

The Preponderance of George P. Grant

If you wish to look into the past for what-next books, you could go back to the Greek philosophers. Plato's Dialogues are queer little novels. It seems to me it was the greatest pity in the world, when philosophy and fiction got split. They used to be one, right from the days of myth. Then they went and parted, like a nagging married couple, with Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and that beastly Kant. So the novel went sloppy, and philosophy went abstract dry. The two should come together again—in the novel.

—D. H. Lawrence, "Surgery for the Novel—or a Bomb"

The best reason for reading George Parkin Grant (1918–88) today lies in the fact that you have got to read it. One reads him. That is as much as any politico pundit has. It's as much as any one who didn't learn from the man himself has. Public reference sites, such as Wikipedia's entry for "George Grant (philosopher)" are quite often balanced and fair appraisals based on a large and impartial readership.

On the other hand, if one's wish is to become a pundit, to merely characterise the various "philosophers" in a somewhat sensible chronology and to attribute to "philosophy" the discoveries of one lifetime rather than come to a better understanding of what becomes a philosopher or the purpose of philosophical training (let alone philosophy itself) then whether you read George Grant won't matter much: he is "thought of" as the "Red Tory" whose mother "never forgave him for not becoming Prime Minister of Canada." And he is "thought of" as a "Platonist". But George Grant thinks quite a bit more about what *is* thought than those who just use him to make some rhetorical points.

Take this snippet for example—if possible, recall if it is so, that the negative take on George Grant is the most likely in this country.

Thought is steadfast attention to the whole.

(George Grant, *English Speaking Justice*, 1974)

He's often characterized as if his writing didn't characterize itself. Say George Grant's a Platonist. Does it mean he is "covered" by our incantations of Plato's philosophy?

A little closer attention to his oeuvre might help to explain what George Grant is saying above. The "whole" in this case involves something he told us about earlier on. I say "told us" because the place where he says it, *Time as History*, was originally a radio show presented by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) for their "Massey Lecture Series", named for George P. Grant's uncle, Vincent Massey who was a Governor General of Canada (1952–9), and Grant was, after all, a professor. It is helpful to read his words out loud or else we risk losing the modulation of his argument. For the majority of Canadians George Grant became known over the radio, others would have seen him in print—no doubt some heard it and read it both.

If there be a crisis, it is a crisis about what we are and what we are becoming, both inward and outward.

(George Grant, *Time as History*, 1969)

One imagines his detractors' heckles—"Why are you getting fat then?" "That's stupid because you smoke." "Guy wears his necktie for a belt." "Elitist rhetoric". The sort of glee scrupulous people are wont to throw into the mix. The sort of clever things that people can get out of his meaning. And perhaps they are right to just laugh George Parkin Grant off after glancing and gleaming. Even with *two* snippets to work with are we any closer to understanding what he means by "thought", "the whole" or "a crisis"? Is it because the "whole" is "both inward and outward" that "steadfast attention" is necessary, and so we indulge in "thought", or is "steadfast attention" simply what happens when we are confronted by "the whole", and so we bear the "thought" of it? Does our "steadfast attention" come and go depending on how serious we are about "the whole" or is our "steadfast attention" involuntary? If voluntary, then isn't reading like the "steadfast attention to the whole"? If it is involuntary then would that mean that the more "thought" we have the more "the whole" is fixed to our "attention"? What, if anything, are we "becoming"? The answers to these questions—perhaps even just the asking of these questions—are a part of our coming to terms with George Grant, as he

existed as a philosopher. The “crisis” however is perhaps our tenuous relation to philosophy, not to mention the burden placed on those of us who are readers new to philosophic writing. A further complication that matters is the responsibility we have in life toward the faith of the writer—but the question remains, how does philosophy fit into our lives when it *isn't* and it *doesn't* take place entirely in schools?

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