

## *Retrieving the Tradition*

# IN DEFENSE OF NORTH AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

• George Grant •

“The very substance of our existing that has made us the leaders in technique, stands as a barrier to any thinking that might be able to comprehend technique from beyond its own dynamism.”

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### *Introduction*

*Canadian philosopher George Grant (1918–1988), one of the twentieth century’s most thoughtful critics of North American culture, summarized his thought once in the words that “we are not our own.”<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of his life, when he knew he was dying, he amplified the meaning of these words, acknowledging that such language “was not easy for moderns”:*

*Christianity [is at its] center concerned with grace—if that word is given its literal meaning. Grace simply means that the great things of our existing are given us, not made by us and finally not to be understood as arbitrary accidents. Our making takes place within an ultimate givenness. However difficult it is for all of us to affirm that life is a gift, it is an*

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<sup>1</sup>From *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* in *The Collected Works of George Grant*, vol. 3: 1960–1969, ed. Arthur Davis and Henry Roper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 480–503. Published with permission.

<sup>2</sup>“Conversation: Intellectual Background,” in *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations*, ed. Larry Schmidt (Toronto: Anansi, 1978), 62–63.

*assertion primal to Christianity. Through the vicissitudes of life—the tragedies, the outrages, the passions, the disciplines and madneses of everyday existence—to be a Christian is the attempt to learn the substance of that assertion.*<sup>3</sup>

*According to Grant, modern civilization, through its conflation of knowing and making, disjoins beauty and truth. Seeing civilizations “as dominated by particular paradigms of knowledge,” Grant took the modern paradigm to be aptly expressed in Bacon’s “putting nature to the question.”<sup>4</sup> He judged that, in liberalism, freedom and reliance on technique are indissolubly linked, such that technology becomes the very ontology of America. Since we live in “the most realized technological society which has yet been,” it might seem that it is we above all who would be the “best able to comprehend what it is to be so.” But that is the problem: “the very substance of our existing which has made us the leaders in technique stands as a barrier to any thinking which might be able to comprehend technique from beyond its own dynamism.”<sup>5</sup>*

*What, then, should be our response? Grant counseled that we must learn to listen for “intimations of deprival” through “intimations of perfection.”<sup>6</sup> We must retrieve the inner stillness that alone might allow the ultimate meaning of being, hence original order and measure of *téchnê*,<sup>7</sup> again to become manifest. But this retrieval is gravely misconceived if we do not see that it is a matter not only of “theory” but of an entire way of life. We must find a way to see again, a seeing that has its origin in contemplation.*

*The present article, “In Defense of North America,” taken from Grant’s *Technology and Empire*, 15–40 (also published in vol. 3 of *Collected Works of George Grant, 1960–1969* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005]), discusses the historical roots and meaning of America’s peculiar drive to technological mastery of human and non-human nature.*

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<sup>3</sup>George Grant, “Two Theological Languages,” Addendum [1988], in *Collected Works of George Grant*, vol. 2: 1951–1959, ed. Arthur Davis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 60.

<sup>4</sup>David Cayley, *George Grant in Conversation* (Toronto: Anansi, 1986), 134–35.

<sup>5</sup>*Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), 40.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>7</sup>*The George Grant Reader*, ed. William Christian and Sheila Grant (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 410, regarding the Greeks.

To exist as a North American is an amazing and enthralling fate. As in every historical condition, some not only have to live their fate, but also to let it come to be thought. What we have built and become in so short a time calls forth amazement in the face of its novelty, an amazement which leads us to that thinking. Yet the very dynamism of the novelty enralls us to inhibit that thinking.

It is not necessary to take sides in the argument between the ancients and moderns as to what is novelty, to recognize that we live in novelty of some kind. Western technical achievement has shaped a different civilization from any previous, and we North Americans are the most advanced in that achievement. This achievement is not something simply external to us, as so many people envision it. It is not merely an external environment which we make and choose to use as we want—a playground in which we are able to do more and more, an orchard where we can always pick variegated fruit. It molds us in what we are, not only at the heart of our animality in the propagation and continuance of our species, but in our actions and thoughts and imaginings. Its pursuit has become our dominant activity. And that dominance fashions both the public and private realms. Through that achievement we have become the heartland of the wealthiest and most powerful empire that has yet been. We can exert our influence over a greater extent of the globe and take a greater tribute of wealth than any previously. Despite our limitations and miscalculations, we have more compelling means than any previous for putting the brand of our civilization deeply into the flesh of others.

To have become so quickly the imperial center of an increasingly realized technological civilization would be bewildering for any human beings, but for North Americans particularly so. From our beginnings there has been an ambiguity for us as to who we are. To the Asians as they suffer from us, we must appear the latest wave of dominating Europeans who spread their ways around the world, claiming that those ways were not simply another civilization, but the highest so far, and whose claim was justified in the fact of power, namely that it could only be countered by Asians who accepted the very forms which threatened them. To the Europeans also we appear as spawned by themselves: the children of some low-class servants who once dared to leave the household and who now surprisingly appear as powerful and dominating neighbors masquerading as gentry, whose threat can only be minimized by

teaching them a little culture. They express contempt of us as a society barren of anything but the drive to technology; yet their contempt is too obviously permeated with envy to be taken as pure.

In one sense both the Asians and Europeans are correct. Except for the community of the children of the slaves and the few Indians we have allowed just to survive, we are indeed Europeans. Imperially we turn out to the rest of the world bringing the apogee of what Europeans first invented, technological civilization. Our first ways, in terms of which we met the new land, came with us from Europe and we have always used our continuing contact with the unfolding of that civilization. To this day many of our shallow intellectual streams are kept flowing by their rain. It was exiled Europeans with the new physical theory who provided us with our first uses of atomic energy. Our new social science may fit us so perfectly as to seem indigenous; but behind Parsons is Weber, behind Skinner, Pavlov, behind social work and psychiatry, Freud. Even in seeking some hope against the inhuman imperial system and some less sterile ground of political morality than a liberalism become the end of ideology, many of the most beautiful young turn for their humanism to so European a thinker as Marcuse. In a field as un-American as theology, the continually changing ripples of thought, by which the professionals hope to revive a dying faith, originate from some stone dropped by a European thinker.

