well with his attention to Plato, particularly *Republic, Symposium,* and *Phaedrus*. Whatever the case for the omission, it behooves us here first to understand what Grant took from Weil as a positive path of contemplation through the love of beauty.

Understanding Weil's love of beauty requires holding several things in mind. One is her presentation of true attention (we may now in our day say "mindfulness"), as a kenotic act (or non-act) of being receptive. That is to say of allowing one's intelligence to be mirror-like and unobscured by the imagination. A good mirror receives and reflects what *is* simply. It does not colour or impose itself upon the world that it reflects.[7]

The second aspect to keep in mind is Weil's Pythagorean-Platonic understanding of necessity or *ananke*. As Grant noted, the modern mind habitually thinks of necessity in terms of force and materiality. We easily leap to thinking of necessity as an obstacle to our own wills, or as what we might impose on others through the force of will. A sort of violence of the will and a desire to master necessity thus shadows the modern soul.

By contrast, Weil and Grant take necessity to refer principally to the intelligible order(s) of the world, most eminently on display in the mathematical and ontological principles which we first come to know through the study of numbers and geometry. The complexities, forces, and forms of the phenomenal world partake in these, and are truly comprehended by knowing the intelligible. Moreover, the intelligible world, for Weil's part, is known to us really only through the flesh.[8]

A third aspect to keep in awareness is, again, Weil's essentially kenotic practice of loving or desiring. Far from being properly an act of pursuit—an interpretation which Weil rejects—desire is said to be most purely expressed as awaiting in patient longing for the beloved to reveal themselves at the door, until imagination and expectation have worn themselves out. At that point, being receptive, and the self-set aside, the beloved may be able to reveal themselves.

We can easily infer then that, for Weil, love is receptive desire, and attention is receptive intelligence. Both are emptied of the self, and are mutually sustaining in patient faith, in the sense of trust or confidence, in the real. Moreover, readers of Plato's *Republic* and *Symposium* can't help notice the parallels between the path to philosophic education sketched in those dialogues, and Weil's sketch of proper study.[9]

Through the attentive love of beauty of the world—which is to say necessity or *ananke*—one comes to a love of the cosmic order and of the transcending dignity and beauty of all things in their place and in their good, bad, or ugly way. Again, learning to love and contemplate the beauty of the intelligible forms of the world becomes the jumping-off point for being receptive to the good or God.

Two potential misunderstandings confront us at this juncture. The busy, imaginative mind easily presumes that attention (and thus contemplation) is achieved through some sort of psycho-physical straining. One hears, "Pay attention!" and immediately the muscles tense and we seek to willfully compress awareness into a point. On the other hand, the opposite misunderstanding is to assume that attention and contemplation—that mirror-like intelligence—is achieved through some sort of non-thought—of forcibly holding the mind blank. This too is a subtle form of action. It is an attempt to *do* something, to manipulate the mind and body to create a desired effect of not-thinking. Neither of these two is the sort of action in non-action and non-action in action which drew Weil's and Grant's attention when reading the Indic *Bhagavad Gita*.[10]

Rather, attention is better understood through the metaphor of the sort of patient desire at the threshold of the beloved which Weil paints. Recognition of a problem or question provokes a desire to know. Study and questioning bring us to the threshold. Desire, and our own capacity to accommodate the tension of waiting, holds us in place. Finally, something clicks, the door opens, and the answer comes to us—along with new, greater questions as a larger awareness of the world rectifies our understanding of things.

Prosaically, we may call this the familiar "aha!", "eureka!", or "lightbulb" moment. The details of the process of discovery through the tacit integration of knowing and being has been described in much greater details in the works of Michael Polanyi. I shall not belabour them here, except to say that Weil's presentation accords well with his, and the reader may productively turn to Polanyi's work for more on the theme.

