

Remarks on George Grant's Platonic Aesthetics. Read to a symposium on Grant, organized by Hamilton Arts and Letters, June 2013.

I have time today only to say a few words about topic on which it is really necessary to say many. It is a topic of great importance, for it lays the groundwork for a strong critique of the way that art has been understood, written about, taught and put to work (for, to be sure, art *is* deployed for purposes that are against its nature). I cannot say very much about that topic and its ramifications here, but I can at least identify it as an issue of concern. That topic is why Platonism provides a stronger basis for an understanding of the arts than the Aristotelianism that has dominated writing and thinking about the arts since the beginning of the modernist era (and this despite the fact that Ezra Pound was perhaps the most Platonist of poets since the late-Renaissance). I will anticipate the conclusion, in order to help you form a mental roadmap of where these few brief comments will take us. I hope to suggest, first, that the Platonic approach, by refusing to understand the experience of art as one of forming judgments (that is to say, of attributing predicates to delineated, differentiated objects) also avoids the intellect's tendency to turn art into a form of discourse; and, second, that the Platonic approach understands art as cultivating a spiritual state—as a transformative experience that suggests a higher way of understanding, and not a mere form of entertainment. And, on the matter of the connection of this topic to our meeting here today, I point out that George Grant repeatedly attempted to formulate a Platonic account of the Beautiful, the True and the Good.

But I shall start with Simone Weil, who was, for Grant, a guide to the manner in which Platonic thought could join with the greatest that the Middle Eastern religious traditions have to offer, and to speak of what it is that makes for a good life. Simone Weil maintains that intimations of truth, goodness, beauty are not vouchsafed to us through the faculties of reason, understanding or will, but rather through attention—*attente*, which is to say, through detachment, emptiness, and waiting. In a short essay with the beautiful, intriguing and pointed title “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God” Weil noted,

The authentic and pure values—truth, beauty and goodness—in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object. Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act. All the other advantages of instruction are without interest . . . Prayer being only attention in its pure form and studies being a form of gymnastics of the attention, each school exercise should be a refraction of spiritual life. There must be method in it. A certain way of doing a Latin prose, a certain way of tackling a problem in geometry (and not just any way) make up a system of gymnastics of the attention calculated to give it a greater aptitude for prayer. Method for understanding images, symbols, etc. Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns.

These are courageous sayings, and I fear their courageousness may be on the point of becoming obscured by the passing of time and that soon enough even the most complacent professors will believe they, had been alive in that time, would have endorsed them—make no mistake, these statements were at odds with her time and ethos, as much as they are at odds with our own. Susan Sontag was as brilliant as she ordinarily was when she commented (in a very early review of Rush Rhees's very early anthology, *Selected Essays*), that Weil was “excruciatingly identical with her ideas.” Sontag was brilliant, but perhaps not quite right. For Weil found her very presence in reality—and even her conceiving ideas—intolerable. That is what she found excruciating. “When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart,” she writes. “We have to be nothing in order to be in our

right place in the whole.” “Perfection is impersonal . . . our personality is the part of us which belongs to error and sin.” Moral regeneration is what is to be achieved by *attente*, but it comes only through the excruciating arduous of decreation.

Weil’s ideas on *attente* are fundamentally Platonic. She does not highlight that fact (for she, like Grant, strives to renew Platonic thinking for her time, by giving it new words, and it is unhelpful to that task to keep citing the sources one draws on). But these ideas do derive from Plato’s comments, scattered across his writings, on the dialectic. In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato (if indeed, as I accept, he actually authored it), Plato expounds on the necessity of his version of the dialectic. Plato, most people know, maintained that mathematical knowledge is propaedeutic to philosophical thinking, as mathematical objects are abstract and are can be apprehended only by the intellect, not by the senses. Many have concluded from this that the Forms (*εἰδη*) are like mathematical objects, and so the knowledge that we seek as a guide to living, resembles mathematical knowledge in being certain, definite, and rational. That is quite wrong. In the *Seventh Letter* (as in *Symposium* 208a) Plato points out that the empirical circle, this instance of circular sort of thing, is negated and turns into opposite when it is compared to the mathematical object (this most writers accept) but also (what fewer realize) that the mathematical object, the thought of the circle as such, is not pure circularity itself, but only a particular (a temporary) representation of the object. It, too, must be annulled, to overcome finitude and specificity of aspect. About this particular (intellectual) representation of a circle, Erich Frank, in a 1940 article with which George Grant was acquainted, notes,

Intellection has presented to the soul what it was not seeking at all, only the thought of the object. Thus every thought is necessarily dialectical. Thus thinking is unable to preserve the transcendent existence as thought; it must annihilate the thought in order to reach the thing itself. For Plato, therefore, the true philosophical method is this form of dialectic . . . Every perception, every concept, every thought of a thing is thus again refuted and in “rubbing” (*Ep.* VII, 344 B) these phases of knowing against one another and against the true being of the idea itself, their finitude and untruth become manifest.

Thought knows an idea of the circle that has been brought within thought itself—the transcendent form itself escapes thought. Thus thought must annihilate itself in order to approach the transcendent form—this occurs, Plato tells us (*Phaedrus* 265d), through, first, through *synagoge* (collection) and then through *diairesis* (separation), which seems to be a negative moment, in which are recognized the differences between the various *εἰδη* (*eide*, aspects) that participate (the relation Plato terms *mathexis*) in an *εἶδος* and the *εἶδος* itself. To attain that which is utterly transcendent—that which is beyond being (cf. *Republic*, 508–509)—thought must annihilate itself. Here are the origins of the ideas of decreation, which Weil, and after her, Grant, both embraced.

