

GROVE'S SEARCH FOR AMERICA

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“I WANT TO STATE with all due emphasis that this is the story of an individual, and that I do not mean to put it down as typical except in certain attitudes towards phenomena of American life.”¹ Although this statement of intention is set down clearly and prominently at the end of the first chapter of *A Search for America*, Grove's book has generally been discussed as if it were primarily a “sociological” exploration of the American consciousness. While it has been recognized as fiction (rather surprisingly, in view of the tendency until a few years ago to accept Grove's apparently biographical statements at face-value), the narrative structure has too often been seen merely as a convenient framework for the all-important presentation of his vision of America. The second half of my initial quotation has therefore been stressed at the expense of the first. Thematically, of course, this is understandable; Grove's chief concern in the book is, unquestionably, to test the American ideal against the American experience, to accentuate the vision by a demonstration of its vulnerability and the ease with which it can be betrayed. But we shall not appreciate the full extent of Grove's achievement until we recognize the subtlety of his artistry as well as the importance of his theme. If we wish to focus upon the literary quality of the book, we cannot do better than to take up Grove's hint and examine this “story of an individual” more closely.

The two opening chapters provide not only a biographical digest of Phil Branden's pre-American experience but a number of useful clues for our interpretation of his story. Branden, we soon learn, is a highly complex spokesman. Most obviously, he represents the opposite pole to the American norm. As a smart, aristocratic, well-spoken, socially-conceited European, he is in archetypal contrast to the modestly-dressed, colloquial, democratic American worker personified by Bennett, the Simpson's foreman whom Branden meets on the train to

Toronto. This confrontation is, in fact, so perfect in its appropriateness (within a few moments, the social distinctions have been reversed, Bennett calling Branden "me boy" in answer to his own unprecedented "sir," and Branden realistically accepting Bennett's "superior status") that only a careless reading could mistake it for accurate reporting of experience and fail to recognize its carefully-planned artistry in which every remark, every gesture, every thought contribute to the literary effect.

In fact, Branden's self-presentation is extraordinarily complex. When, for example, he tells us at the end of the first paragraph that he had sometimes "connived at being taken for an Englishman," and goes on to remark, "if I could meet myself as then I was, I should consider my former self as an insufferable snob and coxcomb", we are not only invited to observe the young man with detachment, but are warned that discrimination of fact and fiction, of truth and falsehood, is likely to prove a delicate exercise. The whole situation is framed with uncertainty. The "Author's Note to the Fourth Edition" further complicates the issue by raising the "truth or falsehood" controversy only to blur the distinction. "Every work of so-called imaginative literature," Grove tells us, "good or bad, is necessarily at once both fact and fiction." A later conversation between Phil and Frank raises the question of the legality of "assuming a false name". The present-day reader, aware of the mystery of Grove's own identity, is in a good position to appreciate the complex web in which he has enmeshed us. Frederick Philip Grove (a name that can now be confidently described as an *alias*) has created the character of Philip Branden (the common given-name is not, of course, coincidental) who admits to a past involving significant if harmless impersonation and openly acknowledges a training that taught him "to keep his mask intact". The layers of intricacy are unending; we become acutely conscious that we are confronted with something much more elaborate than a philosophical inquiry into the condition of America. We have encountered a work in which art and artifice are central and predominant.

Once alerted to the elaborate effects that Grove creates in these early chapters, we shall find numerous phrases and allusions that take on additional significance. When, in describing his life in Europe, Branden observes that "the exact localities are irrelevant", we may recognize an indirect hint concerning the reliability of Grove's own autobiographical details; more important, however, we may extrapolate the remark and treat the later scenes in the book as symbolic reconstructions rather than literal transcripts of reality or representative incidents to be judged by the usual criteria of "realism". Again, the emphasis on literature in the open-

ing pages prevents us from forgetting that *A Search for America* is itself a work of imaginative creation. Branden specifies his literary tastes: "I was all taken up with that particular brand of literature which was then becoming fashionable, filled with contempt for the practical man, and deeply ensconced in artificial poses." Not only does this exacerbate his shock in encountering practical men in America, but it encourages us to recognize the "artificial poses" and so, by extension, Grove's inventive genius. Thus Professor Spettigue's recent discoveries, suggesting that Grove did not emigrate to this continent until 1909 and therefore that *A Search for America* has even less of a factual basis than has generally been assumed,² need not seriously qualify our literary response to his work. Grove had given us due warning in the text itself.

It is clear that viewpoint is all-important in this book, and that Grove is careful to exploit the possibilities of variation. At the opening of the second chapter, Branden has just landed in Montreal. "I felt incongruous and out of place," he tells us, and by a curious process of temporal and spatial extension, the viewpoint shifts to an outside position:

I cannot but smile, I cannot but pity the slim youth in his immaculate clothes, the mere boy I was.