Incubation at the threshold of discovery, and being with the hints and clues, is the necessary precondition for illumination. Knowing this, and knowing that Weil knew this, explains her presentation of study as a spiritual or religious activity. Approaching school studies as an education of one's attention, in this sense of resting in desirous contemplation of parts of aspects of the whole of necessity (e.g. a mathematical proof, a Latin phrase) is to apprehend them by knowing them as hints or reflections of a greater good beyond them.

Critical too, to her mind, is the need to submit attentively to going over our errors in study when they are found out. In this way, we may again recognize the analog of the *elenchus*. Studying our errors, say, in solving an equation or proof, (i) disembarrasses us of false knowledge, (ii) inculcates humility and therefore receptivity, (iii) renews the desire to know, (iv) leads us to a better perception and integration of the clues and elements at hand. There is also, in this process, a sense of being able to recognize and accept the reasonableness of the authority of the teacher and their corrections.

Practically speaking, for Weil, the greater good, or beauty, is the beauty of the whole cosmic order itself. That education in love of beauty of the cosmos in all its rich forces, necessities, and intelligibilities, both leads to a greater love of the particular and the near at hand, and is preparation for sitting at the threshold of the good or God.

What is explicitly rejected in all of this is the treatment of study as "useful" or utilitarian, for this preoccupation naturally limits one to learning only what serves the achievement of profit, productivity, power, or prestige—all false ends, in the sense of endless pursuits without a terminus (Weil 2012, pp. 21-8). In

this, we may recognize something like Grant's familiar inveighing against the modern "multiversity"—the use of institutions of higher learning for the training of the young to be no more than contented consumers and skilled technicians. From an existential perspective, approaching study as a means of expanding the power of the self is self-defeating. Utilitarian training (one hesitates to call it education) leads not to the opening-up of the mind or soul, the cultivation of desire and attention, or the capacity for contemplation. This leads to the impasse in which intelligible things are increasingly difficult for us to love, to perceive, let alone to comprehend. This naturally undercuts the life of the arts and sciences.

IV: FAITH, INTELLIGENCE, LOVE

The foregoing sections perhaps adequately unpack one of Grant's favourite Weilian paraphrases, "Faith is the experience of the intelligence illuminated by love." What Grant understands by faith in this light is precisely that attentive, mirror-like intelligence that is transfixed in place by desire, and infinite faith that the beloved shall appear.

What is absent from this formulation is the willfulness of the self. The lover of the true, the beautiful, and the good, as Plato humorously pointed out, has much more in common with a victim, a servant, or a slave than a master or a tyrant. For all of their *askesis* and study, the philosopher (and, following Weil and Polanyi, the true scientist or true artist) can only long to "know" the beloved, and have faith that they will reveal themselves in time. And all this in full knowledge that one may very well be wrong, and start again from the beginning. The key practice is that of holding attentive in patient desire.[11] This we call contemplation.

V: TRUE IMAGINATION

Once something is "known" by the intelligence through contemplation, the imagination finds its proper place. Not as a vanguard of the self's drive for expansion and empowerment. Rather, as the faculty for making images that reflect the real, be they in the form of statues, equations, words, or what have you. Moreover, the best science and art will emerge from the greater illumination of the love of beauty of the whole cosmos—sensible and intelligible. That is to say, from love of necessity as a moving icon of eternity (Plato. Timaeus. 37d).

VI: CONSENT TO OTHERNESS

Consent to otherness—the sort of love which only desires the other to be and to behold them as they are, not to consume, alter, or master them—is the other side of contemplative attention. They may even be synonymous acts (or non-acts) when practiced perfectly. Contemplative study polishes our capacity to pay attention and bear witness (*theorein*, in Greek). When this ability to just look and behold is turned towards others, this is the essence of love of neighbour and friendship in Weil's work (Weil 2012, pp. 47-61). We have noted that these themes are unexplored in Grant's presentations of Weil, except, we may now say, in so far as they are implied in this, his favourite paraphrase of her.