Yet those who know themselves to be North Americans know they are not Europeans. The platitude cannot be too often stated that the U.S. is the only society which has no history (truly its own) from before the age of progress. English-speaking Canadians, such as myself, have despised and feared the Americans for the account of freedom in which their independence was expressed, and have resented that the other traditions of the English-speaking world should have collapsed before the victory of that spirit; but we are still enfolded with the Americans in the deep sharing of having crossed the ocean and conquered the new land. All of us who came made some break in that coming. The break was not only the giving up of the old and the settled, but the entering into the majestic continent which could not be ours in the way the old had been. It could not be ours in the old way because the making of ours did not go back before the beginning of conscious memory. The roots of some communities in eastern North America go back far in continuous love for their place, but none of us can be called

autochthonous, because in all there is some consciousness of making the land our own. It could not be ours also because the very intractability, immensity, and extremes of the new land required that its meeting with mastering Europeans be a battle of subjugation. And after that battle we had no long history of living with the land before the arrival of the new forms of conquest which came with industrialism.

That conquering relation to place has left its marks within us. When we go into the Rockies, we may have the sense that gods are there. But if so, they cannot manifest themselves to us as ours. They are the gods of another race, and we cannot know them because of what we are, and what we did. There can be nothing immemorial for us except the environment as object. Even our cities have been encampments on the road to economic mastery.

It may be that all men are at their core the homeless beings. Be that as it may, Nietzsche has shown that homelessness is the particular mark of modern nihilism. But we were homeless long before the mobility of our mobilized technology and the mass nihilism which has been its accompaniment. If the will to mastery is essential to the modern, our wills were burnished in that battle with the land. We were made ready to be leaders to the civilization which was incubating in Europe.

The very use of the word "autochthonous" raises another way in which we are not Europeans. Living undivided from one's own earth: here is not only a form of living which has not been ours but which is named in a language the echoes of which are far from us. The remoteness of "chthonic" from us measures our separation from Europe. Greece lay behind Europeans as a first presence; it has not so lain for us. It was for them primal in the sense that in its perfected statements educated Europeans found the way that things are. The Greek writings bared a knowledge of the human and non-human things which could be grasped as firmness by the Europeans for the making of their own lives and cities. Most important, Plato and Aristotle presented contemplation as the height for man. Until Nietzsche, Socrates was known as the peak of Greekness.

To say this does not deny that there was for Europeans another primal—Christianity. Indeed the meeting of these two in men's lives, the manifold attempts to see them as one, to bring together contemplation and charity, the fact that they were seen by some to be antithetical and so either one or the other must be

condemned, the way that each was interpreted and misinterpreted in terms of the other and each used against the other in the building of a civilization which was new and which was neither, these inter-relations formed the chief tension out of which Europe was shaped. It is still possible for some Europeans to live in one or the other as primal although they are part of a civilization which is so alien from both.

The degree to which the Greek was primal for Europeans can be seen in the fact that those theoretical men, from Machiavelli to Nietzsche, who delineated what modern Europe was to become when it was no longer explicitly Christian, made an increasing appeal to the Greeks as primal, while Christianity became for them either a boring, although necessary, convention, or an avowed enemy. Even as their delineation was founded on an increasingly more radical criticism of Greek thought, they claimed to be rediscovering a more authentic account of what the ancients had meant than that held by their immediate predecessors; thus Machiavelli against the theologians, Rousseau against the English, Nietzsche against Rousseau and Hegel.<sup>1</sup> Even such a modern revolutionary as Saint-Just justified his use of terror by an appeal to classical sources. The ways of modern Europe have often been described as a species of secularized Christianity. However, the ambiguity remains: the formulations of modernity have often been made by men who claimed to be returning behind Christianity to the classics, and yet laid out a fundamental criticism of the classical accounts of science, art, politics, etc. And that criticism seems to have been influenced by the hidden depth of biblical religion.

Members of the civilization that initiated modern technology often now express a fear of the Americanization of Europe, and state that fear in their identification of the U.S. with the pure will to technique. This may be an expression of their deeper fear that their own society in becoming sheerly modern has at last and perhaps finally lost touch with its primal and therefore perhaps with contemplation itself, and that thereby Europe, in its particularity, is no more.

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<sup>1</sup>My understanding of this history is dependent on the writings of Mr. Leo Strauss. To express my enormous debt to that great thinker must not, however, hide the fact that I interpret differently the relation of Christianity to the modern philosophers.

For us the primal was much different. It was the meeting of the alien and yet conquerable land with English-speaking Protestants. Since the crossing of the ocean we have been Europeans who were not European. But the Europeanness which remained for us was of a special kind because Calvinist Protestantism was itself a break in Europe—a turning away from the Greeks in the name of what was found in the Bible. We brought to the meeting with the land a particular non-Mediterranean Europeanness of the seventeenth century which was itself the beginning of something new.

To understand North America it is necessary to understand those Protestants and to understand particularly their connection to the new physical and moral sciences which were coming into being in Europe. Why was it that the new physical and moral sciences, although not initiated by Calvinists, found a particularly ready acceptance among them, especially among the Dutch and the English? Weber enucleated the central practical relation between capitalism and the Calvinists as the worldly asceticism of the latter. His exposition of the essentials of that relationship is true despite its mistakes in detail and his lack of theoretical depth. Marxist historians have taken up the subject and written clearly of the relation between the new capitalism and Puritanism, particularly as the two were linked together in the parliamentary party during the English civil war.

