

## The First Task of Thought in Our Time<sup>1</sup>

William F. Pinar

The first task of thought in our era is to think what technology is.<sup>2</sup>  
George Grant

One of Canada's greatest public intellectuals<sup>3</sup>, George Grant was born on 13 November 1918, two days after the armistice. His father William, a historian who had lectured at Oxford University and written a "controversial history"<sup>4</sup> of Canada for use in Ontario high schools (1914), had volunteered for active service and had been seriously injured in France. "'My father,'" George Grant would write, "was a Nova Scotian, who had grown up in Kingston, Ontario, and was essentially a very gentle, strong scholar, who I think, above all, was ruined by the First World War. He was ruined physically; he was terribly wounded. For these people, who had grown up in the great era of progress, to meet the holocaust of the trenches was terrible."<sup>5</sup> William Grant grew embittered over the pointless slaughter of the First World War, the first war structured by technology.<sup>6</sup>

Like his father, George Grant studied history. He won the history medal at Queen's University, where, William Christian<sup>7</sup> tells us, "he was drawn to grand themes, rather than to the minutiae of historical research." That same disposition surfaced later at Oxford, where he'd gone on a Rhodes scholarship to study law. While at first he welcomed the intellectual discipline this new subject demanded, soon enough Grant judged law "tiresome" due to its focus on "detail" and "its indifference to broader questions."<sup>8</sup>

After service as an Air Raid Precautions warden during the German bombing of London, Grant returned to Canada in February 1942 suffering from a nervous breakdown and tuberculosis. Much of the next year he spent in recovery. In 1943 he published a pamphlet, *Canada – An Introduction to a Nation*, and in 1945 *The Empire, Yes or No?* Returning to Oxford after the war he left law to study theology, earning extra money by writing historical articles on Canada for Chambers' *Encyclopedia*. "Before I became a philosopher," he reflected years later, "I studied history and still think very much as an historian."<sup>9</sup> The history to which Grant was increasingly drawn, Christian<sup>10</sup> clarifies, "reflected his early predispositions to the philosophy of history." That subject became personified in his doctoral dissertation, a study of the Scottish Presbyterian theologian John Oman.

While attending meetings of C. S. Lewis's Socratic Club, Grant met Sheila Allen, an English student and fellow pacifist, whom he married in the spring of 1947. The two returned to Canada where Grant had accepted a position teaching philosophy at Dalhousie University in Halifax. He spent the next thirteen years there, during which time the Grants had six children. Grant found Dalhousie a "congenial place," Potter<sup>11</sup> reports, but he felt he was in Halifax on the periphery of North American life. In 1961 he accepted a professorship in the department of religion at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, near Toronto.

During the 1950s Grant was studying philosophy and history, first Nietzsche, then Sartre, then Heidegger. He had also undertaken the study of Freud and Weber. By 1962, Christian<sup>12</sup> reports, when Grant delivered a CBC radio lecture on the C. G. Jung, he had begun to focus on Nietzsche. Grant's central insight between the time he wrote *Philosophy in the Mass Age* in 1959 and

*Time as History* a decade later, was that the contemporary conception of history was very different from the ancient one, wherein time had been regarded as the “moving image of eternity.”<sup>13</sup> Now history had become a totalizing process within which all events are subsumed.<sup>14</sup> The world, in David D. Roberts’ fine phrase, is “nothing but history.”<sup>15</sup> Even historicists like Marx and Hegel had imagined some end toward which history was moving, and in so doing had conferred a broader significance upon individual events. But now the utter contingency of history had stripped particularity of any general (as in mythic or religious) importance, as history had become “nothing but this freakish concatenation of lies, errors, and self-serving actions.”<sup>16</sup> Roberts’ descriptors could have well been Grant’s, as he inveighed against the economic and political integration of the North American continent, threatening, indeed ending (he felt sure), Canada’s political autonomy.<sup>17</sup>

In its political contingency, that event<sup>18</sup> involved the United States, but more generally, Grant argued, Canada’s capitulation was another “realization of the technological dream,” e.g. “universalization and homogenization.”<sup>19</sup> Associated with modernity itself, and with the United States specifically as modernity’s most “expressive manifestation,”<sup>20</sup> technology had become not just one optional *mode d’être*, but the only way of life on earth. Technology had become, in Emberley’s<sup>21</sup> succinct summary of Grant’s understanding of the term<sup>22</sup>, “a philosophy of reason as domination over nature, a politics of imperial, bureaucratic administration, a public discourse of efficiency, and a sociology of adjustment and equilibrium.” Canada’s “collapse,” Grant<sup>23</sup> asserted, “stems from the very character of the modern era.” That era, the so-called age of “progress,” contiguous with the rise of capitalism, science, and the “conquest of nature,”

contrasted sharply with ancient Greece, Grant<sup>24</sup> emphasized. That genesis of the North American present became the contrast to which Grant juxtaposed the present. As science achieved hegemony, Grant<sup>25</sup> felt sure, “there is no place for local cultures.”

How did this happen? How did the local become subsumed in the global, and how has the global become technological? In the West, Grant answered, there had been a “close relation” between technology and political liberalism, by which he meant the “belief that man’s essence is his freedom.”<sup>26</sup> That belief in a “truly liberal society,” Grant<sup>27</sup> reminded, has been linked historically to the progress of science. In something like a sleight of hand, political liberalism installed legal and social homogeneity<sup>28</sup> in order to guarantee individual diversity, something primarily private and psychological, and expressed through the consumption of goods. As Grant<sup>29</sup> puts the matter: “the purpose of action becomes the building of the universal and homogenous state – the society in which all men are free and equal and increasingly able to realize their concrete individuality.” Significantly, and this is the crucial difference Grant draws between the ancient (e.g. Greek) world and the contemporary secular world, is that the realization of individuality is not spiritual or moral or even intellectual, but psychologistic, and it is fused with technological development. “As we push towards the goal we envisage,” Grant<sup>30</sup> cautioned, “our need of technology for its realization becomes ever more pressing.” In U.S. school reform, this has translated into the deafening demand for “what works” in classrooms, a restated behaviorism quantified in students’ standardized test scores. Just as learning disappears into numbers on tests, moral striving becomes recast as increases in productivity that are dependent upon technological advancement.<sup>31</sup> No longer

conceived as laboratories for democracy, in the U.S. schools are dismissed as antiquated “bricks-and-mortar” institutions, now to be privatized, then virtualized, as increasingly the curriculum is moved online.<sup>32</sup>

