"Arms Outstretched in Love to the Further Shore": Simone Weil's Silent Presence in George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*

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Abstract: This paper explores the profound but usually undetected influence of Simone Weil on George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*. While Leo Strauss is typically seen as Grant's principal philosophical influence in this work, this paper argues that Weil's metaphysics of necessity and the good provides the deeper framework in which Grant situates Strauss's critique of modernity and Canada's fate. Though seldom named in connection with this work, her thought is crucial to Grant's lament and his refusal to identify historical necessity with the good. In the end, it is Weil—not Strauss—who illuminates the "further shore" to which Grant gestures in the final lines of his book.

Keywords: George Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, Simone Weil, Leo Strauss, Plato, Greek Geometry, Political Philosophy, Modernity, Alexandre Kojève, Universal and Homogeneous State

> Men's curiosity searches past and future
> And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
> The point of intersection of the timeless
> With time, is an occupation for the saint—
>
> —T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

INTRODUCTION

We have no record of George Grant's initial reaction to reading Simone Weil. In 1952, soon after *Attente de Dieu* was translated as *Waiting for God*, Grant reviewed it for a radio broadcast, but the text of that broadcast appears to be unavailable.[1] But we do know that he was studying her closely through the 1950s and early 1960s, making him one of her earliest avid readers in North America. By the late 1950s, he had concluded that "she was nearer the truth than anyone else."[2] His praise was even more effusive in an introduction to her thought first written in 1963 and revised in 1970 for a public lecture. "[S]ince I spend a great part of my life reading and thinking about this woman," he wrote, "it must be that I think I am there drinking a fountain of divine truth (Grant 2009, p. 798).

As he was falling under Weil's spell, he was also shedding the Hegelianism that was still evident in his first book, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, and moving toward an increasingly tragic view of modernity. In the introduction to the second edition of *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, which ap-

peared in 1966, he publicly credited Leo Strauss with shattering his early faith in progress (Grant 2002, p. 401).[3] But though he did not say so at the time, the direct and indirect references to Weil in his writings of this period reveal that she gave him equally compelling reasons to reject the religion of progress. She may have been as crucial to his turn away from the modern faith as was Strauss. Or so this paper argues as it uncovers her unnamed presence in *Lament for a Nation*, the work in which Grant lays bare his disenchantment with the modern project.

Weil's importance for Grant comes to light in the few places where she appears in his early work. One might get the impression from *Lament for a Nation* that Strauss was his chief guide to ancient philosophy, but careful consideration of Grant's earlier writings shows that within a couple years of his discovery of Weil he had already come to esteem her as an authoritative interpreter of Plato. His early writings also reveal the extent to which the great theme of necessity and the good, central to Weil's reading of Plato, had taken hold of Grant's imagination. Looking at these early writings lets us take the full measure of Grant's words in *Lament for a Nation* when he tells us, "I do not identify necessity and goodness" (Grant 2005a, p. 86), and to see the book in a new light.

I: IN THE SHADOW OF THE GREAT BEAST

The first published mention of Weil in Grant's work appears in his 1954 address "Adult Education in the Expanding Economy," delivered to the National Conference on Adult Education. Here, he defends the place of humanistic education in a technological society that "presses men into the life of manipulation and organization and considers contemplation a waste of time" (Grant 2002, p. 107). His argument turns on a crucial distinction between finite and infinite ends in human life. Our concentration on finite ends like economic prosperity has so narrowed our vision that we fail to recognize the noblest end of human existence: "the journey of the mind beyond all myths out of the shadows and imaginings into the truth"(Grant 2002, p. 102).[4] For the great premodern traditions, this infinite journey was the true business of education, "the way that men became free." The "freeing of finite mind from the chains of illusion" entails "above all the freeing of it from the partial and tiresome traditions we call society—that great beast" (Grant 2002, p. 107).

These shadows, chains, and illusions evoke Plato's famous cave allegory from the *Republic*, which Socrates presents as "an image of our nature in its education and want of education" (Plato 1968, p. 193). However, the phrase "great beast" may be less familiar. In Book VI of the *Republic*, Plato compares the sophist, who "inculcates nothing else than these opinions of the multitude which they opine when they are assembled and calls this knowledge wisdom," to a man charged with the care of a great beast. The sophist comes to define the good as whatever pleases the beast and the bad as whatever enrages it. Mistaking his ability to manipulate the beast for genuine moral wisdom, the sophist is ensnared in ignorance, never grasping how radically "the nature of the necessary and the good really differ" (Plato 1968, p. 173). The great beast is Plato's image of society, an irrational animal moved by contagious passions that pass for wisdom.

This image is also prominent in the thought of Simone Weil, who explicitly links it to the cave allegory. In fact, she believed that these two Platonic images—the cave and the great beast—disclose their full meaning only when considered in tandem. In her notebooks she wrote:

> The Great Beast is the only object of idolatry, the only ersatz of God, the only imitation of something which is infinitely far from me and which is I myself. … The collective is the object of idolatry, this it is that chains us to the earth. … It is the social which throws the colour of the absolute over the relative. … Society is the cave (Weil 2002, pp. 164-5).