Because they were concentrating on the practical relation between religion and society, neither Weber nor the Marxists were concerned with the deeper level of the matter which is the connection between Protestant theology and the new science. For example, more fundamental than the practical connections between capitalism, the parliamentary party, and Protestantism, lies the fact that the refugee Protestant theologians from the continent espoused so immediately the Baconian account of science and worked to make it influential in England. It is only possible to write here generally about the relation between Protestant theology and the new science. It sprang initially from one negative agreement: both the theologians and the scientists wished to free the minds of men from the formulations of medieval Aristotelianism, though for different reasons. Because of our present education, the criticism by the seventeenth-century scientists of the traditional doctrines is well known. They criticized the medieval teleological doctrine with its substantial forms as preventing men from observing and understand-

ing the world as it is. The criticism by the theologians is less well known and less easily understandable in an age such as ours. They attacked the medieval teleological doctrine as the foundation of what they called “natural” theology, and that theology was attacked because it led men away from fundamental reliance on Christian revelation. The teleological doctrine did this because it encouraged men to avoid the surd mystery of evil by claiming that final purpose could be argued from the world. Such mitigation led men away from the only true illumination of that mystery, the crucifixion apprehended in faith as the divine humiliation.<sup>2</sup>

But beyond this common negative attack on the medieval science, there was in the theology of the Calvinist Protestants a positive element which made it immensely open to the empiricism and utilitarianism in the English edition of the new science. Troeltsch has described that element and its consequent openness: “Calvinism, with its abolition of the absolute goodness and rationality . . . of the Divine activity into mere separate will-acts, connected by no inner necessity and no metaphysical unity of substance, essentially tends to the emphasizing of the individual and empirical, the renunciation of the conceptions of absolute causality and unity, the practically free and utilitarian individual judgment of all things. The influence of this spirit is quite unmistakably the most important cause of the empirical and positivist tendencies of the Anglo-Saxon spirit, which today find themselves in it as compatible with strong religious feeling, ethical discipline and keen intellectuality as they formerly did in Calvinism itself.”<sup>3</sup> “Today” for Troeltsch was before

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<sup>2</sup>Luther laid down the whole of this with brilliant directness at the very beginning of the Reformation in some theses of 1518:

“Thesis 19. He is not worthy to be called a theologian who sees the invisible things of God as understood through the things that are made (Romans 1:20).

“Thesis 20. But only he who understands the visible and further things of God through the sufferings and the Cross.

“Thesis 21. The theologian of glory says that evil is good and good evil; the theologian of the Cross says that the thing is as it is” (Luther, *Werke*, Weimar edition, vol. 1, 534).

It is surely possible to see the relation of such a theological statement to later German philosophy.

<sup>3</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World*, trans. W. Montgomery (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 162–63. Originally published in English in 1912.



1914. So that “strong religious feeling, ethical discipline and keen intellectuality” must be taken as an account of the English-speaking bourgeois world before the adventures and catastrophes of the last half century, before the total collapse of Calvinism as an explicit social force. Indeed as Calvinism was more present in North America than in England as the dominant public religion, Troeltsch’s works apply more forcibly to this continent than to the home of Puritanism.

This connection between the English-speaking Protestants and the new physical and moral sciences is played down by those who point to the worldliness of thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke, as compared to the account of salvation found among the Calvinists. Such a contrast is indeed obvious but misses the nature of the connection. It is not that the new philosophers were held by the truth of Christianity. Protestantism was merely a presence in the public world they inhabited which was more compatible with their espousings than Catholicism. Rather the connection was from the side of the Protestants who found something acceptable in the new ideas so that often they were instruments for these ideas in the world, almost without knowing the results for their faith. At the least, Calvinist Christianity did not provide a public brake upon the dissemination of the new ideas as did Catholicism and even sometimes Anglicanism. For example, Locke, so important an influence on our North American destiny, may well be interpreted as contemptuous of Christian revelation and even of theism itself. The comfortable self-preservation to which he thought men directed is hardly compatible with what any Christianity could assert our highest end to be. Nevertheless over the centuries it has been Protestants, both authentic and conventional, who have found his political and epistemological ideas so congenial. One of his great triumphs was surely that by the marvelous caution and indirectness of his rhetoric and by some changes of emphasis at the political level, he could make Hobbes’ view of nature acceptable to a still pious bourgeoisie. Most of us do not see how our opinions are gradually changed from what we think we believe, under the influence of ideas elucidated by others incomparably deeper and more consistent than ourselves. “Worldly asceticism” was to become ever more worldly and less ascetic in the gradual dissolving of the central Protestant vision. The control of the passions in Protestantism became more and more concentrated on the sexual, and on others

which might be conducive to sloth, while the passions of greed and mastery were emancipated from traditional Christian restraints. Weber was brilliantly right to place Franklin near the center of his account of English-speaking Protestantism. Incomparably less philosophic than Locke, Franklin illustrates the influence back from Protestantism into the ideas of the new worldly modernity. He may have had contempt for revelation in his sensual utilitarianism, but the public virtues he advocates are unthinkable outside a Protestant ethos. The practical drive of his science beautifully illustrates what has been quoted from Troeltsch. It takes one quite outside the traditionally contemplative roots of European science, into the world of Edison and research grants. In 1968 Billy Graham at the Republican Convention could in full confidence use Franklin in his thanksgiving for what the Christian God had done for America.