I shall try to describe how I must have looked.

The first sentence offers the judgment of an older and wiser Phil Branden on the "mere boy" of his past in much the same way that Dickens makes David Copperfield and Pip tell the stories of their earlier years at a time when they are established, middle-aged men. (Again, welcome though they are, we should not have needed Professor Spettigue's investigations to doubt Grove's statements concerning the composition of the book; even if early drafts existed, the book as we have it could only date from a period many years after the events which it ostensibly chronicles.) In the second sentence, Branden deliberately renounces his own viewpoint to attempt an external description, and in the succeeding paragraphs we encounter a curious "double-view" effect in which first- and third-person intermix, and Branden can present himself as both the personal "I" and the objective "young man."

This is a stylistic mannerism widespread in Grove's work and peculiarly appropriate to his creative purpose. An interesting parallel is to be found in *Over Prairie Trails*, where Grove describes "the feeling of estrangement . . . — as if I were not myself, but looking as from the outside at the adventures of somebody who yet was I."³ And here is a revealing, if syntactically confusing, example

from the older Grove: "It may interest some of my young critics to hear that, after years on this continent, during which he wrote and published the dozen books or so which have earned him what reputation he enjoys as a Canadian writer, he had . . ." etc.⁴ This effect is obviously related to Grove's habitual process of creating spokesmen and personae who are partly self-portraits and partly fictional inventions — half "I" and half "he". In the "Author's Preface" here (where the blending of first and third person appears yet again), he paradoxically explains his choice of a pseudonym in "Phil Branden" by observing that "it gives him . . . an opportunity to be even more personal than . . . it would be either safe or comfortable to be were he speaking in the first person, unmasked." As it is, the relations between Grove and Branden, and those between the younger and older Branden, become so intricate by the end of the two opening chapters, that Grove is henceforth in a position to present his "hero" from whatever angle or viewpoint seems most appropriate in any given situation.

THE FOREGOING ANALYSIS will have shown, I hope, that *A Search for America* is a literary work that eludes the normal genre-categories. The terms "novel" and "epic" have both been applied to it, but these are no less inaccurate than "autobiography." Indeed, the difficulty of assessing the book critically lies primarily in its unclassifiable status. I have been able to discover only one work that closely resembles it — George Borrow's *Lavengro* (1851) — and this too is a book that has been misunderstood and critically undervalued for the same reason. A brief comparison between the two books will prove useful at this point, though I wish to stress that I am not arguing in terms of influence. There is, so far as I am aware, no evidence that Grove had read Borrow (though the probability seems to me strong); all I wish to do here is to consider the books as mutually-revealing analogues in an attempt to throw light on the kind of book I believe *A Search for America* to be, and to indicate a rewarding way in which to approach it.

In *Lavengro*, Borrow presents us with an exploration of the highways and byways of early nineteenth-century England, a picaresque account of adventures with gypsies, tinkers and road-girls, told in the first person by a speaker (*Lavengro*) who resembles the author but is none the less distinct from him. We find, therefore, the same relation between the philosophical exploration of a country and the deliberate creation of a persona that marks *A Search for America*.

Indeed, Borrow offers a definition of autobiography — “a picture of the man himself — his character, his soul” as opposed to “the mere record of the incidents of a man’s life”²⁵ — which sounds startlingly relevant to *In Search of Myself* and the book under present discussion. Like Grove, Borrow carefully provides in the opening chapters a subtle but elusive portrait of Lavengro which gives the alert reader the necessary means by which to interpret the rest of the narrative. In particular, he prepares us to see the ensuing adventures not merely as a succession of disconnected experiences, but as carefully selected and juxtaposed incidents that make up a coherent portrait both of the country in question (the genuine England for Borrow, an authentic America for Grove) and of the many-faceted observer whose qualities have led him to attain to insight.