Problem-solving is no longer construed as a moral imperative – as the intellectual labor of judgment informed by knowledge and wisdom - but, rather, applying relevant information, devising a technological fix. No longer public, morality becomes a matter of privately held “values,” for Grant equivalent to commodities, statements of personal preference, often ornamental, sometimes self-servingly instrumental. Whatever their function, “values” were to be confined to the private sphere<sup>33</sup> where one was, presumably, free to do what one wanted. The public sphere<sup>34</sup> was no longer the civic square but, rather, the marketplace, the site where one purchased whatever one valued.

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.<sup>35</sup>

From Grant’s perspective, it seems to me, the insistence on “gay rights” – especially the right to public affirmations of private commitments, as in gay marriage – risks the relegation of homosexual desire to the status of yet another option for consumption. In so doing, it normalizes it. Difference becomes another instance of the same.

The division between private and public was blurred by technology, then dismissed in theoretical terms as a “binary.” There remains among some, however, an ongoing lament for the loss of privacy, under stress for centuries given the emphasis upon confession in Christianity, a compulsion for self-

disclosure secularized in psychoanalysis and popularized in less time-consuming psychotherapies and self-help groups. The confessions that had before been private – confined to priests or trustworthy friends - are now exhibited openly online, risking not only reputations (also an increasingly archaic concept) but the fluidity of subjectivity as well, as now the inner life has a point only inasmuch it can be posted in public. The technological opportunity for exhibitionism and surveillance coupled with an uneasiness over privacy<sup>36</sup> threatens the disappearance of private life. While it may not be the cause, technology could be a consequence of what Heidegger called *das Man*, the public man in conformity with his or her fellows.<sup>37</sup> That dispersion of an individuated subjectivity – leaving what Lasch<sup>38</sup> termed a minimal self – reassembles as *das Man*, even when we are women and have secrets. As Kleinberg notes, in a different but related context: “In the interest of uniformity and complete systematic understanding, publicness invents responses that make all cases conform to one rule, one logic, and thus removes all differentiation.”<sup>39</sup> This obliteration of internal differentiation and external distinctiveness accompanies globalization, itself materialized through technological innovation.

As technology ensures social conformity, it dissolves individuality. Avatars substitute for selves. Without internal subjective complexity, external multiplicity fades as material fact and moral challenge. Presumably the site of freedom, the Internet presents new opportunities for imperialism. It is under the “banner of freedom and a liberating modernization,” Grant<sup>40</sup> points out, that this new-style “imperialism” is justified to the public.<sup>41</sup> This “expansionist practicality”<sup>42</sup> has become a common faith, and not only in America, so that to “think outside this faith is to make oneself a stranger to the public realm.”<sup>43</sup> The

technological era is a time, Grant charges, during which “nobility and wisdom have been exchanged for a pale belief in progress.”<sup>44</sup>

“Pale”<sup>45</sup> here is probably not a play on racialization, although to non-European listeners, especially to the descendents of the victims of imperialism it might seem so, if inadvertently. Rather, the word conveys the stripped-down, naked (as in “vulgar” and “brutal”: Grant’s words) “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.”<sup>46</sup> These prerequisites and processes of education, of curriculum as complicated conversation more specifically, depend upon the cultivation of non-coincidence, one subspecies of which is disidentification. In a period of narcissism, boundaries blur, and not only between self and other, but among social and political phenomena. Technology restructures political liberalism so that it conflates instrumentalism with action, exhibitionism with communication, image with reality.<sup>47</sup> How can I use technology as the subject of a sentence? To do so acknowledges, in Nusselder’s (2009, 23) phrasing, “technology as *volition*.”<sup>48</sup> In Grant’s terms, technology materializes the human will to power, precipitating the “violence of an undirected willing of novelty.”<sup>49</sup> As Grant appreciated:

When men are committed to technology, they are also committed to continual change in institutions and customs. Freedom must be the first political principle – the freedom to change any order that stands in the way of technological advance. Such a society cannot take seriously the conception of an eternal order that stands in the way of technological advance.<sup>50</sup>

When transcendence is recast as the production of novelty – new products, new ideas, always the “new” – the future is foreclosed and what matters is now.

### Our Civilizational Destiny

Surely the deepest alienation must be when the civilization one inhabits no longer claims one’s loyalty.  
George Grant<sup>51</sup>

Not in the remembrance of things past or as risks taken in the name of the future, social action is replaced by proceduralism, in our field conveyed simplistically in the Tyler Rationale, wherein the implementation of objectives is constantly evaluated, creating a self-referential set of culs-de-sac reiterating what is already. Because proceduralism leads nowhere but where one began, the objectives-evaluation axis tends toward intensification, creating, in Raymond Callahan’s famous phrase, a cult of efficiency. A technological society, Potter (2005, xliii) summarizes, is one that pursues the systematic application of reason to the invention of tools and methods for enhancing freedom by making all activity more efficient.<sup>52</sup> “Freedom’s great achievement was that it allowed modern technology to appear,” Grant acknowledged, and “technology’s great achievement was that it allowed freedom to flourish.”<sup>53</sup> In the private sphere, freedom is recast as choice of consumer goods; in the public sphere it converts to control, the demand that freedom flourish so that whatever is profitable occurs. In new products and increased productivity technology and capitalism conflate. At the same time, in its tendency toward intensification, technology also undermines freedom and efficiency, submerging us in minutiae, tying us to the present moment, an interminable present in which we become preoccupied with

the next sensation, a next “hit” of communication or information<sup>54</sup>, focused on the expectation that in the next moment “something” will happen, something will stimulate.