The fact that such men have so often been the shock troops of the English-speaking world's mastery of human and non-human nature lay not simply in the absence of a doctrine of nature into which vacuum came the Hobbesian account of nature (so that when revelation was gone all that was left was that account) but also in the positive content of their extraordinary form of Christianity. The absence of natural theology and liturgical comforts left the lonely soul face to face with the transcendent (and therefore elusive) will of God. This will had to be sought and served not through our contemplations but directly through our practice. From the solitude and uncertainty of that position came the responsibility which could find no rest. That unappeasable responsibility gave an extraordinary sense of the self as radical freedom so paradoxically experienced within the predestinarian theological context. The external world was unimportant and indeterminate stuff (even when it was our own bodies) as compared with the soul's ambiguous encounter with the transcendent. What did the body matter; it was an instrument to be brought into submission so that it could serve this restless righteousness. Where the ordinary Catholic might restrain the body within a corporatively ordained tradition of a liturgy rhythmic in its changes between control and release, the Protestant had solitary responsibility all the time to impose the restraint. When one contemplates the conquest of nature by technology, one must remember that that conquest had to include our own bodies. Calvinism provided the determined and organized men and women who could rule the

mastered world. The punishment they inflicted on non-human nature, they had first inflicted on themselves.

Now when from that primal has come forth what is present before us; when the victory over the land leaves most of us in metropoloi where widely spread consumption vies with confusion and squalor; when the emancipation of greed turns out from its victories on this continent to feed imperially on the resources of the world; when those resources cushion an immense majority who think they are free in pluralism, but in fact live in a monistic vulgarity in which nobility and wisdom have been exchanged for a pale belief in progress, alternating with boredom and weariness of spirit; when the disciplined among us drive to an unlimited technological future, in which technical reason has become so universal that it has closed down on openness and awe, questioning and listening; when Protestant subjectivity remains authentic only where it is least appropriate, in the moodiness of our art and sexuality, and where public religion has become an unimportant litany of objectified self-righteousness necessary for the more anal of our managers; one must remember now the hope, the stringency, and the nobility of the primal encounter. The land was almost indomitable. The intense seasons of the continental heartland needed a people who whatever else were not flaccid. And these people not only forced commodities from the land, but built public and private institutions of freedom and flexibility and endurance. Even when we fear General Motors or ridicule our immersion in the means of mobility, we must not forget that the gasoline engine was a need-filled fate for those who had to live in such winters and across such distances. The Marxists who have described the conquest of the continent as an example of capitalist rape miss the substance of those events, as an incarnation of hope and equality which the settlers had not found in Europe. Whatever the vulgarity of mass industrialism, however empty our talk of democracy, it must not be forgotten that in that primal there was the expectation of a new independence in which each would be free for self-legislation, and for communal legislation. Despite the exclusion of the African, despite the struggles of the later immigrant groups, the faith and institutions of that primal encounter were great enough to bring into themselves countless alien traditions and make these loyal to that spirit. To know that parents had to force the instincts of their children to the service of pioneering control; to have seen the pained and unrelenting faces of the

women; to know, even in one's flesh and dreams, the results of generations of the mechanizing of the body; to see all around one the excesses and follies now necessary to people who can win back the body only through sexuality, must not be to forget what was necessary and what was heroic in that conquest.

Now when Calvinism and the pioneering movement have both gone, that primal still shapes us. It shapes us above all as the omnipresence of that practicality which trusts in technology to create the rationalized kingdom of man. Other men, communists and national socialists, have also seen that now is the moment when man is at last master of the planet, but our origins have left us with a driving practical optimism which fitted us to welcome an unlimited modernity. We have had a practical optimism which had discarded awe and was able to hold back anguish and so produce those crisp rationalized managers, who are the first necessity of the kingdom of man. Those uncontemplative, and unflinching wills, without which technological society cannot exist, were shaped from the crucible of pioneering Protestant liberalism. And still among many, secularized Christianity maintains itself in the rhetoric of goodwill and democratic possibilities and in the belief that universal technical education can be kind, etcetera, etcetera. Santayana's remark that there is a difference between Catholic and Protestant atheism applies equally to liberalism; ours is filled with the remnant echoes of Calvinism. Our belief in progress may not be as religiously defined as the Marxist, but it has a freedom and flexibility about it which puts nothing theoretical in the way of our drive toward it (or in other words as the clever now say, it is the end of ideology). In short our very primal allowed us to give open welcome to the core of the twentieth century—the unlimited mastery of men by men.

It may be argued that other later arrivals from Europe have so placed their stamp on North America as to have changed in essence what could come from that primal. But obvious facts about the power of Catholicism in our politics, or the influence of Jews in communications and intellectual life, or the unexpected power for continuance shown by ethnic communities, mean only that recent traditions have colored the central current of the American dream. The effectiveness of Catholics in politics remains long after its origins in urban immigrant needs, but from the very beginning successful Catholic politicians have been particularly dutiful toward

institutions, customs, and rhetoric which had been made by others before their arrival, and made from traditions utterly different from their own. In so far as Catholic contemplation ever crossed the ocean, it has been peripheral. Today when Catholics desiring to embrace the modern open themselves directly to the public liberalism, it looks as if even the few poor remnants of contemplation will die. For all the closeness of Jews to the American dream, it would be degrading to Judaism to say that it has been able to express its riches in American culture when the chief public contribution of Jews has been the packaged entertainment of Broadway and Hollywood, the shallow coteries of intellectual New York. As for pluralism, differences in the technological state are able to exist only in private activities: how we eat; how we mate; how we practice ceremonies. Some like pizza, some like steaks; some like girls, some like boys; some like synagogue, some like the mass. But we all do it in churches, motels, restaurants indistinguishable from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Even as the fissures in the system become apparent, leading its enemies to underestimate its ability to be the leader in modernity, our primal spirit still partially survives to give our society its continuing dynamism. The ruthlessness and banal callousness of what has been done in Vietnam might lead one to see North American events as solely self-interested nihilism of a greedy technological empire. But such an interpretation would not be sufficient to the reality. It must be remembered that the exigencies of imperialism have to be justified to the public (particularly to the second-order managers) under the banners of freedom and a liberating modernization. When they cannot there is widespread protest of a kind that never existed during the European depredations in the non-European world. The Vietnam war is disliked not only because it is obviously a tactical blunder; nor only because most of us are "last men" too comfortable to fight for the imperial power that buttresses that comfort; nor, simplistically, is it that television filters some of the ferocity to our living rooms; but also because the central dream still publicly holds, that North America stands for the future of hope, a people of goodwill bringing the liberation of progress to the world. The exigencies of violence necessary to our empire will increasingly make mockery of the rhetoric of that dream. The lineaments of our imperialism are less and less able to be dressed up in the language of liberal idealism to make them seem

more than the affluence and power of the northern hemisphere. Nevertheless, as of now, the belief that America is the moral leader of the world through modernization still sustains even the most banal and ruthless of our managers.