Society, as both cave and beast, is the false absolute that hijacks human desire. It presents the relative as absolute and invests finite beings with the infinite worth that properly belongs only to the transcendent good.

Chained to the earth and captivated by the shadows on the wall, the prisoners are idolators who worship an ersatz divinity, the society that dictates what ends are worth pursuing and what objects are worth desiring.[5] Grant is thinking along similar lines when he laments how modern education is designed "to make people comfortable and adjusted members of the world." Much of what passes for education is really just what he calls "adjustment propaganda" (Grant 2002, p. 102). Grant writes the word "adjusted" with an implied sneer, since it almost a direct antonym of "free." In the concluding paragraph he writes that "the man we call supremely free was sufficiently maladjusted to his community to die on a cross, and there is no reason to believe that we are so much better than the people who put him to death" (Grant 2002, p. 108). The aim of education should be to make us free, not adjusted.

While Weil is only implicitly present in Grant's reference to the great beast, she steps into full view a few pages later, when he turns to Weil's best known and most sustained reflection on education: "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," included in *Waiting for God*, the collection of writings Grant reviewed only two years earlier. Grant cites her proposal that the purpose of study is to cultivate the student's capacity for attention—first through disciplines like Latin and geometry, but ultimately for the sake of loving God and one's neighbor. Arguing that a good life must combine thought with responsible action in the world, he writes:

> On this point Simone Weil says something which takes one to the very heart of the matter. She points out that the purpose of all education is the cultivation of the faculty of attention so that ultimately attention can be paid to the infinite. As she says, the attention one learns as a child in Geometry or Latin may be just what will allow one someday to pay attention to one's neighbour at some crucial moment. … Therefore, it is crucial that we should cultivate the life of disciplined thought. Otherwise, we will lose the faculty of attention. And the faculty of attention is just our freedom (Grant 2002, pp. 107-108).

If, as Grant says, attention is our freedom—and if, as Weil argues, "the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies" (Weil 2009a, p. 105)—then their educational philosophies perfectly align. By developing our capacity for attention, education achieves its end of freeing us from the cave. As a philosopher of education, Grant is Weil's disciple.

Attention is a receptive engagement with a reality other than ourselves. It affords us an impersonal perspective free from social conditioning—our bondage to the "great beast"—and egocentric distortions. As Weil writes:

> The human being can only escape from the collective by raising himself above the personal and entering into the impersonal. The moment he does this, there is something in him, a small portion of his soul, upon which nothing of the collective can get a hold. If he can root himself in the impersonal good so as to be able to draw energy from it, then he is in a condition, whenever he feels the obligation to do so, to bring to bear without any outside help, against any collectivity, a small but real force (Weil 2015a, p. 15).

Attention—or, as Grant more often calls it, contemplation—liberates. It allows us to transcend the personal, delivering us from what Iris Murdoch calls "the fat relentless ego" (Murdoch 2001, p. 57), which includes the ego writ large in the form of the "we," the collective beast. It establishes a relationship with the impersonal good, with the truth that sets us free.

Yet, it is startling to hear Grant speak so dismissively in this essay of "the partial and tiresome traditions we call society—that great beast," given that a decade later he would mourn the loss of Canadian traditions in *Lament for a Nation*. Indeed, Grant tells us there that his lament is based not on philosophy but on his love for a particular tradition that claims his allegiance (Grant 2005a, p. 94). Has he forgotten what he learned from Weil and gone over to the beast?

Not at all. A similar tension is found in Weil. *The Need for Roots*, written near the end of her life, offers a much more nuanced view of the social order than what we find in her rhetorical censure of the "great beast." While the collective can become an idol, it is also owed a "very high degree of respect," being "the sole repository for the spiritual treasures amassed by the dead" (Weil 2024a, p. 7). Weil understood that human beings have a natural need to participate in social wholes that preserve cultural and moral traditions. Like Plato, she believed that our capacity for love, which at its apex is the love of an impersonal and universal good, is nurtured through relationships with particular people and communities. Love of the universal does not exclude love of the particular—it depends on it. Her argument anticipates Grant's rebuke of the modern juggernaut that tears people away from their inherited sources of meaning and grinds them into a homogeneous monoculture. Like Weil, he is wary of the modern collective but affirms rootedness in tradition, so long as it retains a capacity to orient us toward transcendence. Modern civilization fails in precisely that respect.

II: THE SCREAMS OF THE TORTURED CHILD

This notion of an impersonal good points to another reason why the "great beast" passage in the *Republic* is so important to Weil—and consequently to Grant. In her essay "Is There a Marxist Doctrine?", she paraphrases *Republic* 493e: "As Plato says, an infinite distance separates the good from necessity." But her paraphrase adds something absent from the original. Whereas for Plato the distance between the necessary and the good is merely great, Weil dilates it to infinity. "They have nothing in common," she says. "They are totally other" (Weil 2001, p. 165).