Technology is, then, no set of tools supplementary to our way of life. For Grant, Potter explains, “technology is a way of apprehending the world, it is a mode of existence that transforms the way we know, think, and will.”<sup>55</sup> Nature becomes, in Heidegger’s famous phrase, a “standing reserve” (or *Bestand*), a source of energy or resources for future use. As Krauss points out, “*Bestand* implies orderability and substitutability; objects will necessarily lose their autonomy.”<sup>56</sup> The system or way of thinking that enframes the world as “standing reserve” Heidegger calls *Gestell*; this is, Grant was sure, our “civilizational destiny.”<sup>57</sup> It is not only Nature that is wasted in this technology of thinking, it is human nature<sup>58</sup> itself. “Powerful and value-laden,” Potter states, summarizing Grant’s view, technology

will come to dominate our consciousness and constrain our very sense of “freedom” and our sense of the possibilities for thought and for action. It enslaves us even while it appears to liberate, giving us a fragmented and atomized society that is heavily dependent on the impersonal and alienating institutions of mass society.<sup>59</sup>

No one who has lived through the financial events of 2008 or the European crisis of 2011-12 can doubt our dependency on “impersonal” and “alienating institutions of mass society.” Significantly, one recent response to these was an improvisational, anti-institutional “Occupation of Wall Street,” a reference one supposes less to previous occupations (of the Rhineland after World War I, for

instance) than to the “impersonal” (as in “having no personal reference or connection”<sup>60</sup>) character of the financial system.<sup>61</sup>

Minus a subjectively coherent civic subject – the consumer is dispersed along fused planes of need, mood, commodity – resistance becomes quixotic. Given our subsumption in the “technological sensorium”<sup>62</sup>, resistance (with its implication of a force separate from “us” that can in fact be “resisted”) dissipates as a concept and social practice. Instead we have another reality TV show, this one (Occupy Wall Street) with poor lighting and inadequate accommodation.

Quoting Marshall McLuhan, Arthur Kroker points out:

If, indeed, we are now “looking out” from inside the technological sensorium; and if, in fact, in the merger of biology and technology which is the locus of the electronic age, “we” have become the vanishing points of technique, then a way had to be discovered for breaching the “invisible environment” within which we are now enclosed.<sup>63</sup>

Kroker’s choice of “breaching” seems especially apt, as it specifies not “push back,” as “resistance” implies, but non-coincidence<sup>64</sup> however internalized that “environment” has become within subjectivity.

As would Ted Aoki<sup>65</sup> decades later, George Grant, Emberley points out, did not overlook the “moral promise and concrete achievements of modern technology.”<sup>66</sup> Many of these are familiar – increased food production, advances in medicine, convenience of communication – if with consequences, including poisoning by pesticides, preservatives and genetic modification, pills and practices that kill as they cure, and connectivity condensed to the constancy of information transmission as we stare at screens, not at each other or the world from which, evidently, we are now disembedded.<sup>67</sup> “Canadians in particular,”

Grant wrote, “felt the blessing of technology in an environment so hard that to master it needed courage. But conservatism must languish as technology increases.”<sup>68</sup> Recall that by “conservatism” Grant meant (2005 [1965], 71) not the “defense of property rights and chauvinism,” but the “right of the community to restrain freedom in the name of the common good.”<sup>69</sup> Those phrases meant something rather different to the Nazis, who, during the 1920s, enlisted technology to dazzle unemployed German youth.<sup>70</sup>

Technological achievements imply, Emberley notes, the “extension of individual freedom.”<sup>71</sup> In its everyday practical sense, Grant thought of his wife’s housekeeping chores, in Christian’s description, her “relationship” with the “wonderful American machines that relieved her of drudgery, and therefore let her live a freer life than was possible even a hundred years before.”<sup>72</sup> While machines have been employed for millennia<sup>73</sup>, what was different now – and this was evidently reflected in Grant’s thinking (at least in the 1970s) – was that “never before had human beings defined and understood themselves primarily as free. George [Grant] recognized this as an authentic phenomenon and agreed that such freedom was a genuine good for human beings.”<sup>74</sup> But not only, as Grant was clear that freedom represented danger as well as opportunity.

Indeed, Grant was quite clear – since his father’s World War I injury, since the 1940 London bombing raids he had endured on site – that the freedom technology affords is also the opportunity to do what is morally wrong. Of course machines make for “convenience” and yes they free people to do other things. But do they render us *more* free? Does not “freedom” depend upon subjective non-coincidence with what is and the self-conscious cultivation of the

capacity to critique, to reflect, to act independently of what is? Convenience comes with consequences, Grant knew.

Open access – made possible by those information technologies devised and disseminated after Grant’s death – would seem to represent an instance of “non-coincidence” and an increased capacity for critique and insight. The case for open access is made nowhere more succinctly and sagely than by John Willinsky who importantly links the development with its antecedents:

The public library has long been a beacon of self-directed and deeply motivated learning on the part of common readers. It is not only a vital cornerstone of democracy, but a public site of quiet solace, intellectual inquiry, and literary pleasures. To increase public access to online research and scholarship would add a great deal to what has emerged over the last decade on the Internet as a wired and virtual public library, providing people with an opportunity to explore a new world of ideas that they may have only suspected existed.<sup>75</sup>

Opportunity yes, but one, it bears repeating, that depends upon the curiosity and capacity of the person, assuming online access is available to him or her.