At home the ruling managers move "toward the year 2000." It might seem here that the practical primal has become no more than the unalloyed drive to technological mastery for its own sake. It is this interpretation that allows certain Europeans to consider us a wasteland with nothing seriously human among us but that self-propelling will to technology. But this interpretation underestimates the very effectiveness of North America in the world, in its forgetting that it is men who make that drive. What makes the drive to technology so strong is that it is carried on by men who still identify what they are doing with the liberation of mankind. Our ruling managers are able to do what they do just because among sufficient of them technology and liberalism support each other as identified. It is this identification which makes our drive to technology still more dynamic than the nihilistic will to will which is emptied of all conceptions of purpose. It may be (to use the indicative would be claiming to have grasped the very heart of what is) that this drive to practicality moves to become little more than a will to mastery governing the vacuous masses. But this is not yet how we understand our present. The identification in our practicality of masterful interference and the building of a human world still filters through the manifold structures of managerial and scientific elites to be the governing faith of the society. All political arguments within the system, the squalls on the surface of the ocean (for example, that about the rights of property in relation to the common good, between the freedom for some and the freedom for all) take place within the common framework that the highest good is North America moving forward in expansionist practicality. To think outside this faith is make oneself a stranger to the public realm.

Indeed the technological society is not for most North Americans, at least at the level of consciousness, a *terra incognita* into which we must move with hesitation, moderation, and in wonder, but a comprehended promised land which we have discovered by the use of calculating reason and which we can ever more completely inherit by the continued use of calculation. Man has at last come of age in the evolutionary process, has taken his fate into his own hands and is freeing himself for happiness against the old

necessities of hunger and disease and overwork, and the consequent oppressions and repressions. The conditions of nature—that “otherness”—which so long enslaved us, when they appeared as a series of unknown forces, are now at least beginning to be understood in their workings so that they can serve our freedom. The era of our planetary domination dawns; and beyond that? That this is obviously good can be seen in the fact that we are able to do what we never could and prevent what we have never before prevented. Existence is easier, freer, and more exciting. We have within our grasp the conquest of the problem of work-energy; the ability to keep ourselves functioning well through long spans of life and above all the overcoming of old prejudices and the discovery of new experience, so that we will be able to run our societies with fewer oppressive authorities and repressive taboos.

To such comprehension the technological society is only in detail a *terra incognita*, as in its rushing change new problems arise which cannot always be predicted in advance. We therefore require the clearest minds to predict by understanding those which are on the horizon and to sort them out by calculation with courage. As we move “toward the year 2000,” we need all the institutes of urban studies and of race relations, all the centers of economic development and psychological adjustment we can get. We will have to see how cities need not set affluence and squalor, private competence and public disorganization, against each other; how all can reach a level of educational competence to inherit the hope; how the young can be shown purpose in the midst of enormous bureaucracies; how banality need not be incumbent on mass culture; how neuroses and psychoses, which are so immediately destructive when power is great, can be overcome by new understandings of psychology and sociology, etcetera, etcetera. Add to these the international problems of how underdeveloped countries can be brought to share in these new possibilities by accepting the conditions of modernization, how the greed of already modern societies does not hold the others in slavery, how mass breeding with modern medicine does not overwhelm them and us before modernization can be accomplished, above all how the new military techniques do not explode us all before we have reached an internationalism appropriate to the age of reason. But these are difficulties of detail, requiring our best calculation to avoid, but vitiating intrinsically the vision of the technological society as a supreme step in our liberation. Behind

them lie the comprehension of this great experiment in the minds of our dominant majority as self-evidently good, that for which man has struggled in evolution since his origins in pain and chance, ignorance and taboo.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed the loud differences in the public world—what in a simpler-minded nineteenth-century Europe could be described as the divisions between left and right—are carried on within this fundamental faith. The directors of General Motors and the followers of Professor Marcuse sail down the same river in different boats. This is not to say anything as jejune as to deny the obvious fact that our technological society develops within a state capitalist framework and that that will have significant effect on what we are and what we will become, particularly in relation to other technological societies developed under other structures. But amid the conflict of public ideologies it is well to remember that all live within a common horizon. Those of the “right,” who stand by the freedoms of the individual to hold property and for firmer enforcement of our present laws, seem to have hesitation about some of the consequences of modernity, but they do not doubt the central fact of the North American dream—progress through technological advance. It may be indeed that, like most of us, the “right” want it both ways. They want to maintain certain moral customs, freedoms of property, and even racial rights which are not in fact compatible with advancing technological civilization. Be that as it may, the North American “right” believes firmly in technical advance. Indeed its claim is that in the past the mixture of individualism and public order it has espoused has been responsible for the triumphs of technique in our society.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>As is true of all faiths, this dominating modern faith has many different expressions of itself. Some of these formulations put forward a rather low and superficial view of what it is to be human, for example those of Daniel Bell or Marion Levy in the U.S. or that of Edmund Leach in the U.K. These formulations must not lead to the hermeneutical error of judging the truth of the faith from the crassness of a particular formulation. This would be as fair as judging the truth of Christianity from the writings of its most foolish theologians. The same modern faith has been expounded thoughtfully by many; by liberals, both positivist and existentialist, by Marxists, by Christians, and by Jews.