In Weil's *Awaiting God*, consent to otherness is a general theme, extending down from the divine, kenotic creation, and finding specifically human expression in the four loves. Above, we have ennucleated its expression in the love of beauty and therefore education. We may now contemplate the natural expression of this consent to otherness when it spills out into our relations to other persons and societies. We may also consider how it relates to Grant's concern for the love of one's own as a point of political philosophy and human community.

Given the foregoing, it is easy to apprehend that the ability to truly look at another—to behold them and bear witness to their existence, even in their suffering or affliction—is to give up one's selfish concerns

for a moment and be truly mindful of them. At the deepest levels of attention, we may even be said to be contemplating them in their gestures and their dress, their talk and afflictions.

Attention is thus the way to the threshold of knowing others, freed of the imposition of our imaginings, plans, and self-concern. It is the basis of a sort of communion, particularly when practiced reciprocally. Nevertheless, it is rather a difficult thing to do. It cannot be done abstractly through a mere idea of loving everyone. Practicing attention to others must pass through the body and sense, like every other form of knowing, if it is not to be a phantom of the imagination.

Loving one's own—and indeed, having a "one's own"—is the most obviously human place to start. And how difficult it is already to be mindful of or contemplate in this way, our children, our parents, our friends and lovers, let alone the neighbours! Yet, our love for them, however tinctured with ego, holds us proximal to the possibility of desiring them to be and no more.[12] This then is the practical training ground for learning loving consent to the otherness of wider circles.

This recognition of a need for one's own squares Grant and Weil. It also deepens our appreciation of the deeply human problems posed by the modern technological desire to homogenize in pursuit of efficient mastery of nature and human nature. The need for one's own is not mere pleasant sentimentality. It is also the working basis for learning how to be human with ourselves and others.[13]

From the above, we might apperceive that the progressive loss of contemplative attention in the arts and sciences paradoxically undermines the technological basis of the modern enterprise. We may now also say that the loss of the basis for learning how to consent to otherness undermines the affective basis for good human society, or perhaps society altogether.

VII: WHEREIN CANADA?

Wherein may Canada factor into the equation of human life? What is particularly good about the Confederation, and what possibilities does it present for contemplating the good, and living and dying in a good, human society?

For those of us whom, by happenstance of fate, find ourselves claimed as Canadian, we find ourselves amidst an ongoing conversation not of our creation. This is the common human predicament. But it may be said that the Canadian conversation—or rather, overlapping conversations—is peculiar by virtue of its very expansiveness and relative absence of settled common opinions.

One may indeed have a certain familiar lived sense of oneself and one's own as, say, a Montrealer, a rural Acadian, a queer woman from Kingston, an urbane Cree artist, a dock worker, a rig-worker, or a multitude of other things. Identities abound in the expanses of Canada, and few would argue that there is much difficulty in distinguishing common regional or communal characters or senses of belonging.

When the issue of conversation comes to the matter of knowing a Canadian identity, however, things take an interesting turn. Some insist on the necessity of a defining creed which will summon-forth and bind the community—say as British, or Anglican, or liberal (vaguely defined), or Red Tory (even more vaguely defined). These efforts flounder on the shoals of reality for being too narrow, too parochial, and too obviously imposed and willful. Thus they are unpersuasive to those who would need to be persuaded to give-up their own to belong to someone else's dream of a particular stripe of unity. Each is a stripe that too obviously resembles the author's imagining of their perfect self, and many are justifiably suspicious of the whiff of the imperial, the colonial, and the will-to-power hovering like pipe-smoke over that conversation table, dulling the senses.

Another table at the court of the Canadian conversation denies the existence of a super-regional or super-confessional identity, its desirability, or very possibility. Good enough to have a sense of oneself as an Albertan, a Quebecer, a Black Canadian, queer Canadian, conservative or so forth. To whatever extent that Canada exists, it would thus be thought of as a collection of conversations and institutions purposed to the mediation of the interests and conflicts of these collective associations, and their preservation against destruction.