Let us consider another apparently progressive – again referencing Grant’s association of technology with the extension of freedom – consequence of online access. The so-called Arab Spring of 2011 was enabled, many thought, by the information technologies and social media. Research by Navid Hassanpour questions that assumption. “Full connectivity in a social network sometimes can hinder collective action,” Hassanpour concluded.<sup>76</sup> While Twitter posting, texting and Facebook wall-posting may have disseminated calls to protest and facilitated the actual organization of protest events, it also communicated caution, delay,

and confusion as in “I don’t have time for all this politics, did you see what Lady Gaga is wearing?”<sup>77</sup> Specifically, after President Hosni Mubarak shut down the Internet and cellphone service on January 28, 2011, Hassanpour found that protests *increased*, not only in Cairo but throughout Egypt. The number of actual protestors participating had not increased, but the number of protest events had. Hassanpour terms this phenomenon a “localization process.” He explains:

The disruption of cellphone coverage and the Internet on the 28<sup>th</sup> exacerbated the unrest in at least three major ways. It implicated many apolitical citizens unaware of or uninterested in the unrest; it forced more face-to-face communication, i.e., more physical presence in the streets; and finally it effectively decentralized the rebellion on the 28<sup>th</sup> through new hybrid communication tactics, producing a quagmire much harder to control and repress than one massive gathering in Tahrir.<sup>78</sup>

I am reminded of Harold Innis’ insistence on orality as central to democratic dialogue. While such orality can occur online, it is made more difficult without physical presence and non-verbal communication. (Never mind the privatization the Internet can command.) Hassanpour is thinking of the “normalization” effect of being “connected.” In an interview he suggested that “we become more normal when we actually know what is going on - we are more unpredictable when don’t – on a mass scale and that has interesting implications.”<sup>79</sup>

Canadians’ commitment to technology was not initially, Grant suggests, an expression of the will to power, the insistence on clearing any obstacles to economic development. Instead, as Atwood also argued, Canadians’ commitment was associated with survival in a harsh land. But what permitted physical survival, Grant warned, threatened cultural survival. In particular, the

conservation of tradition is threatened by technology's limitless expansiveness. Grant points to the particularities of one's homeland to which citizens have loyalty and in which they take pride. Such particularities come to cultural distinctively form through time, but history – traditional education is predicated on the preservation of culture – becomes dissolved by the presentism technology installs and codified in the “new social sciences.”<sup>80</sup> “When men are committed to technology,” Grant appreciated, “they are also committed to continual change in institutions and customs. Freedom must be the first political principle – the freedom to change any order that stands in the way of technological advance.”<sup>81</sup> Freedom, then, is the opportunity to do whatever is possible.

School reform in the U.S. – always forefronting technology in the classroom, not always a form of pedagogy but outright profiteering<sup>82</sup> – has been rationalized in recent years as reparation. It was the especially the poor U.S. schools that were alleged to be failing, and it was, presumably, in the service of leaving no child behind that George W. Bush installed accountability schemes that deformed educational institutions into businesses. Recalling our long-standing faith<sup>83</sup> in technological development to address hunger, ease labor, and build wealth, Grant admonishes: “One must never think about technological destiny without looking squarely at the justice in those hopes.”<sup>84</sup> Now that faith in technology as the driver of justice is no longer so simple or strong, as we are faced – Grant was writing in the mid-1980s here - with technologically produced crises of overpopulation and life-threatening pollution. Documenting “the determining power of our technological representation of reality,” Grant notes, “the political response to these interlocking emergencies has been a call for an even greater mobilization of technology. More technology is needed to meet the

emergencies which technology has produced.”<sup>85</sup> This paradox was evident to the influential right-wing German intellectual Ernst Jünger, who, in 1931, observed: “The history of inventions also raises ever more clearly the question of whether a space of absolute comfort or a space of absolute danger is the final aim concealed in technology.”<sup>86</sup> Does technology portend the extension of life or the extinguishing of the species?

“Much of the new technology upon which we are going to depend to meet these crises,” Grant predicted, “is technology turned towards human beings.” Self-mastery must accompany mastery of nature. Self-mastery implies the “mastery of other people,” requiring, he suspected, “the proliferation of new arts and sciences directed towards human control, so that we can be shaped to live consonantly with the demands of mass society.”<sup>87</sup> The neurosciences might qualify as an academic instance of Grant’s prediction. The information technologies provide another, as they create the illusion of “connectivity” while increasing isolation<sup>88</sup> and constrain one to the social networks to which, within which, one is “connected.” The constancy of being connected reorganizes time around disclosure – of one’s whereabouts, what one’s feeling, “news” now as minutiae – and the presentism of a narcissistic age is sounded by cell phones demanding to be answered. Never mind the effects of being constantly connected to employers.

Grant’s example is not cellphones – he died before they metastasized - but the medical profession, whose “proliferating power,” he asserted, functions to tighten “social control.”<sup>89</sup> Sounding like Foucault, he points to the profession’s alignment with law enforcement and government in addressing the problems of the “psyche,” increasingly, he notes, focused on physiology as well as behavior.

The aggressive prescription of pharmaceuticals for complaints mild and severe prove the prescience of the philosophy professor from Halifax. Technology, he pronounced, “is the pervasive mode of being in our political and social lives.”<sup>90</sup>

Now humanity stares at screens. The sleight-of-hand achieved in Grant’s analysis is that he – we – could somehow stand outside technology. Rather, we abstract the term technology from the totality as an analytic device, to enable us to speak about a totality from which we cannot actually separate but with which we can choose not to coincide completely. Grant’s strategy seems to be one of mobility, as he moves from one to another instance of technology’s pervasiveness, as if he were skipping like a stone on the surface of the pond, knowing he would sink should he stop. Movement is propelled by thinking, including out loud, “witnessing” one might say in the Christian tradition. “If protest cannot go further than witnessing,” Paras suggests in a different but related context, “it is because the twentieth century has revealed the dangers of theorizing solutions.”<sup>91</sup>

Indeed, the instrumentalism of technology is not confined to “external objects” – like the computer, which, anticipating C. A. Bowers<sup>92</sup>, Grant will mention – but structures “systems of organization and communication as bureaucracies and factories.”<sup>93</sup> Efficiency and rationalization accomplish homogeneity as time accelerates, flattening its own structures – past, present, future - into an apparently eternal now, yet always almost new, “marking, among other things, the priority of the values of disruption and interference over those historically establishing continuity.”<sup>94</sup> “[H]ow far,” Grant asks,

will the race be able to carry the divided state which characterizes individuals in modernity: the plush patina of hectic subjectivity lived out

in the iron maiden of an objectified world inhabited by increasingly objectifiable beings.... Is there some force in man which will rage against such division: rage not only against a subjectivity which creates itself, but also against our own lives being so much at the disposal of the powerful objectifications of other freedoms?<sup>95</sup>

This is the question Alice Miller posed in the context of child abuse.<sup>96</sup> How can the abused survive when both love and violence have been fused?