<sup>5</sup>I use the term “right” because I have written elsewhere of the impossibility of political conservatism in an era committed to rapid technological advance. See *Lament for a Nation*, 66–67. The absurdity of the journalistic use of the word



Equally those of the “left” who have condemned our social arrangements and worked most actively to change them have based their condemnation in both the 1930s and 1960s on species of Marxism. This is to appeal to the redemptive possibilities of technology and to deny contemplation in the name of changing the world. Indeed domestic Marxists have been able as a minority to concentrate on the libertarian and Utopian expectations in their doctrines because unlike the Marxists of the East they could leave the requirements of public order to others. But however libertarian the notions of the New Left, they are always thought within the control of nature achieved by modern techniques. The liberation of human beings assumes the ease of an environment where nature has already been conquered. For example, at the libertarian height of Professor Marcuse’s writing (*Eros and Civilization*), he maintains that men having achieved freedom against a constraining nature can now live in the liberation of a polymorphous sexuality. The orgiastic gnosticism there preached always assumes that the possibilities of liberation depend on the maintenance of our high degree of conquest. Having first conquered nature, we can now enjoy her. His later *One Dimensional Man* is sadder in its expectations from our present situation, but technology is still simplistically described and blessed, as long as it is mixed with the pursuit of art, kind sexuality, and a dash of Whiteheadian metaphysics.

Even the root and branch condemnation of the system by some of the politicized young assume the opportunities for widespread instant satisfaction which are only possible in terms of the modern achievements. They want both high standards of spontaneous democracy and the egalitarian benefits accruing from technique. But have not the very forms of the bureaucratic institutions been developed as necessary for producing those benefits? Can the benefits exist without the stifling institutions? Can such institutions exist as participatory democracies? To say yes to these questions with any degree of awareness requires recognition of the fact that the admired spontaneity of freedom is made feasible by the conquering of the spontaneity of nature. In this sense their rejection of their society is not root and branch. They share, with those who appear

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“conservative” was seen in the reporting of the recent invasion of Czechoslovakia when the term “conservative” was widely applied to the pro-Russian Czech communist leaders.

to them as enemies, the deeper assumptions which have made the technological society.

Indeed the fact that progress in techniques is the horizon for us is seen even in the human stance of those who seek some overreaching vision of human good in terms of which the use of particular techniques might be decided. Who would deny that there are many North Americans who accept the obvious benefits of modern technique but who also desire to maintain firm social judgment about each particular method in the light of some decent vision of human good? Such judgments are widely attempted in obvious cases, such as military techniques, where most men still ask whether certain employments can ever serve the good. (This is even so in a continent whose government is the only one so far to have used nuclear weapons in warfare.) At a less obvious level, there are still many who ask questions about particular techniques of government planning and their potency for tyranny. Beyond this again there are a smaller number who raise questions about new biochemical methods and their relation to the propagation of the race. As the possible harm from any new technique is less evident, the questions become fewer. This position is the obvious one by which a multitude of sensible and responsible people try to come to terms with immediate exigencies. Nevertheless the grave difficulty of thinking a position in which technique is beheld within a horizon greater than itself, stems from the very nature of our primal, and must be recognized.

That difficulty is present for us because of the following fact: when we seek to elucidate the standards of human good (or in contemporary language "the values") by which particular techniques can be judged, we do so within modern ways of thought and belief; but from the very beginnings of modern thought the new natural science and the new moral science developed together in mutual interdependence so that the fundamental assumptions of each were formulated in the light of the other. Modern thought is in that sense a unified fate for us. The belief in the mastering knowledge of human and non-human beings arose together with the very way we conceive our humanity as an Archimedean freedom outside nature, so that we can creatively will to shape the world to our values. The decent bureaucrats, the concerned thinkers, and the thoughtful citizens as much conceive their task as creatively willing to shape the world to their values as do the corporate despots, the motivations

experts, and the manipulative politicians. The moral discourse of “values” and “freedom” is not independent of the will to technology, but a language fashioned in the same forge together with the will to technology. To try to think them separately is to move more deeply into their common origin.

Moreover, when we use this language of “freedom” and “values” to ask seriously what substantive “values” our freedom should create, it is clear that such values cannot be discovered in “nature” because in the light of modern science nature is objectively conceived as indifferent to value. (Every sophomore who studies philosophy in the English-speaking world is able to disprove “the naturalistic fallacy,” namely, that statements about what ought to be cannot be inferred solely from statements about what is.) Where then does our freedom to create values find its content? When that belief expresses itself seriously (that is, politically and not simply as a doctrine of individual fulfillment), the content of man’s freedom becomes the actualizing of freedom for all men. The purpose of action becomes the building of the universal and homogeneous state—the society in which all men are free and equal and increasingly able to realize their concrete individuality. Indeed this is the governing goal of ethical striving, as much in the modernizing East as in the West. Despite the continuing power in North America of the right of individuals to highly comfortable and dominating self-preservation through the control of property, and in the communist bloc the continuing exaltation of the general will against all individual and national rights, the rival empires agree in their public testimonies as to what is the goal of human striving.

Such a goal of moral striving is (it must be repeated) inextricably bound up with the pursuit of those sciences which issue in the mastery of human and non-human nature. The drive to the overcoming of chance which has been the motive force behind the developers of modern technique did not come to be accidentally, as a clever way of dealing with the external world, but as one part of a way of thought about the whole and what is worth doing in it. At the same time the goal of freedom was formulated within the light of this potential overcoming of chance. Today this unity between the overcoming and the goal is increasingly actualized in the situations of the contemporary world. As we push toward the goal we envisage, our need of technology for its realization becomes ever more pressing. If all men are to become free and equal within the enormous

institutions necessary to technology, then the overcoming of chance must be more and more rigorously pursued and applied—particularly that overcoming of chance among human beings which we expect through the development of the modern social sciences.