Necessity, for Weil, denotes the order of the world, including the implacable progression of cause and effect that govern the sequence of events in time. For the scientist or philosopher, this necessity can become an object of dispassionate contemplation, but in the course of our lives it is also experienced as blind force—indifferent to our needs and desires, with the power to crush us and reduce us to mere things. Yet at the same time as we experience ourselves as hapless victims of this empire of force, we discover something in ourselves that contradicts its message that we are nothing but its doomed playthings, something that marks us as born for a different destiny: our inextirpable desire for the good. "The very being of man is nothing else but a perpetual straining after an unknown good," Weil writes (Weil 2001, p. 164). This contradiction at the heart of human existence is hard to bear and even harder to think. That is why Weil believes it is denied by every inferior form of the religious life, including the modern religion of progress, which tries to persuade us that events in this world are providentially ordered toward the good.

This metaphysical framework was appropriated very early on by Grant, as is evident from a lecture titled "The Necessary and the Good in the Crucifixion" that was found after his death in a box in his study.[6] Given as part of a course on Augustine that he taught five times in the 1950s, it explores the meaning of the crucifixion, taking as its starting point the infinite distance between the necessary and the good. Curiously, however, Weil receives only a single passing mention.[7] Instead, Grant says he is using Platonic terminology.[8]

> Now if I understand Plato correctly (and before such an immense genius how can we be sure?)—the famous passage in the Republic about the transcendence of the Good arises from his recognition that the central contradiction which must arise to our thought is the contradiction between necessity and the good, call it if you will the contradiction between justice and force, between love and worldly power. Plato seems to have seen with such clarity, as surely we must, that human beings have from their very being the desire for the good, [but] are at the same time under the rule in their very selves—that is, in their thought as well as in their flesh—under the entire rule of a blind force, an absolute necessity, which at least appears absolutely indifferent to the good (Grant 2002, p. 488).

Despite his reticence about Weil, Grant is clearly indebted to her for this reading of Plato. Indeed, given how closely his language parallels hers, it is almost certain that his recognition of what "Plato seems to have seen with such clarity" was possible only because of the clarity of vision he owed to Weil.[9] His near silence about her suggests that she and Plato had almost merged in his mind, so that Plato spoke to him from out of her text. He sees Plato through her eyes.

Like Weil, Grant also believes that the contradiction between necessity and the good applies only within the human realm of experience. In the transcendent order, they are united—but in a way that eludes our comprehension. "Although we are forced to assign them a unity," Weil writes, "this unity is a mystery; it remains for us a secret. The genuine religious life is the contemplation of this unknown unity" (Weil 2001, p. 165). Our contemplation of what we can only perceive as a contradiction brings the finite mind to the farthest limit of intelligibility, where it brushes up against the supernatural. Grant describes this moment of contact using an image borrowed from Weil—a set of pincers:

> [T]here is a legitimate and illegitimate use of contradiction. The illegitimate use insists on joining together incompatible thoughts as if they were compatible. … The legitimate use seems to me this, when two incompatible thoughts present themselves to us we must exhaust every recourse of our intelligence to try to eliminate one of the conflicting and incompatible thoughts. If this is impossible—if both insist on imposing themselves on our minds, it becomes necessary to recognize the contradiction as a fact. Then it becomes necessary to use this contradiction as a kind of pincers, to try and enter directly in contact with the transcendent which otherwise is inaccessible to human beings (Grant 2002, p. 489).

As in his reading of the *Republic*, Grant remains silent about his debt to Weil for both the image of the pincers and the distinction between illegitimate and legitimate uses of contradiction. Both are taken from "Is There a Marxist Doctrine?"[10] Indeed, what Grant says so closely paraphrases what Weil wrote there that we must imagine him composing this lecture with Weil's text at his elbow.

Grant shares Weil's scorn for the illegitimate use of contradiction. Those who concoct a fictitious unity between necessity and the good in this world paper over the anguish of the human condition, which "only leads to attempts to justify evil" (Grant 2002, p. 490). For Weil, the chief culprits are the Marxists, who claim to have discovered inexorable laws of history that are guaranteed to bring about justice, even though untold suffering may have to be endured along the way. Grant casts a wider net. Marxism is just one form of the modern faith in progress, which is itself a mutant offspring of the Christian doctrine of providence. For some Christians, providence means that every event serves a divine purpose. Grant finds this doctrine repellent in both its Christian and secularized forms. "To take a progressive view of providence is to come close to worshipping force," he writes in *Lament for a Nation*. "Does this not make us cavalier about evil? The screams of the tortured child can be justified by the achievements of history" (Grant 2005a, p. 87).

