with secrets and paradoxes held in tension. Frost never needed to break the pentameter to make his verse sound like speech; he broke it only for various localized reasons. In any case, it is not in such “tension” that Frost’s genius lies, and Wakefield’s poems develop Frost’s rural colloquial language by giving us a fluid, natural, and generally prosaic voice. This proves a weakness as well as strength, for Wakefield’s realism is narrative rather than descriptive, and his lyrics are therefore far less vivid of image than were Frost’s greatest poems.

If Frost stressed the unnatural tensions of verse to beat the Modernists at their own game, Wakefield shows that verse that sounds more like natural speech than anything Frost wrote can be accomplished in faithful meter and rhyme and that, therefore, these neglected but essential aspects of poetic craft should be rediscovered not as difficult but as accommodating conditions. “In a Poetry Workshop” wittily mocks the modern scorn of meter and rhyme and its pretentious ticks, such as the refusal to capitalize the first-person subject pronoun. Moderns reject rhyme, alliteration, and assonance “so the reader doesn’t think we’re playing God,” Wakefield observes. But his poems demonstrate that, while a poet’s craft is not the secret of some occult vates, it must be analogous to “playing God.” For, these poems, like nature itself, insist unobtrusively but openly, upon the formal principles of intelligible order; they advocate also an order of civilization that has been put into retreat. Of craft and farm country alike, they insist that much which has long lay fallow must be sown again.


Out of the Shadows and Imaginings

A. S. Duff

George Grant: A Guide to his Thought by Hugh Donald Forbes
(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007)

George Grant is best known as a Canadian nationalist, as a conservative of such odd coloring that he welcomed the formation of a federal socialist party in the 1960s and refused to set foot in the United States during its prosecution of the Vietnam War. He was a conservative who, in his best known book, Lament for a Nation, spoke of “the impossibility of conservatism” entailing “the impossibility of Canada.” In Canada he was the inadvertent progenitor of a revived nationalism, often

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left-wing, typically anti-American. In the United States, insofar as he is known at all it is for his philosophical opposition to abortion, expressed in his later writings. Such evidently retrograde positions are not known to sit well with the *soi disant* nationalists of Canadian progressivism, and give a bad odor to the pretensions of Red Toryism, where that recondite term is now usually understood to refer to someone socially left but economically right. Yet the friend of Sixties radicals likewise seems to be no friend of American conservatives.

It is rare that a book so fittingly inhabits its title as H. D. Forbes's *George Grant: A Guide to his Thought*. As a good guide will do, it shows the way through Grant's work, alerting the reader to what is interesting, providing judicious warnings where necessary, correcting mistaken apprehensions of short-cuts, giving some sense of the nearby terrain. It points the reader away from the well-beaten paths of Grant the nationalist, Grant the anti-American, to more promising clearings: Grant the student of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Grant the friend and critic of Leo Strauss, Grant the Christian follower of Simone Weil. Beyond these clearings, longer and broader vistas emerge: the character of the disappearing local as the given route to the universal; the problem of practicing Christian charity and ancient contemplation in a world altogether determined by modern technology; the inconceivability of a politics that would respond to such problems. Forbes is hardly the first to understand Grant in this context, but there is none better. The book is the work of a mature scholar who wears his impressive learning very lightly. One is left with the sense that this guide has not taken the reader all of the way, but rather shown how one might continue forward—markers having been left for later retracking—into lands hoped for, if not quite promised.

The structure and content of the book point to the challenge of understanding the coherency of Grant's very unusual views. The book ascends briskly from Grant's politics to his philosophical thought, then to his highly unorthodox understanding of Christianity. We are left to navigate our own descent into more familiar, thicker air, returning ourselves to practical questions and concerns.