The difficulty then of those who seek substantive values by which to judge particular techniques is that they must generally think of such values within the massive assumptions of modern thought. Indeed even to think “values” at all is to be within such assumptions. But the goal of modern moral striving—the building of free and equal human beings—leads inevitably back to a trust in the expansion of that very technology we are attempting to judge. The unfolding of modern society has not only required the criticism of all older standards of human excellence, but has also at its heart that trust in the overcoming of chance which leads us back to judge every human situation as being solvable in terms of technology. As moderns we have no standards by which to judge particular techniques, except standards welling up with our faith in technical expansion. To describe this situation as a difficulty implies that it is no inevitable historicist predicament. It is to say that its overcoming could only be achieved by living in the full light of its presence.

Indeed the situation of liberalism, in which it is increasingly difficult for our freedom to have any content by which to judge techniques except in their own terms, is present in all advanced industrial countries. But it is particularly pressing for us because our tradition of liberalism was molded from practicality. Because the encounter of the land with Protestants was the primal for us, we never inherited much that was at the heart of Western Europe. This is not to express the foolish position that we are a species of Europeans-minus. It is clear that in our existing here we have become something which is more than European—something which by their lack of it Europeans find difficult to understand. Be that as it may, it is also clear that the very nature of the primal for us meant that we did not bring with us from Europe the tradition of contemplation. To say contemplation *tout court* is to speak as if we lacked some activity which the Ford Foundation could make good by proper grants to the proper organizations. To say philosophy rather than contemplation might be to identify what is absent for us with an academic study which is pursued here under that name. Nevertheless, it may perhaps be said negatively that what has been absent for us is the affirmation of a possible apprehension of the world

beyond that as a field of objects considered as *pragmata*—an apprehension present not only in its height as “theory” but as the undergirding of our loves and friendships, of our arts and reverences, and indeed as the setting for our dealing with the objects of the human and non-human world. Perhaps we are lacking the recognition that our response to the whole should not most deeply be that of doing, nor even that of terror and anguish, but that of wondering or marveling at what is, being amazed or astonished by it, or perhaps best, in a discarded English usage, admiring it; and that such a stance, as beyond all bargains and conveniences, is the only source from which purposes may be manifest to us for our necessary calculating.

To repeat, Western Europe had inherited that contemplation in its use of it theologically, that is, under that magistry of revelation. Within that revelation charity was the height and therefore contemplation was finally a means to that obedient giving oneself away. Nevertheless it was necessary for some to think revelation and the attempt to do so led theologians continually back to the most comprehensive thinkers that the West has known. Augustine spoke of “spoiling the Egyptians” but in that use of philosophy to expound revelation, the spoilers were often touched by that which they would use as something they could not use. In that continual tasting of the Greeks, some men were led back to thought not determined by revelation, and therefore to a vision of contemplation not subservient to charity, but understood as itself the highest. As has been said earlier, the Calvinists claimed to be freeing theology from all but its biblical roots and cut themselves off from pure contemplation more than did any other form of European theology—Catholic or Jewish, Lutheran or even Anglican. For the Calvinist, theology was a prophetic and legal expounding of a positively conceived revelation, the purpose of which was to make its practical appeal to men. Thus being in our origins this form of Protestant, thrown into the exigencies of the new continent, we did not partake of the tradition of European contemplation. And as we moved that Calvinism to modernity, what was there in the influence of liberalism which could have made us more open to that contemplation? Indeed for lack of contemplation, American intellectual patriots have had to make the most of Emerson and Adams, James and Pierce.

I know how distant from North Americans is the stance of contemplation, because I know the pervasiveness of the pragmatic liberalism in which I was educated and the accident of existence

which dragged me out from it. To write so may seem some kind of boasting. But the scavenging mongrel in the famine claims no merit in scenting food. Perhaps for later generations of North Americans it is now easier to turn and partake in deeper traditions than they find publicly around them. The fruits of our own dominant tradition have so obviously the taste of rot in their luxuriance. It may be easier for some of the young to become sane, just because the society is madder. But for myself it has taken the battering of a lifetime of madness to begin to grasp even dimly that which has been inevitably lost in being North American. Even to have touched Greekness (that is, to have known it not simply as antiquarianism) required that I should first have touched something in Europe which stayed alive there from before the age of progress through all its acceptance of that age. By touching Europe I do not mean as a fascinating museum or a place of diversion, but to have felt the remnants of a Christianity that was more than simply the legitimizing of progress and that still held in itself the fruits of contemplation. By that touching I do not mean the last picking of authentic theology left after the storms of modern thought (though that too) but things more deeply in the stuff of everyday living that remain long after they can no longer be thought: public and private virtues having their point beyond what can in any sense be called socially useful; commitments to love and to friendship that lie rooted in a realm outside the calculable; a partaking in the beautiful not seen as the product of human creativity; amusements and ecstasies not seen as the enemies of reason. This is not to say that such things did not or do not exist in North America (perhaps they cannot disappear among human beings) but their existence had been dimmed and even silenced by the fact that the public ideology of pragmatic liberalism could not sustain them in its vision. The remnants of that which lay beyond bargaining and left one without an alternative still could be touched even amidst the degeneracy of Europe's ruin. They generally existed from out of surviving Christianity or Judaism (neither necessarily explicit), which pointed to a realm in which they were sustained. I remember the surprise—the distance and the attraction—of letting near one at all seriously a vision of life so absent in day-to-day North America. I remember how such a vision inevitably jeopardized one's hold on North America: how it made one an impotent stranger in the practical realm of one's own society. But the remnants of such a Europe were only one remove from

what was one's own. It was the seedbed out of which the attenuated Christianity of our secularized Calvinism had come. To touch the vestiges of this fuller Christianity was a possible step in passing to something that was outside the limits of one's own.