### Conclusion

What is worth doing in the midst of this barren twilight is the incredibly difficult question.  
George Grant<sup>97</sup>

While no technophobe<sup>98</sup>, George Grant understood that technological progress transforms the human spirit as it severs the “new social controls” from “traditional moralities and politics.”<sup>99</sup> Because it is simultaneously universalizing and homogenizing, technology’s intensification of immediacy and efficiency erases heterogeneity, cultural, political, subjective.<sup>100</sup> Whatever “difference” remains becomes commodified, incorporated into a system of exchange recalculating its value as eccentricity or pathology or sentimentality. Whatever the economic benefits (and, as 2008 shows, they are hardly uniform or predictable), technology, Grant argued, is a universal tyranny, destined to eradicate the historic aspirations of the Western world and particularly its North American experiments. “The unfolding of modern society,” Grant wrote, “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 change which leads us back to

judge every human situation as being solvable in terms of technology.”<sup>101</sup> And, Grant added: “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.”<sup>102</sup> In this afternoon’s talk, we’ll revisit an earlier instance of the cultural politics of the technological imperative, one that Grant himself does not reference but which, I will attempt to show, points to his prescience.

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared for presentation on July 13 at the UBC/SFU Institute “Recurring Questions of Technology: A Brief History of Consciousness and Learning.”

<sup>2</sup> Grant (1998 [1974], 1).

<sup>3</sup> “A political philosopher who spent his most productive years teaching in a department of religion,” Andrew Potter (2005, ix) summarizes, “George Grant is probably best known today as the father of English-speaking Canadian nationalism.” For Robin Lathangue (1998, vii) a “public intellectual,” for the distinguished American sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset (1990, 36) Grant was “Canada’s most distinguished conservative intellectual.” It is the adjective “conservative” that requires clarification, as the term connotes for Grant a different set of political preoccupations than it does in the U.S. “The truth of conservatism,” Grant (1966 [1959], 108) wrote, “is the truth of order and limit, both in social and personal life. But obviously conservatism by itself will not do. For it can say nothing about the overcoming of evil, and at its worst implies that certain evils are a continuing necessity.” Even at this stage – the late 1950s – Grant (1966 [1959], 109) appreciated the concept’s appropriation: “Yet to express conservatism in Canada means *de facto* to justify the continuing rule of the businessman and the right of the greedy to turn all activities into sources of personal gain.”

<sup>4</sup> Trained in history at Queen’s University, William Grant lectured in colonial history at Oxford from 1906 until 1910; he then returned to teach history at Queen’s. Among his publications were a biography of his father (1905), a controversial history of Canada for use in Ontario high schools (1914) and *The*

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*Tribune of Nova Scotia: A Chronicle of Joseph Howe* (1915; see Christian 2001 [1995], viii).

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Christian (2001 [1995], viii-ix).

<sup>6</sup> Harold Innis' biographer Alexander John Watson (2007, 426) positions Grant in a generational cohort of "profound figures ... whose gestation period was between the end of the First and Second World Wars." In addition to Innis and Grant, Watson adds Innis' political economist colleague C. B. Macpherson, classics scholar A. E. Havelock, the great literary critic and public intellectual Northrop Frye, and Marshall McLuhan.

<sup>7</sup> Christian (2001 [1995], ix).

<sup>8</sup> Christian (2001 [1995], ix).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Christian (2001 [1995], x).

<sup>10</sup> Christian (2001 [1995], x).

<sup>11</sup> Potter (2005, xxx).

<sup>12</sup> Christian (2001 [1995], xiii).

<sup>13</sup> Christian (2001 [1995], xiv).

<sup>14</sup> "Our interest in history as a study is directly related to our belief that we are historical beings," Grant (2001 [1969], 10) argued: "Indeed, in modern thought the idea of history is everywhere.... Even reason, which was traditionally conceived as transcending all development, has been given its history."

<sup>15</sup> Roberts (1995, 60).

<sup>16</sup> Roberts (1995, 60). While not a key category for Grant, allegory could be said to structure Grant's *oeuvre*, as he grapples with questions of meaning, contingency, and history. "The enchantment of our souls by myth, philosophy or revelation," he observed, "has been replaced by a more immediate meaning – the building of a society of free and equal men by the overcoming of chance" (1969, 138). Any overarching – for Grant it is eternity – meaning of our lives disappears in modernity's conflation of "freedom" with "will" (Grant 1969, 142). While Emberley (2005 [1994], lxxvii) employs "meditation" to describe Grant's *Lament for a Nation*, it is clear the term resonates with the doubleness of allegory:

A meditation raises the reader from what is familiar and near, to a level in which the recollection of experiences and understandings reveals what is most enduring in our human existence. It demands that we reflect on the tension between our particular historical existence and the greater whole of which we are a part. A meditation closes by returning its participants to the familiar and near, having disclosed how they are necessarily invested with what is highest and most enduring.

This is precisely what is lost to a world wherein there is "nothing but history." It is this world allegory inscribes (see Pinar 2012, 50).