It is almost a necessity when writing about Grant to begin with politics, as Forbes does. Forbes goes very far in correcting the widespread view that Grant is primarily a Canadian nationalist, and thus better illuminates the true character of his localism. Grant wrote *Lament for a Nation* in response to what to many seems like a minor event in Canadian history. In 1963, the minority Conservative government of John Diefenbaker fell on a vote of non-confidence when the opposition parties, the Liberals and the socialist New Democratic Party (NDP), voted to bring it down on the question of whether American nuclear warheads should be stationed in Canada. Diefenbaker and his foreign minister, Greene, objected to the American plan, but were opposed by an unusual array of bedfellows from their own Conservative defense minister to John F. Kennedy, and, in a spasm of electoral bloodthirstiness, the NDP. Grant, who until this point professed himself a socialist, cast Diefenbaker and Greene as the heroes of the book. He thought the failure of the government—they were turned out in the Liberals' subsequent electoral victory under internationalist demigod Lester B. Pearson—and their abandonment by the leading classes of Canadian society on such an elementary matter of sovereignty meant the death of Canada. Not, to be clear, *foretold* the death of Canada. No: marked it as an event that had already happened. Forbes isolates as few others have the strangeness of Grant's claim.
Forbes shrewdly penetrates and elegantly articulates the inner logic of Grant’s argument. In the process he saves Grant from the accusation of mere Tory crankiness or pessimism. Grant claims that the death of Canada is not strictly attributable to the economic or military bullying of the United States, but rather, in Grant’s obscure terms, to *fate or necessity*, more particularly, to a “tendency of thought.” According to Grant, Canada has passed because in the midst of our late-modern confusion, it has become impossible to think clearly of an independent Canada. Grant is not a historicist, but he stresses those areas of political life where our confused thinking is all but totally determined by our times. In the present age, Grant thinks that all latitude for genuine politics and statesmanship has been lost because it has become nearly impossible to think outside of our pre-given, liberal, progressive categories. He traces the source of this fated thought to the shared Lockean philosophical and Calvinist theological opinions of North America’s early European settlers and their experience of conquering the untamed wilds of North America. Grant attributes to this formative encounter with nature as chaos in need of mastering the uniquely North American success of “technology.” As a consequence, Grant finds the modern juggernaut of technology, most advanced in North America, to be now shaping nearly every aspect of human life, including our politics, our religion, and our thought. The fate of Canada was to attempt to be a conservative, ordered, restrained society while sharing a continent with the dynamic “spearhead of modernity.” As Forbes makes clear, Grant was chilled by the apparently very great difficulty, amidst the fate of modern technology, of thinking the truth about justice or charity. The “tendency of thought” that has made it impossible to think of Canada as an independent political entity is the same that occludes our intimations of justice, charity, and contemplation.

It is unfortunate that the term *technology* conjures cybernetic bogeymen. What Grant means is the widespread and virtually inescapable disposition that man’s reason operates by summoning nature before it as a set of objects and demanding of them their reasons. According to such a view, reason is not man’s apprehension of the order of eternity; it is, rather, an instrument of the will. Reason works on the project of freeing man from the bondage of nature by mastering and subduing it. It is thus in the service of freedom, and freedom is seen to be the essence of humanity. Grant fears that this concept of freedom—at work in the heart of modernity—is substantially indistinguishable from mastery: freedom is power for desire satisfaction, finally unregulated by God or nature. Grant eventually comes to see the society of progress for which such a view is the foundation to be characterized by a great mass whose existence consists in ever greater satisfaction of their largely vulgar desires and an elite few whose liberty is disposed of in projects of creative willing for will’s sake, sharing in “the plush patina of hectic subjectivity lived out in the iron maiden of an objectified world inhabited by increasingly objectifiable beings.”

This diagnosis sounds Nietzschean because it is. Forbes’s book is superior for his grasp of the thinkers who most moved Grant. Forbes treats Grant’s relationship to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Strauss in the longest section of the book, which is on philosophy. As should already be clear, Grant largely accepts the Heideggerian diagnosis of technology and reads Nietzsche as the consummate description thereof. Both Strauss and Grant were philosophers who saw the best response to the present crisis to be a new or revived confrontation between...
reason and revelation. Forbes’s approach to this particularly dense thicket is enigmatic and suggestive, but no more than suggestive. He nonetheless makes it sufficiently clear that Grant did not go far with Strauss beyond the latter’s endorsement of ancient thought over that of the moderns.