These tortured screams are memorialized by Ivan Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's great novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. In 1958, Grant, in collaboration with his wife Shiela, composed a radio talk on Dostoevsky. After praising his literary brilliance, they concluded that his greatest influence lay in his "remarkable dialectic" of faith and doubt, expressed with unparalleled force in Ivan's speech in the section titled "Pro and Contra." Ivan shares his brother Alyosha's religious longing for universal harmony, but he refuses to accept it on the terms offered, purchased with the innocent suffering of children. The Grants, using Weil's language, praise Dostoevsky's portrayal of "the agonizing struggle of the believer to reconcile the necessary with the good" (Grant 2002, p. 415).

To illuminate Ivan's anguish, they quote a passage from Weil's notebooks in which she voices a similar sentiment:

> To manage to love God through and beyond the misery of others is very much more difficult than to love him through and beyond one's own suffering. When one loves him through and beyond

> one's own suffering, this suffering is thereby transfigured; becomes, depending upon the degree of purity of that love, either expiatory or redemptive. But love is unable to transfigure the misery of others (with the exception of those who are within the range of one's influence). What saint shall transfigure the misery of the slaves who died on the cross in Rome and in the Roman provinces throughout the course of so many centuries (Weil 2004, p. 255).[11]

Grant quotes this same passage in his 1959 book *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, where he describes Weil as a modern saint. However, it becomes clear there that the obstacle for *him*, the suffering that his own love of God cannot transfigure, is not just the historically remote misery of crucified Roman slaves but the horrors of his own century: "If anyone thinks the purpose of existence is evident let him contemplate what has happened in the twentieth century; let him contemplate what is happening at the very moment that these words are read" (Grant 1995, p. 92). Grant may be thinking of his own shattering experience during the Second World War, as well as the carnage of the anti-colonial struggles in Vietnam and Algeria.

These themes resurface in his "Introduction to Simone Weil," written after a 1963 research trip to France for a planned but never completed book on the philosopher-saint. He returns to her reflections on the reign of force and the use of contradiction, focusing on one sentence that he believes captures a crucial theme running through her mature thought: "I am ceaselessly and increasingly torn both in my intelligence and in the depth of my heart through my inability to conceive simultaneously and in truth, of the affliction of men, the perfection of God and the link between the two" (Grant 2002, p. 796).[12] Arguably, Weil's powerful impact on Grant stems from him being similarly torn.

But the full extent of Weil's importance for Grant comes into view when he writes that "the afflictions of modern civilization taught her to question the philosophic principles on which modern civilization is based and so enabled her to read and participate directly in what the Greeks and Indians have said about alternative principles, in a way that is quite impossible for most men" (Grant 2009, p. 791). To ascribe to Weil a "direct" participation in the "principles" grasped by the greatest premodern thinkers is to confer on her the authority of firsthand knowledge. That helps to explain why he feels so confident turning to her as a guide to Plato. But equally important is Grant's claim that she calls into questions the principles on which modern civilization is based. He does not elaborate those principles in detail, but we can easily gather what he might have learned from her that was relevant to his own project.

From Weil, Grant might have drawn the insight that modern science is fundamentally oriented toward technological domination—a sharp departure from the ancient view, in which the highest exercise of the intellect lay not in mastery or self-assertion but in receptive openness to the transcendent good. For the modern mind, technological expansion has become an end in itself, feeding the myth of limitless progress and power, while the ancients dwelt with a profound sense of limit. As we know, Weil gave Grant ample grounds to reject both the Marxist and liberal faith in progress. He speaks of "her central theme about history in general," her insistence that "the nobler and better does not necessarily survive; indeed, because of the ultimate rule of force over the world, truth and beauty can only be tenuously held in the being of any society" (Grant 2009, pp. 795-796). This tragic realism—this denial that history providentially bends toward the good—underwrites the mood of *Lament for a Nation*.

"It is because the assumptions of modernity had been smashed in Simone Weil that her commentary on Plato is illuminating," Grant wrote, adding a terse parenthesis: "(Strauss and her.)" (Grant 2009, p. 798). Strauss and Weil—this unlikely pair—are linked in Grant's mind as astute critics of modernity who enable a recovery of Plato.

III. THAT WISE MAN AND THE FLAME

When Grant wrote *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, he had by his own admission not yet fully cast off his progressivist faith—though his study of Weil would have posed a mighty challenge it. Grant's first book was no hymn to progress, yet in the 1966 introduction to the second edition he conceded that it was still "perme-

ated with the faith that human history for all its pain and ambiguities is somehow to be seen as the progressive incarnation of reason" (Grant 1995, p. 120). A corollary of this faith was his admiration for Hegel, who claimed to have synthesized the best of ancient and modern philosophy. Grant confessed that he once considered him "the greatest of all philosophers" (Ibid.). Yet, he reports that his encounter with the writings of Leo Strauss proved decisive in persuading him of the superiority of ancient over modern philosophy. In *Lament for a Nation*, he paid homage to Strauss by calling him "that wise man" (Grant 2005a, p. 93).