One of the characteristic features of Borrow’s work throws interesting light on the literary technique of *A Search for America*. In the course of his adventures, Lavengro is continually meeting people who in certain respects bear a noticeable resemblance to himself, and such meetings often develop into curious, almost surrealistic conversations between Lavengro and an *alter ego*. The process is less conspicuous in Grove, but it helps to explain the function of two figures frequently praised by Grove’s commentators but not, I think, generally understood. These are the old worker in the Yonge Street restaurant and the silent hermit whom Branden saves from the river. The scenes in which these two appear are commonly praised for their vividness and “realism,” but such appreciation is insufficient and on one level misleading. It should be noted, first, that both are nameless; the one is invariably referred to as “Whiskers;” the other is merely “the man.” In the second case, of course, there is no way in which a name could credibly be conveyed, but there is, I believe, a more compelling reason for the anonymity; in terms of the overall structure of the book, the two are significant not as individuals but as possible projections of what Branden might become. “Whiskers” is a living reminder of the futility of life as bus-boy in a restaurant. His hopes of rising to the position of waiter are never realized, and Branden himself is promoted above him within a few days. He represents, in almost medieval fashion, a helpless old age, a monitory figure of whom Branden might well say, “There but by my own exertions go I.” While “Whiskers” suffers loneliness in the midst of a city, the hermit has lost all connection with mankind so that he has nothing to say to Branden and is presumed to be deaf-and-dumb. Branden has already noted how, after days of silence, his own voice “sounded husky to [him], unfamiliar like that of a stranger”, and the hermit, carrying this to an extreme, has virtually lost the capacity for speech — which implies the

possibility of human contact. Again, Branden can see what he might become if he remained in "the Depths."

A Search for America needs to be read, then, not in terms of fiction or non-fiction, but as deliberately-moulded carefully-patterned experience. Grove selects the adventures of his spokesman so that he is aware at first-hand of a complete cross-section of American life. Even Branden's occupations have a symbolic function. As waiter in the restaurant, he is serving his fellow-men in the most literal way possible; as book-agent he is selling either knowledge (to the poor) or art (to the rich), and his situation offers a richly ambiguous paradigm of commercial education (its designation as "missionary-work" suggesting an additional subtlety) that contrasts increasingly with the genuine role of teacher which, having served a practical apprenticeship, he takes up on the last page of the book. Similarly, after his interlude "in the wilderness", he works as factory-hand (significantly in a veneer-factory — and Grove must surely have known Dickens' embodiment of the image in *Our Mutual Friend*) and as itinerant-labourer on the farm. This is no simplistic distinction between agricultural and industrial, since the factory is located in a small rural town and the farm is mechanized and organized as a full-scale industry. None the less, Branden's search is progressive, and his experience as a farm-worker, an occupation which Grove's urbanized readers might consider humble and undignified, is clearly offered, despite its drawbacks and imperfections, as his closest encounter with the true America.

The whole of the section on the Mackenzie farm, indeed, contains a symbolic dimension that does not seem to have been noted. Superficially, it is a setting for Grove's presentation of the life, working-conditions and general philosophy of the hobo or itinerant labourer, but a fuller reading reveals a much broader level of meaning. On a farm whose enormous extent is emphasized, the owner, Mackenzie, lives in what is known as "the White House", and this combination of the Presidential residence with a famous Canadian political name can hardly be fortuitous. It is worth noting that Mackenzie King was Prime Minister at the time of the book's first publication, and that Mackenzie is specifically described as "an incipient king" during a discussion of royalty and rule. This contrived but none the less effective episode is the intellectual climax of the book. In a scene that could only be condemned as incredible if the book were judged solely in terms of realistic convention, Branden discusses the broad political questions with his millionaire employer. If, however, we read the book in the way I have been suggesting, this discussion between the sometime European aristocrat turned hobo and the American agricultural capitalist is rich in irony, and its "meaning"

extends far beyond the inevitably inconclusive debate. At this point Branden has become self-appointed spokesman of the real America for which he has been searching throughout the book, and he is able to lecture Mackenzie, the man in power, on the discrepancy between what America is and what she might be. Needless to say, this does not lead to any immediate practical reforms, but these final chapters provide a fitting resolution within the logic of the book itself. In articulating his position, Branden has achieved his quest; he has discovered not only America but his true self.

IF IT SEEMS STRANGE that this important (and hardly recondite) aspect of *A Search for America* has remained unnoticed, I can only suggest that Grove's own curiously ambivalent reaction to the book has discouraged deeper scrutiny. Whereas he was always ready to sing the praises of his other works, his response to *A Search for America* was unusually guarded. Indeed, in *In Search of Myself* he indulges in some rare self-criticism while discussing it. "I still believed — and I believe today — that, artistically, this was my weakest book. . . . It seemed very juvenile to me, full of garrulity and even presumption."⁶ Unless my demonstration of the artistry involved is hopelessly void, some explanation for Grove's undervaluing of the book seems required.