Forbes’s book moves next to its final and highest peak, religion, where the implicit contrast with Strauss is sharpened. That Strauss saw the particulars of the confrontation between philosophy and revelation in terms that recalled Judaism and Grant Christianity is the obvious starting point. Unlike Strauss, Grant thought the Heideggerean claims about technology were both persuasive and catastrophic. Like Heidegger, Grant came to accept the darkening of the world as the necessary route through the Great Depri-val characterized by the technological civilization. Grant, however, thought the origins of this were in Western Christianity, not in Plato or Christianity as such. Forbes leaves this path of Grant’s thought virtually undisturbed. Grant’s step beyond or away from Heidegger is to see intimations of beauty in this deprival, visible, so to speak, as shadows in the darkness. He once called this “bringing the darkness into light as darkness.” These intimations of the universal are primarily accessible through one’s own particular tradition. He came to understand them as evidence of the Christian truth, anticipated by Plato, of the perfection of the good that is beyond being. Here Grant’s guide was neither Heidegger nor Strauss, but Simone Weil. Grant was struck by Simone Weil’s apprehension of the mystery of God’s perfection and the misery of human suffering. Through Weil’s highly unusual, indeed unorthodox, Christianity, Grant was able to read Heidegger as the great phenomenologist of the world shorn from God. Through Weil, Grant retained a distinctly moral sense of the suffering and potential-ity for evil constitutive of the technological world. Forbes’s guide ends with several probing comments on Grant’s extremely enigmatic religious thought. He does not investigate the most unusual elements of Weil’s understanding of Christianity nor Grant’s related claims to be interested in what he sometimes called the Hindu wing of Christianity.

This aspect of Grant’s work takes him far from anything that could be called a normal approach to politics. The return from these heights is tricky. It is sometimes objected that Grant’s indictment of the liberal modernity most triumphantly exhibited by the United States blinded him to the wickedness of the Soviet Union. From as early as the mid-60s, Grant apparently thought that America was destined to win the Cold War. He thought that Marxism retained too much of a pre-modern notion of _telos_ for it ever to last in the modern era characterized by technological freedom’s trumping purpose. Grant had little to say about Soviet tyranny. It must be admitted that in sharing Heidegger’s assimilation of all forms of regime to technology he repeated something of the latter’s obscu-rantism on political matters. Forbes’s treatment of this and related elements of Grant’s political thought is very satisfying. He admits to his own irritation at, for example, Grant’s praise of Canadian socialists, but concludes thus:

Grant did not hide that his disconcerting interpretation of our condition has its basis in tradition. He did not claim simply to know the truth about the ultimate questions he raised. But by raising them he provided Canadians of my generation with access to an unorthodox understanding of our tangled political-philosophical-religious tradi-
tion from an immediately intelligible starting point, beginning from questions that are inescapably present to thoughtful or perplexed Canadians.

Forbes nicely brings out that, from our perspective looking back, Grant’s silence about communism is less irritating than his insights into liberalism, modernity, technology, and Christianity are striking.

Grant spoke of the impossibility of conservatism, and yet his own attachment to Canada’s peculiar institutions and traditions, to say nothing of other considerations, mark him as a conservative. What kind of conservative is he? Forbes produces a sound taxonomy of conservative types and concludes that Grant does not easily fit in any of the categories. He is neither a Burkean conservative, a fiscal conservative, a social conservative, nor a neoconservative. Grant judges Burke to be little more than Locke with a touch of romanticism, and holds him partially responsible for the hollowing-out of the British conservative tradition to which Grant might otherwise wish to cleave. Grant cares little for neoliberal economics. He is probably closest to social conservatives in his concerns, most prominently his opposition to abortion and euthanasia. But he regarded most of them as advocating little more than enough order to prevent technological society from becoming absolutely unruly. As we have seen, he had little sympathy for the projection of American power as the guarantor of world order. Each of these varieties of conservatism is just another current in the dynamic vortex of technological modernity, each more or less oblivious of eternity.

In order to understand Grant’s conservatism we need to see it as subordinate to his Platonic Christianity. He understands the love of one’s own, including one’s own particular place and time, to be the necessary first step in an ascent to the universal. What he lamented was the deprival of that first step, that first object of love. If Grant is right, then the “impossibility of conservatism” means not only the “impossibility” of Canada, but also the impossibility of any particularism or localism, including American particularism. And as Forbes makes helpfully clear, in Grant’s considered opinion, the reasons for this cannot be attributed to any wicked schemers or disliked political clique, but are given as both a fate and gift whose origins lie far in the past of Western Christianity. The truth of this is cause for neither despair nor rebellion, for the long night of Western Christianity is promised to be followed by the dawn of Easter Sunday.

1 George Grant, Collected Works (Toronto: University of Toronto Press) 3: 580.