Strauss offered an alternative genealogy of modern philosophy. The modern project is not the triumph of the rational spirit but a severe narrowing of our horizons, a turn from contemplation and the cultivation of virtue to the conquest of nature and the alleviation of human suffering. By lowering our sights, modern philosophers sought to place the goal more readily within reach. From his reading of Strauss, Grant was led to the conclusion that Plato's account of human excellence was in fact closer to the truth than Hegel's. Yet, as important as Strauss may have been, Grant's preeminent guide to Plato was never Strauss, but Weil. As he is reported to have told a classroom of students, "Beside Leo Strauss, Simone Weil is a flame" (Christian 1993, p. 228).

Grant's new orientation is on full display in *Lament for a Nation*, with his debt to Strauss openly acknowledged, while his greater debt to Weil is strangely muted. Grant builds a section of his argument around Strauss's account of modernity's two initial waves: the first launched by Machiavelli and culminating in Lockean liberalism, the second originating with Rousseau and leading to the revolutionary politics of Marxism (Grant 2005a, p. 59).[13] He also explicitly endorses Strauss's judgment that to understand the classics properly we must cast off the assumptions of the modern age, in particular, the belief that classical philosophy is at best an immature form of wisdom that has been perfected by modern thinkers (Grant 2005a, p. 93). But Strauss's influence is most evident in Grant's argument that the demise of Canada is not just the fallout from its leaders' missteps and moral compromises but is inscribed in the very destiny of the modern West.

The absorption of Canada into the American empire follows necessarily from features of the modern world that Strauss accents in his writings—its ideology of progress, its devotion to the conquest of nature, and its political drive toward what he called "the universal and homogeneous state." Grant takes this phrase from Strauss's debate with the French Hegelian-Marxist philosopher Alexandre Kojève, where it denotes a global society of supposedly free and equal men and women whose parochial loyalties have all been dissolved in an acid bath of political and social uniformity (Strauss 2013). For Kojève, such a state is the inevitable end (*telos*) of history, the final reconciliation that concludes all the political struggles that, in his Hegelian view, had propelled history forward until now. Strauss, on the other hand, while not denying that history may be heading in this direction, insisted that the universal and homogeneous state would be a tyranny, dehumanizing those who live within it.

The phrase "universal and homogeneous state" entered Grant's vocabulary soon after his discovery of Strauss. He used it as early as 1961 in a speech to the National Research Council, provoking outrage by suggesting that their scientific work served the coming of a universal tyranny (Grant 2005a, p. 118).[14] The importance of the Strauss-Kojève debate for Grant is even more evident in his essay "Tyranny and Wisdom," written in 1962, though it did not appear in print until 1964. His research trip to France for his projected Introduction to Weil was in 1963, so both thinkers were occupying his thoughts around the same time. In fact, Grant was in the midst of work on Weil when political developments drew him into writing what would become *Lament for a Nation*—a book he described in a letter as "just about Canada becoming part of the universal and homogeneous state." He may have been thinking of Weil when he added, "It is finally true that one's hope must lie in the transcendent—but what a business it is putting off one's finite hopes" (Christian 1993, pp. 241-242). Given how preoccupied he was with Weil, we might wonder how his interest in her shaped his reception of the Strauss-Kojève debate. "Tyranny and Wisdom" offers important clues.

Strauss takes an anti-historicist stance in this debate, one that Grant says "asserts an eternal and unchangeable order in which history takes its place and which is in no manner affected by the events of history" (Grant 2018, p. 98).[15] This formulation, drawn nearly verbatim from Strauss, likely appealed to Grant

because it echoes Weil's turn to a transcendent good that relativizes all our finite hopes. Using Weilian language absent from Strauss, Grant describes the ancient philosophical posture as "the contemplation of necessity" (Ibid.), rather than seeking mastery. More tellingly, he homes in on two aspects of Strauss's argument, both pertinent to Weil's understanding of the ancients, though neither is a major theme for Strauss in this particular essay.

First, Strauss argues that the ancient Greeks recognized the possibility of a technological science but rejected it, believing it would undermine human excellence. For them, the highest excellence was philosophy—contemplation of an eternal, unchanging order. Because such contemplation presupposes a realm of necessity beyond human control, the modern project of conquering nature represents a denial of classical philosophy. Strauss supports his claim with three classical citations, but Grant presses for more convincing evidence—and then suggests where Strauss might find it: ancient geometry. To understand why the Greeks turned away from the technological application of science, he writes,

> it would be necessary to understand Greek geometry and what those Greeks who were philosophers thought geometry was and also what place geometry played in Greek religious practice before Aristotle. As a student of religion, it is quite clear to me that geometry had for the educated Greeks an essentially religious significance . . . (Grant 2018, p. 100).