Indeed until recently the very absence of a contemplative tradition spared us the full weight of that public nihilism which in Europe flowered with industrial society. The elimination of the idea of final purpose from the scientific study of the human and non-human things not only led to the progress of science and the improvement of conditions but also had consequences on the public understanding of what it was to live. But this consequence was not so immediately evident in our practical culture as it was to Europeans. We took our science pragmatically, as if its effect on us could be limited to the external. Thus it was possible for us to move deeply into the technological society, while maintaining our optimism and innocence.

In the public realm, this optimism and innocence delayed the appearance among us of many of those disorders which in Europe were concurrent with that nihilism. It is well to remember that large sections of our population resisted the call to imperialism by the economic and political powers of the eastern seaboard, even when they welcomed the technological expansion that made it inevitable. Europeans (particularly the English) would do well to remember, now that they live in the full noon of that imperialism, how hard they worked to drag North American democracy to wider imperial pursuits. Until recently there have not appeared among us those public atheisms of the left and of the right which were central to the domestic violence of Europe in this century. The propertied classes of the right have remained uneducated until recently and so kept longer within the respectable religion of their tradition than did their counterparts in Europe. Liberals have ridiculed as hypocrisy the continuing religion among the propertied and even among the bureaucratic. When such traditions have gone, those ridiculers may miss the restraints among their rules that were part of such traditions. For can there be any doubt that the bureaucratic "right" must be more powerful in advanced societies than the left? For the last hundred years our optimism has been reaffirmed by generations of new immigrants who, whatever their trials, found in the possibilities of the new land the opportunity of affluence and freedom on its practical terms. This continuous entry of new families and new

peoples busy fighting to partake in the North American dream perpetuated the vitality of the modern.

Even as the language of Europe's "agony" began to penetrate our institutions of the intellect, we were able to use that language as if it could be a servant of our optimistic practical purposes. To repeat, what would North American rhetoric be without the word "values"? But even those who use the word seriously within theoretical work seem not to remember that the word was brought into the center of Western discourse by Nietzsche and into the discourse of social science through Nietzsche's profound influence upon Weber. For Nietzsche the fundamental experience for man was apprehending what is as chaos; values were what we creatively willed in the face of that chaos by overcoming the impotence of the will that arises from that recognition of the consequences of historicism. Nietzsche's politics (and he affirmed that the heart of any philosophy can be seen in its political recommendations) stated that democracy and socialism were the last debasements brought into the world by Christianity as it becomes secularized. The universal and homogeneous state would be made up of "last men" from whom nobleness and greatness would have departed. Because of our firm practicality, North American social scientists have been able to use the language of values, fill it with the substantive morality of liberalism, and thereby avoid facing what is assumed in the most coherent unfolding of this language. The writings of Lasswell and Parsons were hymns to that innocent achievement. It has been wonderful to behold legions of social scientists wising up others about the subjectiveness of their values while they themselves earnestly preached the virtues of industrial democracy, egalitarianism, and decent progressive education; espousing, in other words, that liberalism which sees the universal and homogeneous state as the highest goal of political striving. They took their obligations to the indigenous traditions more seriously than those to the theoretical consequences of their sciences.

Such a position could not last. The languages of historicism and values that were brought to North America to be the servants of the most advanced liberalism and pluralism, now turn their corrosive power on our only indigenous roots—the substance of that practical community. Moreover, because our roots have been solely practical, this nihilism shares in that shallowness. The old individualism of capitalism, the frontier and Protestantism, becomes the



demanding right to one's idiosyncratic wants taken as outside any obligation to the community that provides them. Buoyed by the restless needs of affluence, our art becomes hectic in its experiments with style and violence. Even the surest accounts of our technomania—the sperm-filled visions of Burroughs—are themselves spoken from the shallowness they would describe. Madness itself can only be deep when it comes forth from a society which holds its opposite. Nihilism that has no tradition of contemplation to beat against cannot be the occasion for the amazed reappearance of the “What for? Whither? and What then?” The tragedy for the young is that when they are forced by its excesses to leave the practical tradition, what other depth is present to them in which they can find substance? The enormous reliance on and expectation from indigenous music is a sign of the craving for substance, and of how thin is the earth where we would find it. When the chthonic has been driven back into itself by the conquests of our environment, it can only manifest itself beautifully in sexuality, although at the same time casting too great a weight upon that isolated sexuality.

For those who stay within the central stream of our society and are therefore dominant in its institutions, the effect of nihilism is the narrowing to an unmitigated reliance on technique. Nietzsche's equivocation about the relation between the highest will to power and the will to technology has never been part of the English-speaking tradition. With us the identity was securely thought from the very beginning of our modernity. Therefore as our liberal horizons fade in the winter of nihilism, and as the dominating among us see themselves within no horizon except their own creating of the world, the pure will to technology (whether personal or public) more and more gives sole content to that creating. In the official intellectual community this process has been called “the end of ideology.” What that phrase flatteringly covers is the closing down of willing to all content except the desire to make the future by mastery, and the closing down of all thinking that transcends calculation. Within the practical liberalism of our past, techniques could be set within some context other than themselves—even if that context was shallow. We now move toward the position where technological progress becomes itself the sole context within which all that is other to it must attempt to be present.

We live then in the most realized technological society that has yet been; one that is, moreover, the chief imperial center from

which technique is spread around the world. It might seem then that because we are destined so to be, we might also be the people best able to comprehend what it is to be so. Because we are first and most fully there, the need might seem to press upon us to try and know where we are in the new found land which is so obviously *terra incognita*. Yet the very substance of our existing that has made us the leaders in technique, stands as a barrier to any thinking that might be able to comprehend technique from beyond its own dynamism. □

**GEORGE GRANT** (1918-1988), one of Canada's foremost philosophers, was the author of six books, more than 200 articles, and numerous other publications. The present selection is taken from *Technology and Empire* (1969).