A very Hobbesian take. It has a sort of rugged spirit, but yet it is hard not to notice the seeming lack of awareness of the conversations going on in the rest of the room. If things were so settled, sensible, and obvious, wouldn't the conversations themselves obviously be settled? But we are not all so obvious to ourselves, and so, to much chagrin at this table, conversations continue on around them. They find much unspoken agreement in murmuring askance over their pints at the stupidity of the jabber. Can't we all just we get on with practical affairs?

Stopping for a moment to take in the room with an eye sharpened by Grant's Weil, we may apprehend different things. For one, we might note the Socratic, Delphic air about the whole Canadian conversation about what it means to be Canadian. We paradoxically unsettle every settled opinion about ourselves and each other. In so doing, we unsettle fixed opinions about principles—e.g. justice, freedom, charity—and are forced to re-adjudicate with one another and ourselves on what they are, what they aren't, and how to live with and by them. The overall conversation is quite aporetic and thus, irritating to many of us who find ourselves always getting swept up in it. It keeps us up when we'd prefer to sleep. Still, the great Canadian elenchus continues.

Moreover, it is remarkable to note that the steady familiarization with the habit of being politely attentive to others and a growing consent to otherness does seem to have grown deep roots in Canada. Realistically, we may well say that this habit was founded on necessity—the surest of educators. If British North America was to not become a spur of the United States, it was necessary for British Loyalists, French Canadians, Catholics and Protestants to consent to each others existence first.

Over the generations, that habit seems to have expanded surprisingly wider, and deepened in the direction of true consent to otherness. That expansiveness now begins to take in even groups and communities whom for generations were explicitly targeted and maligned. It is beyond remarkable, given history's low standards, that present generations of Canadians show not merely toleration, but even genuine ongoing interest, respect, and admiration of people and traditions (e.g. queer, First Nations and Inuit, non-Caucasian and non-Christian) many of whom their grandparents' generation actively oppressed, despised, or attempted to either suppress or brush to the margins of society.

Perhaps this turning-around may be logically square with Lockean or Millian—that is to say, liberal—ideas of freedom and toleration. But, perhaps such work in the realm of ideas is unnecessary or even obstructive to the conversation. Perhaps there is something too to recommend John Ralston Saul's reported notion that early European explorers, traders, and settlers, by necessity, learned indigenous practices of listening respectfully and consensus building that, by necessity, became the habits of Canada's institutions (Saul 2008).

Whatever the case (or cases) may be, far from being a problem to be resolved, Canada's Socratic-Delphic quest, made possible and plausible by this tacit consent to otherness (now raised to explicit reflection and analysis) may be the thing itself. It is rooted, and needs roots, in the love of one's own, and may indeed be nourished by a contemplative education of one's attention. This, I think, we can glean by looking again at Canada with eyes trained to a love of the good by a deep conversation with Grant, his Weil, and their Plato. Perhaps it might be a tad too obnoxious to suggest, bombastically, that the world, let alone the neighbours, could learn anything from the Canadian practice of conversation, self-searching, and self-denial. But, perhaps not too much to suggest that we may reflect upon and love these habits in ourselves—whoever we happen to be.

NOTES

1 Grant himself insists upon the importance of Weil's *Awaiting God* (previously published as *Waiting on God*) in a letter to Rod Crook hence it shall be the focus of this essay. See Grant (1996).

2 This tradition comes down to us via Diogenes Laertius. See Book 2, lines 64-65 of Laertius (1915).

3 Grant follows Weil in this, in fact, and quotes her at length in his 1970 *Introduction to Simone Weil,* published in *The George Grant Reader* (p. 248). Grant does not cite his source in that lecture, but it appears to be from Weil's *Oppression and Liberty* (1958, p. 173). It is worthwhile to quote Weil's very lucid comment on the Platonic practice of contemplating genuine contradiction at length:

> "The essential contradiction in human life is that man, with a straining after the good constituting his very being, is at the same time subject in his entire being, both in mind and in flesh, to a blind force, to a necessity completely indifferent to the good. So it is; and that is why no human thinking can escape from contradiction. Contradiction itself, far from always being a criterion of error, is sometimes a sign of truth. Plato knew this. But the cases can be distinguished. There is a legitimate and an illegitimate use of contradiction.
>
> The illegitimate use lies in coupling together incompatible thoughts as if they were compatible. The legitimate use lies, first of all, when two incompatible thoughts present themselves to the mind, in exhausting all the powers of the intellect in an attempt to eliminate at least one of theme If this is impossible, if both must be accepted, the contradiction must then be recognized as a fact. It must then be used as a two limbed tool, like a pair of pincers, so that through it direct contact may be made with the transcendental sphere of truth beyond the range of the human faculties. The contact is direct, though made through an intermediary, in the same way as the sense of touch is directly affected by the uneven surface of a table over which you pass, not your hand, but you pencil. The contact is real, though belonging to the number of things that by nature are impossible, for it is a case of a contact between the mind and that which is not thinkable. It is supernatural, but real."

4 See "Excerpts from Graduate Seminar Lectures, 1975-6" in Davis (2009).

5 Paraphrased by Grant, Davis (2009, pp. 833).

6 See note 3.

7 For Weil's general reflections on the interpenetration of attention, the intelligence, and desire, see Weil (2012, pp. 21-28).

8 See Weil (2012, p. 67). See Grant's summary in (Davis 2009, pp. 836-7).

9 For a point of comparison of Weil's thoughts on the practice of contemplative study to those of Plato's dialogues and Michael Polanyi, see Cordner (2017, pp. 26-40).

10 See David (2009, p. 827) and Weil (2012, p. 89). Grant indicates that he had been granted access to Weil's books and manuscripts, and "...when I was in Paris looking at SW's manuscripts and books, her copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* was shown to me, and in the margin she had transcribed in French certain lines one of which was: 'He who can see inaction in action and action in inaction, such a being is wise, etc. She took this as a text of authority, writing of what she called in French 'l'action non-aggressante,' the non-acting acting; and it seems to me this phrase takes one to the heart of what she means by attention. As you will know, those who have read her writings, the *Bhagavad Gita* becomes in her last writings in the New York and London *Notebooks* a text of comparable authority with the gospels. She returns again and again to the meeting of Arjuna and Krishna and she took Krishna to be the incarnate God. Now clearly I have no right to speak of such matters in the way that I can speak of Plato or the gospels. But nevertheless I must point out this fact."

11 For a specific example of Weil's contemplative practice, I invite to readers to refer to chapter 4 of *Awaiting God* — "About the 'Our Father'". In that chapter, Weil unpacks the the use of the "Lord's Prayer" of the Christian New Testament as a meditation by which to reciprocally heighten desire and attention to the Good or God.

In another practice, outlined in correspondence quoted by Grant in his *Introduction to Simone Weil*, Weil herself tells that it is the George Herbert poem "Love" which she recited over and over in prayer, in the context of the extremes physical affliction and attention to the "unimaginable beauty" of an Easter liturgy, when "Christ himself [suddenly] came down and took possession of me."

To quote Herbert:

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?
Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

12 Grant was quite forthright in acknowledging the difficulty of expressing love as a true consent to otherness, even with (or perhaps especially with) one's own children. This does not detract, but rather emphasizes the importance of learning to love one's own *well* and *selflessly* as the basis for spiritual growth. See Davis (2009, p. 826).

13 Davis (2009, p. 826). Cf. also Edmund Burke's comments on the same in his comments on belonging to the "little platoons" of familiar affection, through which love of one's country and of mankind can be fostered and grown in Burke (1887, pp. 292-300. Cf. too, Weil's comments, "Let us love the country here below. It is real; it resists love. It is what God gave us to love. God has willed that it should be difficult and nonetheless possible to love." and "We must, on the contrary, give our whole attention, our whole faith, our whole love to a particular religion to be able to think of any other religion with the highest degree of attention, with the faith and love that it contains" (Weil 2012, pp. 77, 81).

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