Grant identifies himself as "a student of religion," but he might have said student of Simone Weil, since her essay "The Pythagorean Doctrine" explores the religious significance of Greek geometry at length. Grant cites it in a footnote, subtly directing Strauss to the evidence he seeks. The footnote appears at the end of this sentence:

> One could wish, therefore, that even if Strauss did not include a discussion of Greek geometry in his text that he had included references to scholarly writings which would illuminate what he says about Greek geometry and its relation to their philosophy and religion (Grant 2018, p. 100).

But Strauss had said nothing about geometry or Greek religion, maintaining only that the Greeks viewed the conquest of nature as "destructive of humanity" (Strauss 2013, p. 178). It is Grant—clearly thinking of Weil—who reframes the issue in these terms, perhaps just to give himself a reason to cite her.

For Weil, Greek geometry was about building bridges—though not the kind engineers construct. Geometry was an image of divine truth, a reflection of the necessity that undergirds the universe. But the Greek geometers' most intoxicating discovery was that geometrical proportions could express relation between incommensurable magnitudes. Geometry thus offered a model of the mediation or *metaxu* (μεταξύ)—the bridge—between the finite and the infinite, between human affliction and divine perfection. "To sum up," she wrote, "the appearance of geometry in Greece is the most dazzling of all the prophecies which foretold the Christ" (Weil 2024b, 168). To unpack this arresting claim would require a deep dive into her views on both Greek mathematics and Christ as mediator. What matters here is that Grant takes this moment to gesture—delicately but deliberately—toward Weil, whose sacramental reading of the Greeks would have been totally alien to Strauss.

This issue touches on the second key theme of Grant's commentary: the relationship between the history of philosophy and biblical religion. Grant is struck by Strauss's "remarkable reticence" about what authority, if any, biblical revelation should have over the philosopher (Grant 2018, p. 108). Grant draws a plausible inference: while Strauss is not a believer, he does not see it as the philosopher's task to undermine religious faith among those who need it for moral guidance and consolation. But, as Grant notes, everything hinges on what we take the true substance of biblical revelation to be, as opposed to how it has been interpreted by certain dominant theological schools. "The effort to understand Biblical religion," he writes, "is as much a philosophical task as to understand its relation to the pursuit of wisdom" (Grant 2018, p. 107).

Elsewhere in his writings, Strauss offers his account of biblical religion. In his reflections on the tension between Jerusalem and Athens—a central theme of his thought—the two cities represent opposed ways of life: one governed by divine command, the other by free inquiry.[16] They are fundamentally incompatible, since the philosopher cannot submit to any authority other than the dictates of his own unfettered reason. But Grant rejects Strauss's opposition between faith and reason, turning to a different teacher: Simone Weil. As we have seen, she finds in Greek philosophy what the title of one collection of her essays calls *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*. In that spirit, she writes, "The Gospels are the last marvellous expression of the Greek genius, as the *Iliad* is the first" (Weil 2002, p. 212).

Weil can claim this continuity between biblical and Greek thought because she conceives of faith quite differently from Strauss. Faith, for her, does not limit the philosopher's freedom to pursue truth. It resembles the loving contemplation of beauty more than an assent to some dogma.[17] "Intellectual adherence is never owed to anything whatsoever," she declares in words that Strauss could have adopted as his own motto (Weil 2012, p. 196). Strauss had much to teach Grant, but when in the final paragraph of *Lament for a Nation*, he turns his gaze from Canada's temporal collapse and to an eternal order apprehended by faith, it is Weil—not Strauss—who serves as his signpost.

Canada is fated to be swallowed up into the universal and homogeneous state, but not for the reasons Kojève gives. Canada's fate is sealed not because history is what Weil calls "a machine for manufacturing the good" (Weil 2001, p. 173), but because certain *beliefs* about the good have taken hold of modern human beings. Briefly, the achievement of the universal and homogeneous state has come to be regarded as "the pinnacle of political striving" (Grant 2005b, p. 52). As Weil argues, human beings possess an innate yearning for a good they cannot name, but society—the "great beast"—supplies it with an orientation and content. Strauss shows us how the teachings of modern philosophers introduced new judgments about the good. "As these judgments are apprehended and acted upon by practical men," Grant writes, "they become the unfolding of fate" (2005b, p. 91). Grant builds on Strauss's analysis, but his language of necessity and fate frames this great modern event—the coming of a new planetary civilization dominated by technology—within a metaphysical scheme derived from Weil, one structured around the chasm between necessity and the good.