What is attained by this dialectic of conjectures and refutations, and finally of negations and annihilations? Every representation must be overcome on the way to wisdom. This implies that wisdom, the ultimate knowledge, has no determinate object. Wisdom, accordingly, is not any form of theoretical knowledge which always involves some form of representation. Rather, the truth that is ultimately attained is that of the *Ἀγαθόν* (agathon, the Good), the source of every other truth and of being (*Republic* 508e–509b). If the truth of the Good is not known through thought and representation, how is it apprehended? Plato says, by identification. A general principle of Platonic epistemology (and, in fact, Greek epistemology in general), that only like can know like. So the vision of the Good is granted only to those who have become like the good—and since the Good is beyond being, the knower must empty himself or herself out and become boniform. Knowledge of the Good is realized in the very existence of the philosopher: in our

search for truth our being itself, along with every image (every illusion) of truth, is extinguished in an effulgent identification with the Good. The dialectic prepares us for this, for through negating successively each determinate object in turn in the ascent towards a higher truth, we learn that all thought, all representation, all understanding of determinate forms—anything immanent within thinking itself—must be extinguished, to proceed towards higher understanding. Compare this with Weil: “To detach our desire from all good things and to wait.... It is then we touch the absolute good,” And “once we have understood we are nothing, the object of all our efforts is to become nothing ... it is for this that we act, it is for this that we pray.” According to Plato, the philosopher is one in whose soul a fire has been kindled, a flare of light akin to the sun (Plato’s metaphor for the good) (*Ep.* VII, 341bff.). Weil, we have seen, notes of *attente*: “Method for understanding [art]. . . Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns.” Neither in Plato nor in Weil is existence, nor its epistemological correlate, knowledge, the ἀρχή of philosophy. Just as Xenō’s paradoxes exposed the erroneousness of sense perception’s claims to deliver truth, so Socrates’s/Plato’s dialectic exposed the errors of the claims for intellect as the source of wisdom: it delivers only representations (determinant forms) of what is transcendent, but not the transcendent itself: it would be logical folly to believe that we can make the transcendent immanent within thinking. The Ἄγαθόν is that through which all that is becomes one. It binds multiplicity into unity. All that is would fall apart—indeed fall into the abyss of non-being, but for binding together of all in Ἄγαθόν. But Ἄγαθόν cannot be reduced to propositions or analyzed—it can be known only through the Love that orders beings and draws forth our love.

Contrast this with Aristotle. For Aristotle the general idea is to the particular as the formal cause is to the particular. This, as many of you will know (for the topic has recently received considerable attention) is the view of the relation of medium to artwork in Marshall McLuhan’s thought—the ἰδέα is like a seed of life, a dynamic element serving a productive φύσις to bring forth beings. This is also the view that the formalists adopted concerning the coming-to-pass of a work or art—they speak of causes, but to talk of causes is to bring the principle of order within the same realm as that which it orders. Aristotle’s purpose was to deny its transcendence—and that cause was adopted by his formalist followers. The logic of the Aristotelian dialectic is one of categorization, of nominal definition, of nouns and the subsumption of the particular under the universal. Aristotle’s is the logic of empirical science, of processes that define one object or quality in isolation, while knowledge becomes a purely theoretical edifice, unconnected to the self of the artist or the viewer/listener/reader—it is not understood as necessary to developing a good soul. That philosophy might lead to ontological understanding beyond that of science is revealed to be a sham; philosophy is a guide to correct reasoning, and has as its mission to expose categorical confusions, logical errors and linguistic hubris. From this, too, comes the Latin West’s proclivity to discuss theological (and aesthetic) issues in terms of being and essence.

Now consider Grant’s aesthetics. It has to do with the Whole, which brings all that is together. It is apprehended not through intellect, but by love, which opens us towards illumination by the Good. That is to say, it is known not by analysis, by understanding the relations between substance and qualities, or categories and the relation of subsumption. It is not known through thought. Furthermore, love requires distance, or Otherness. as Grant keeps reminding us—otherwise, what is known in love would be “scrutable.” In this, it helps us along the way towards living well. In his great essay, “Faith and the Multiversity,” Grant writes of beauty

The greater the work of art the less can its purpose be represented at all. The staggered silence with which we can watch *King Lear* is evidence that something of great import is before us. . . . When we are enraptured we can say that it seems purposiveness itself. But can we ever represent that purpose to ourselves? . . . In a certain sense the purposiveness in nothing but the gathering together of the

means employed by the author; in another sense [to me a more important sense] it is present but we cannot represent it. The beautiful at its heights gives us purposiveness but its good transcends us (oh dangerous word). . . This is inevitably the question: are there some works that are more worth paying attention to than others? What is given in those that are most worthy of attention. What is it that enraptures us about them, so that even *King Lear* or K. 491 [Mozart's Piano Concerto no 24] we are enraptured? Can we describe that enrapturing as the immediate engrossment [involving awe and love] in the beauty of the work, which point to good, which is quite unrepresentable.

The Good and Love are the same, Grant reminds us. This seems to me an so much closer to a true account of the experience of a real art work than any other I know.