<sup>17</sup> See Grant (2005 [1965], 4).

<sup>18</sup> It had been the fall of the Progressive Conservative government in 1963 and its replacement by the Liberal party and the new Prime Minister Lester Pearson's willingness to accept nuclear warheads and generally accommodate the Americans that provided the political provocation for George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*. It was the "shabby" treatment of John G. Diefenbaker – of whom Grant

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was critical – by the “Canadian elite” that fueled, Potter (2005, xvi) suggests, Grant’s “seething, focused anger.” See also Grant (2005 [1970], lxxi).

<sup>19</sup> Grant (2005 [1970], lxxii).

<sup>20</sup> Emberley (2005 [1994], lxxx).

<sup>21</sup> Emberley (2005 [1994], lxxx).

<sup>22</sup> Detlev J. K. Peukert (1992, 81-82) provides a more detailed definition; for him “modernity” refers “to the form of fully fledged industrialized society that has been with us from the turn of the century until the present day. In an economic sense, modernity is characterized by highly rationalized industrial production, complex technological infrastructures and a substantial degree of bureaucratized administrative and service activity; food production is carried out by an increasingly small but productive, agricultural sector. Socially speaking, its typical features include the division of labor, wage and salary discipline, an urbanized environment, extensive educational opportunities and a demand for skills and training. As far as culture is concerned, media products dominate; continuity with traditional aesthetic principles and practices in architecture and the visual and other creative arts is broken, and is replaced by unrestricted formal experimentation. In intellectual terms, modernity marks the triumph of western rationality, whether in social planning, the expansion of the sciences or the self-replicating dynamism of technology, although this optimism is accompanied by skeptical doubts from social thinkers and cultural critics.”

<sup>23</sup> Grant (2005 [1965], 52).

<sup>24</sup> Grant (2005 [1965], 52 n. 15).

<sup>25</sup> Grant (2005 [1965], 53).

<sup>26</sup> Grant (1966, iv).

<sup>27</sup> Grant (1998 [1974], 2).

<sup>28</sup> Potter (2005, xxiv) points out that Grant’s divination of technology as a universal homogenizing force is reflected in the mainstream social sciences from the 1950s to the 1970s.

<sup>29</sup> Grant (1969, 33).

<sup>30</sup> Grant (1969, 33).

<sup>31</sup> See Grant (1969, 34).

<sup>32</sup> As the school as educational institution is dismantled in the United States, professional educators are no longer required, as the curriculum is moved online and assignments are monitored by underpaid checkers. In this regard, “school reform” is a subspecies of ongoing profit-driven corporate restructuring, downgrading professionals into interchangeable parts, easily replaced and paid accordingly. One hundred years ago the top executive of a business firm typically earned no more than 20 times the average wage of its workers. In the United States today that multiple has risen to 200, Cohen (2009, 30, 33, 34) reminds. The same greed drives the privatization of public schools in the United States today, as public funds are diverted school children and their teachers into the pockets of profiteers (see Saul 2011).

<sup>33</sup> The private sphere of freedom is also where thought is relegated. “In capitalist democracy,” Grant (1986, 10) notes, “differences about practice are seen as

important, while theoretical differences are seen as people's private business. It is of the very nature of 'technology' that this should be the case."

<sup>34</sup> Many (among them Habermas) attribute a normative dimension to the public sphere as it housed the liberal idea of public discussion of different viewpoints. With Herf (1984, 24 n. 17), "I am using the term in a strictly descriptive sense to refer to a forum in which politics is discussed without all points of view necessarily being represented." In a public-sphere-as-market, politics becomes "retail" and public dialogue devolves into advertising (as McLuhan, in 1974, pointed out: see Cavell 2002, 186), often of the "false" kind. The point is private accumulation, not sacrifice for the common good, these last two concepts that are incomprehensible in the public sphere as market.

<sup>35</sup> Grant (1969, 26).

<sup>36</sup> Two (sometimes overstated) threats to contemporary society – terrorists and child predators – have rendered retreat from the public sphere suspect.

<sup>37</sup> For Heidegger, Kleinberg (2005, 15) points out, *das Man* is an "essential structure" of *Dasein* because it is what accords *Dasein* its "values, norms, and practices." While the "basis for all shared practices," Kleinberg (2005, 16) continues, "it is [also] the locus of conformity wherein the individual *Dasein* loses itself in the anonymity of shared practices." The "rationality" and "universal principles" of the present age strengthen the "grip" of "das Man," Kleinberg (2005, 16) explains, "obscuring" the character, indeed the ontology, of *Dasein*. The materialization of that "rationality" is, in part, technology. Charles Larmore (2010, 142), in contrast, contests the idea that being authentic requires us to be "independent of what conventions and borrowed models have made of us." For him, authenticity turns on the self's relationship to itself (see 2010, 173).

<sup>38</sup> See Lasch (1984).

<sup>39</sup> Kleinberg (2005, 16).

<sup>40</sup> Grant (1969, 26-27).

<sup>41</sup> "Our modern way of looking at the world hides from us the reality of many political things," Grant (1969, 72-73) argues, "but about nothing is it more obscuring than the inevitable relation between dynamic technology and imperialism." In his *Lament for A Nation*, Grant (2005 [1965], 9, n. 1) had defended his use of the phrase "American Empire" by noting that "an empire does not have to wield direct political control over colonial countries." Indeed, decades before the "retreat of the state" argument (see Strange 1996), George Grant (2005 [1965], 42) knew that "By its very nature the capitalist system makes of national boundaries only matters of political formality." Is this prescience in part an acknowledgement of Empire as a "non-place," as Hardt and Negri (2000, xiv) later suggest, as "characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries; Empire's rule has no limits." To guarantee "justice ... for all peoples," Hardt and Negri (2000, 11) continue, "the single power is given the necessary force to conduct, when necessary, 'just wars' at the borders against the barbarians and internally against the rebellious." But all violence is not directed elsewhere, as "the totalizing social processes of Empire" (2000, 10) ensure that standardization – leaving no child behind – will be enforced at home. Grant (1969, 73) discerned an "inevitable relation between dynamic technology and imperialism." There is also blowback (although Grant never uses this term associated with 9/11; I am

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associate it here with social disintegration) in “the practical tumult of the technological society” (Grant 1998 [1974], 88).