IV. THE FURTHER SHORE

Strauss was Grant's chief guide to the great modern philosophers, while the Strauss-Kojève debate helped clarify the trajectory of the modern world those philosophical architects had shaped. But Grant turned primarily to Weil for his understanding of the eternal order in which history unfolds and of the philosophy of Plato, whose account of human excellence he came to believe was true. Yet, when it came to communicating what he had learned from her to a broader public, Grant proceeded with a curious reserve.[18] For instance, she is almost invisible within the pages of *Lament for a Nation*, even though some of her most basic insights supply the scaffolding for his argument. Laurence Lampert's 1975 essay, "The Uses of Philosophy in George Grant," offers a compelling explanation. Lampert argues that Grant, being fully aware of the obstacles facing the philosopher who hopes to gain a hearing in the modern age, adapted his rhetorical strategy accordingly.[19] Grant learned that "philosophy must always be cognizant of how it is being heard if it is to maintain its frail hope of making a difference" (Lampert 1978, p. 183). Edwin B. Heaven and David R. Heaven directly address Grant's general reticence about Weil in their 1978 article "Some Influences of Simone Weil on George Grant's Silence." "It is neither smart politics not timely pedagogy to speak publicly of the eternal," they write in explanation of his reluctance to say much about Weil (Heaven and Heaven, 1978, p 73). Weil's presence in *Lament for a Nation* is muted then not because she was irrelevant to its argument, but because invoking her directly might have undercut its effectiveness. Still, she does appear—behind a veil, as it were—at key moments in the text.

When Grant turns at the end of his book to the question of whether Canada's disappearance is good, he adopts—or perhaps feigns—a stance of agnosticism, claiming not to know whether the universal and

homogeneous state is the best political order. But this profession of ignorance seems to undermine the very premise of his book as announced in its title. "As the central issue [of the goodness of Canada's disappearance] is left undecided," he writes, "the propriety of lamenting must also be left unsettled" (Grant 2005b, p. 94). Yet it seems that his decision to frame the book as a lament has already settled the question.

Turning from the last pages of the book to its beginning, we find Grant defining a lament as "the celebration of a passed good" (Grant 2005b, p. 4). But there are two kinds of people incapable of lament. The first are those for whom the good is entirely absent, even as memory. For them, despair is absolute and leads to suicide, not lament. The second are the saints, those rare souls who can endure any loss because they possess an absolute certainty that "the destruction of good serves the supernatural end; therefore, they cannot lament." Is this statement not a veiled nod to Weil, whom Grant revered as both a saint and a genius? Situating himself between despair and certainty, between the suicides and the saints, Grant tells us of himself, "Those who write laments may have heard the propositions of the saints, but they do not know that they are true" (Grant 2005b, p. 5).

We need to consider Grant's language carefully. The "destruction of good" in our world is experienced as evil—indeed, it comes close to the very definition of evil—especially when the ruined good is something dear to us, loved as our own. Grant thus frames his lament in the context of the greatest of all theological quandaries: the problem of evil. Evil experienced directly in one's own flesh is an occasion of anguish, but it is also a theological problem, precisely because to experience something as evil presupposes some awareness of the good it corrupts or destroys. As Grant asks, "what could evil deprive us of, if we had not some prior knowledge of good?" (2005b, p. 4). The attempt to think together the reality of evil and the primacy of the good—or, in theological language, the sovereignty of God—opens an abyss. At stake is thus both the intelligibility of the world and the possibility of loving it. What the propositions of saints like Weil tell us is that God grants permission to evil because it serves some *supernatural* end.

For Weil, the supernatural is what lies outside of time—unchanging, beyond the reach of the finite intellect and ordinary experience. If the end served by evil is supernatural, it cannot be our arrival at some historical destination, such as the universal and homogeneous state, nor even the more remote future harmony envisioned by Ivan Karamazov but rejected because the tears of a single child was too high a price of admission. Only something that persists at all times, something coeval with every moment of human woe and human joy, could be a supernatural end. For Weil, that end is the possibility of a universe existing independently of God, filled with beings capable of answering God's love with their own.

In creating such a universe, Weil says, God withdraws, relinquishing power and ceasing to be all in order to make room for otherness. Out of this renunciation arises the web of necessity that governs the world. Indifferent to our needs, without remorse or pity, necessity is infinitely distant from the transcendent goodness of God—and yet as the source of all order and regularity, it is what makes our existence possible. As such, it points to the good that lies on the other side of necessity. From Weil, Grant would have heard the following proposition concerning the "supernatural end" served by the destruction of the good: "Relentless necessity, wretchedness, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of labour which wears us out, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, disease—all these constitute divine love. It is God who in love withdraws from us so that we can love him" (Weil 2002, p. 32). A hard proposition, no doubt.

Even when the universe sends its most brutal afflictions, robbing us of all we hold dear, it remains beautiful and therefore lovable precisely because of its underlying order, which the saint contemplates with loving attention. "The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked by it," Weil writes (Weil 2009b, p. 129). The beauty of the world is a sign of the goodness at its source. Weil—and Grant—use the phrase *amor fati*, the love of fate, to describe the possibility of loving the good by loving its image in the world: the impersonal necessity that governs all things.[20] Though we are powerless to alter this necessity, we can offer our consent. Weil believes that is enough.

> It suffices for him to consent fully, at every instant, with love for the order God has created in the world, to all wounds without the least exception which the course of events may bring him. This

> unconditional 'Yes' which is pronounced in the most secret point of the soul … is *amor fati*, it is the virtue of obedience, the Christian virtue excellent above all others (Weil 2024c, p. 118).