<sup>42</sup> This is Grant’s (1969, 28) phrase.

<sup>43</sup> Grant (1969, 28).

<sup>44</sup> Grant (1969, 24).

<sup>45</sup> In addition to its racialized connotation, “pale” can also point to the absence of the specificity of relationality. Martin Buber, Axelrod (1979, 63) notes, employed the term “alien place” to reference social structures “emptied themselves of their relational content.” So-called “interactive” behaviors may be more sensorimotor than affectional in nature, disembodied and imagistic: online.

<sup>46</sup> Grant (1969, 24). Is there anyplace to hide? Forty years ago Grant (1969, 24) named “art and sexuality,” but I suspect he might today exclude these as well, given their commodification. “Repressive desublimation” (for a succinct summary see Savran 1998, 34-36) was a key concept in his time. Grant (2001 [1969], 26) associated desublimation with the human will and the emancipation of passion, Marcuse argued that desublimation could also be “repressive.” But that politically reactionary consequence is stripped by the confidence many express in electronic media, that an “Electronic enlightenment will overcome the old anal rationality of print and speech” (Grant 2001 [1969], 49). Grant may be referencing McLuhan here, who thought not only linear rationality but nationalism itself had been a “product of print” (Cavell 2002, 186).

<sup>47</sup> Recall that Lasch links the culture of narcissism with the United States and the latter decades of the twentieth century. Technologism is not confined to our time, but, in Peukert’s analysis (see 1992, 241-242), was prominent in the Weimar Republic and its dissolution. Especially unbridled capitalism undermines democracy, replacing questions of common good with private gain, and converting technology into extensions of desire, the unleashing of passion without its reconstruction into public service. It all happened once before, in the Weimar Republic.

<sup>48</sup> Nusselder’s (2009, 23).

<sup>49</sup> Grant (2001 [1969], 56).

<sup>50</sup> Grant (2005 [1965], 71).

<sup>51</sup> Grant (1969, 76).

<sup>52</sup> Potter (2005, xliii).

<sup>53</sup> Grant (1998 [1974], 3).

<sup>54</sup> “‘Information’ is about objects,” Grant (1986, 24) points out, “and comes forth as part of that science which summons subjects to give us their reasons.” In its very nature it is “homogenizing” (1986, 24).

<sup>55</sup> Potter (2005, xliii).

<sup>56</sup> Krauss (2007, 30).

<sup>57</sup> (quoted in Potter 2005, xliii).

<sup>58</sup> Silverman (2009, 107) recalls a 1945 Heidegger presentation (“What Are Poets For?”) to a small group of listeners, in which he that suggested that what “threatens” humanity “with death, and indeed with the death of his own nature, is the unconditional character of mere willing in the sense of purposeful self-assertion in everything.” Such instrumental – technological – rationality has

come to dominate thinking, now reduced to everyday calculation of self-interest, dignified in academic disciplines such as economics. Applied economics assumes, Coyle (2007, 124) asserts, "rational and self-interested behavior by individuals."

<sup>59</sup> Potter (2005, xlv).

<sup>60</sup> *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, p. 575.

<sup>61</sup> Potter (2005, xlv) points out that Grant's analysis of technology as "universalizing" and "homogenizing," dissolving "all particularity" remains uppermost in today's anti-globalization activism, concerned that the "culturally uniformity that has swept through North America will soon extend to the rest of the planet."

<sup>62</sup> As Kroker (1984, 60) points out: "[B]ecause we live now, fully, within the designed environment of the technological sensorium... We now take our "environment" with us in the form of technical 'extensions' of the human body or senses. The technostructure is both the lens through which we experience the world, and, in fact, the "anxious object" with which human experience has become imperceptibly, almost subliminally, merged."

<sup>63</sup> Kroker (1984, 61).

<sup>64</sup> As a structure enabling subjective reconstruction, non-coincidence (see Pinar 2011, 158 n. 13) is the space of freedom, wherein – I'm recalling Potter's phrasing quoted earlier in the main text – within which thought and action can occur. Is the space study can cultivate.

<sup>65</sup> Also informed by Heidegger, Aoki's analysis of technology merits a separate section, but suffice to say here that he concludes his essay by recounting a case in which life itself depends on technology. "Carol," Aoki (2005 [1987], 157) informs us, "has been for 12 years a child of haemo-dialysis technology. She and her three siblings have been sustained by a dialysis machine at the University of Alberta Hospital.... She recently wrote of her experiences with technology: 'We acknowledge our indebtedness to technology; we refuse to be enslaved by technology.'" In another essay, Aoki (2005 (1993), 292) reflects: "As I contemplate my relationship to technology, I affirm that it is both a blessing and a burden." Whatever his intentions, these terms – "blessing" and "burden" – convey Christian connotations, interesting in light of Grant's acknowledgement that technology, however it has undermined hierarchies and ended parochialism, cannot communicate spirituality (see Emberley 2005 [1994], lxxxi).

<sup>66</sup> Emberley (2005 [1994], lxxxi).

<sup>67</sup> It was Marshall McLuhan, Richard Cavell (2002, 170) points out, who "sought to convey the notion that the world around us, and the lived experience of it, had become artifactual through the effects of media, such that nature could be said to have collapse into culture." This seems to me more like an acknowledgement of pervasive narcissism than it does historical or empirical fact. With climate change, for instance, nature isn't collapsing into culture, but vice versa.

<sup>68</sup> Grant (2005 [1965], 73).

<sup>69</sup> Grant (2005 [1965], 63).

<sup>70</sup> See Pinar (2012, 172).

<sup>71</sup> Emberley (2005 [1994], lxxxi).

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<sup>72</sup> Christian (1996, 177).

<sup>73</sup> Mary Bryson (2004, 240), too, notes that “everyday cultural practices have always-already been mediated by artifacts.”

<sup>74</sup> Christian (1996, 177).

<sup>75</sup> Willinsky (2006, 113).

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Cohen (2011, August 29, B3).

<sup>77</sup> Cohen (2011, August 29, B3).

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Cohen (2011, August 29, B3).

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Cohen (2011, August 29, B3).

<sup>80</sup> Grant (2005 [1965], 78). In the 1970s – before U.S. school reform became a juggernaut – I noticed officials in schools wearing buttons that said simply “Change Agent!” What change was advocated, and for what purpose? These were left unaddressed: change was important for its own sake. Later, when they were addressed – the change demanded was numerical: test scores – the academic culture of schools was undermined.

<sup>81</sup> Grant (2005 [1965], 71).

<sup>82</sup> See, for instance, Saul (2011, December 13, A1) and Spring 2012.

<sup>83</sup> “It is hard indeed,” Grant (1966, vi) observes in another context, “to overstate the importance of faith in progress through technology to those brought up in the main stream of North American life. it is the very ground of their being. The loss of this faith for a North American is equivalent to the loss of himself and the knowledge of how to live.”

<sup>84</sup> Grant (1986, 15).

<sup>85</sup> Grant (1986, 16).

<sup>86</sup> Jünger ([1931], in Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg 1995, 371).

<sup>87</sup> Grant (1986, 16).

<sup>88</sup> Ling (2008, 3) argues that “mobile communication ... supports better contact within the personal sphere, sometimes at the expense of interaction with those who are co-present,” but in doing so, supports “social cohesion” (2008, 5). Ling’s study is of cellphone use; Keller (2012, June 11, A19) reports that online sites – Facebook in particular – leave many “lonely, and narcissistic and actually ill.”

<sup>89</sup> Grant (1986, 16).

<sup>90</sup> Grant (1986, 17).

<sup>91</sup> Paras (2006, 85).

<sup>92</sup> Bowers (2000, 22) worries that “computers lead us to substitute decontextualized ways of thinking about the world for the sensory encounters with the natural world that intertwine our lives.” Such dissociation occurs not only vis-à-vis natural world, but within culture as well. “[T]he the electronic ‘community,’” he argues, “is populated by individuals who are free both of the moral constraints and the wisdom contained in the intergenerational narratives of the cultural group” (Bowers 2000, 46). Grant (1986, 26) notes that “computers ... exclude certain forms of community and permit others.” Such intergenerational isolation spells narcissism, implied in Bowers (2000, 47) observation that: “Just as data should be viewed as a degraded form of knowledge, computer-mediated communication should be viewed as a degraded

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form of symbolic interaction – one that reinforces the rootless individual who is comfortable with the expressions of self-creation that the computer industry finds profitable to encourage.” Concerning education specifically, Bowers (2000, 111) cites evidence from the mid-1990s questioning the positive correlation between technology and learning. Despite the evidence, that faith remains unbroken and aggressively promoted, as in the U.S. schools are privatized and curriculum moved online (Spring 2012).

<sup>93</sup> Grant (1986, 19).

<sup>94</sup> Ronell (2003, 97). Discussing the work of Paul de Man, Ronell (2003, 98) suggests that “technology’s essence is disclosed in its moments of breakdown ... the fact that ‘l’effet machinal’ is responsible for effects of meaning generated by sheer contingency, elements of uncontrol and improvisation.” Such disruption – the “technicity of a power failure” (Ronell 2003, 97) – denotes, one might say, “the experience of permanent parabasis” (Ronell 2003, 99). Can this be an experience of ecstatic self-departure ... a desubjectivizing rupture [producing] a medused effect, terrorizing and petrifying the other[?]” (Ronell 2003, 193) asks, underwriting “the radical vulnerability of the psychologically uninsured” (Ronell 2003, 209)? Probably such “rupture” underwrites nothing.

<sup>95</sup> Grant (1969, 142).

<sup>96</sup> After achieving access to her childhood experience through painting, Alice Miller abandoned any concept of pedagogy, asserting that all pedagogies serve the needs of adults, not of children; she substitutes the concept “support” (Capps 1995, 8). Interesting in light of Grant’s later critique of abortion, Miller is critical of opponents of abortion, who, she points out, substitute abstract conceptions of life for “lived life,” thereby distracting our attention away from the need to work toward the protection of the right of already-born children to a life without parental violence. Instead of making parental abuse a criminal offence, “pro-life” advocates want to legalize abortion. Miller points out as well that those who oppose abortion are often supporters of “traditional” childrearing practices (what she terms “poisonous pedagogies”), characterized by abusive ideas such as “spoil the rod and spare the child.” These people exhibit no commitment to protect the children they insist be born from parental, social, and economic violence. They say they “love” the unborn child, but to claim to “love” without at the same time condemning traditional childrearing practices is discloses the same confusion of love and cruelty that these “old-fashioned” childrearing practices themselves reproduce (see Capps 1995, 19).

<sup>97</sup> Grant (1969, 78).

<sup>98</sup> In contrast to Freud, for instance, who, Elsaesser (2009, 93) reminds us, was a “notorious technophobe, who, according to his son, hated both the radio and the telephone.... Freud’s obdurate refusal to have anything to do with cinema ... is well documented.” While “refusal” is not an option for many of us, the great man’s contempt for technology was no eccentricity.

<sup>99</sup> As Emberley (2005 [1994], lxxxi-xxxiii) points out.

<sup>100</sup> “[I]n its profound past form,” Grant 1986, 24) reminds, “heterogeneity” was an “expression of autochthony.”

<sup>101</sup> Grant (1969, 34).

<sup>102</sup> Grant (1969, 27).