This unconditional affirmation of the order of the world is the central proposition of the modern saint Grant held in highest esteem, whose words he believed even if he had no firsthand knowledge of their truth.

From Weil's hyperborean standpoint of *amor fati*, lament is impossible because everything happens in accordance with necessity. But looking to Weil confronts Grant with a dilemma. If he laments the loss of Canadian sovereignty but also judges it necessary, he cannot escape the question: "how can one lament necessity—or, if you will, fate? The noblest of men love it; the ordinary accept it; the narcissists rail against it." Not counting himself among the noblest but surely no narcissist, he frames his lament as a "celebration of memory" (Grant 2005b, p. 7). He is not railing against necessity—even if he later regretted that his "book was written too much from anger" (Grant 2005b, p. lxxiii)—but celebrating a good, albeit one that can survive only as a memory.

But memory gets only the penultimate word. Grant ends his *Lament* by evoking something older and deeper than the memory of those dashed hopes his forebears invested in Canada. One might still "live in the ancient faith"—whose modern oracle is Weil—

> which asserts that changes in the world, even if they be recognized more as a loss than a gain, take place within an eternal order that is not affected by their taking place. Whatever the difficulty of philosophy, the religious man has been told that process is not all. *Tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore* [They were holding their arms outstretched in love toward the further shore] (Grant 2005b, p. 95).

This final line, from Virgil's *Aeneid*, describes souls gathered at the river Styx and yearning to cross over. Grant places himself on this bank. Dwelling in the ruins of fragile temporal goods like his beloved Canada, he strains across an infinite expanse to the imperishable good on the other side. There is a boundless chasm between the cruel necessities that must now be endured and the enduring good for which we long. From Simone Weil he has learned that the only bridge across is *amor*.[21]

NOTES

1 See Grant (2002), Appendix 3: Radio and Television Broadcasts, p. 536. His review of Weil was broadcast on December 16, 1952. *Attente de Dieu* first appeared in English in 1951, though in *George Grant in Process* (1978), Grant says that it was sent to him to review in 1950. In that place, he also says that since first reading her, "she has been the central influence on my thought about the most important matters" (p. 65).

2 Letter to Shiela Grant in June/July 1958; quoted in Christian (1993, p. 229).

3 In his introduction to the 1966 edition of *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, he writes, "my debt is above all to the writings of Leo Strauss. … As the greatest joy and that most difficult of attainment is any movement of the mind (however small) towards enlightenment, I count it a high blessing to have been acquainted with this man's thought."

4 This phrase is Grant's translation of a motto he attributes to Augustine of Hippo: *ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*. It is inscribed on Grant's gravestone.

5 Weil's picture of idolatry is similar in many ways to the mimetic theory of René Girard, whom she influenced. For a good introduction to Girard's life and thought, see Haven 2018.

6 See Grant (2002, p. 443).

7 Grant (2002, p. 484): "We are not able to choose the Cross. As Miss Weil so brilliantly has put it: 'We might choose no matter what degree of asceticism or heroism, but not the Cross—that is to say penal suffering.'"

8 Grant (2002, p. 482): "I am going to start from two Platonic terms which I have used consistently—the Necessary and the Good."

9 Cf. Weil (2001, p. 164): "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."

10 See Weil (2001, p. 164).

11 Quoted by the Grants in Grant (2002, p. 415).

12 This line is from a letter she wrote to Maurice Schumann in 1943. It appears in Weil (2015b), where it is translated somewhat differently on p. 178: "I feel an ever increasing sense of devastation, both in my intellect and in the centre of my heart, at my inability to think with truth at the same time about the affliction of men, the perfection of God, and the link between the two."

13 It is interesting that Grant makes no mention of the third wave of modernity described by Strauss. Strauss argues that this third wave, the radical historicism of Nietzsche and Heidegger, found political expression in German National Socialism.

14 For an account of this controversy, see Christian (1993, p. 223).

15 Cf. Strauss (2013, p. 212).

16 See for example his essays "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections" (1985) and "Progress or Return?" (1989).

17 Grant unpacks Weil's understanding of faith at length in "Faith and the Multiversity" (1986).

18 He abandoned the book he was writing on her. It was not until 1986 that he published his first essay-length meditation on her thought, "Faith and the Multiversity" (1986). Clearly, Grant struggled with how to translate her thought into an idiom that he believed could be heard.

19 Lampert's essay first appeared in *Queen's Quarterly* but was reprinted in *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (1978). Soon after its originally publication, Grant wrote a letter to Lampert saying that "it is much the best thing that has ever been written about myself" (private letter dated Mar. 10th, 1975).

20 For the importance of *amor fati* in Grant and Weil, see Dunn (2024).

21 Many thanks to Tyler Chamberlain, who read an earlier draft of this paper and made helpful suggestions for improvement.

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