There are, I believe, two explanations. The first is clearly presented in Grove's own discussion. After describing it as his "weakest book" he goes on, with typical sarcasm, to forecast that "it would, therefore, have the best chance with the public."⁷ This is all part of Grove's persona of the unrecognized, unappreciated artist. While it would be both inaccurate and improper to question the undoubted neglect that Grove suffered through most of his life, it is none the less fair to observe that he moulded and adapted this circumstance for his own artistic purpose in his habitual manner. His account, for example, of the contemporary response to *Settlers of the Marsh* is highly exaggerated, as even a brief examination of the reviews recently reprinted by Professor Pacey will show.⁸ To state, as Grove does, that "reviewers called it 'filthy'"⁹ is a gross misrepresentation of the facts, but it fits conveniently into the artistic creation of the "I" of *In Search of Myself*, who is no more to be equated with Grove himself than is Phil Branden. (Interestingly enough, George Borrow described a hostile critical response to *Lavengro* in terms that bear no resemblance to the reality — for similar reasons.)

All this throws light on what might otherwise seem, for a book about America, a singularly inappropriate dedication to Meredith, Swinburne and Hardy. The importance that Grove attached to these three is explained in an essay, "A Neglected Function of a Certain Literary Association," printed in *It Needs to be Said*. Grove lists the same three names as examples of "English writers of the first importance who, regardless of immediate recognition, laboured on in comparative obscurity and poverty, ceaselessly and strictly endeavouring to express just what they had to say — a thing the public, so it seemed, would not hear and yet at last has heard."¹⁰ However inaccurate this may be as literary history, it is a succinct expression of Grove's myth of the great writer. To this company he wished to belong, and the comparative success of *A Search for America* threatened to spoil the pattern.

The second explanation is more complicated. In embarking on his quest, Branden "made up [his] mind to leave Europe and all [his] old associations behind", and although he soon learns "that there were social strata in America as well as in Europe", he none the less pursues the ideal. By the last chapter, he claims to be convinced and converted: "I was reconciled to America. I was convinced that the American ideal was right, that it meant a tremendous advance over anything which before the war could reasonably be called the ideal of Europe". Branden is at first disillusioned by the materialist skulduggery that he finds rampant in America, but, as I have indicated, finds at least a glimpse of the true America in the agricultural West. None the less, the main evidence for the survival of the ideal personified by Lincoln is essentially negative: "What nonsense to search! The Lincolns were living all about me, of course; there were thousands of them, hundreds of thousands, millions! If there were not, what with graft, 'con,' politics and bossdom the country would long since have collapsed!"

Although we can say that Branden has completed his quest, it would be unwise to conclude that the search was altogether successful. An illusion of success is precariously maintained within the book itself, but this depends upon two arguments that are in fact contradictory: first, that the search "might not be a geographical search at all"; second, expressed in a well-known and over-quoted footnote, that the ideal "has been abandoned by the U.S.A." and is only to be looked for in Canada. It is obvious that, despite these somewhat frantic gestures, Grove has considerably qualified his position. *It Needs to be Said* was published only two years after *A Search for America*, yet there Grove continually insists on the importance of Canada's maintaining her ties with the spiritual tradition of Europe rather than succumbing to the materialistic tyranny of the

United States, which he openly condemns as "the most intolerant nation on earth."¹¹ Grove's disillusionment must have been traumatic; it is hardly surprising, under the circumstances, that he should make only guarded references to a book whose thesis (whatever its artistic merits) he was no longer prepared to uphold.

But if the search for America is "not a geographical search at all," where is it to be located? If anywhere, in the individual — in the kindly and unselfish Doctor Goodwin, in Ivan ("the personification of all that is fine and noble in bodily labour"), in the Phil Branden who, tempered by experience, emerges at the close of the book. The ideal embodied in Lincoln can only manifest itself in individuals. I suggest that Grove had come to this conclusion by the time he wrote *A Search for America* as we now have it, and that he deliberately emphasized "the story of an individual" to counter-balance the implications of the title. The sub-title, we should remember, is "The Odyssey of an Immigrant," and this accentuates the individual nature of the quest.

Throughout the narrative, the emphasis is upon Branden's development; in particular, we are never allowed to forget the significance of education. He must cast off the unpractical training he had received in Europe, and complete a required period of apprenticeship before he can find his proper role in America. The training he receives is almost brutally practical but it is also, in Grove's view, ultimately humane. In a passage carefully positioned just before his meeting with Ivan, Branden observes: "I was merely rounding off what I called my education in the 'true humanities'". In the last hundred pages of the book, he becomes conscious of this development, and recognizes, moreover, "the curious plan that seemed to underlie [his] wanderings". Established on the Mackenzie farm, he remarks: "I marvelled at the plan of my life." This plan is, of course, identical with what I hope to have demonstrated to be the closely-knit structure of the whole book. Grove lays out for us the example of one man's progress towards mature understanding. It is, as he insists, "the story of an individual," but the meaning of "individual" is refined in the course of the book. It is purged of all selfish associations. Branden is no less an individual at the end of his search than he was at the beginning, but his individuality is no longer directed into purely personal channels. Branden himself makes the necessary distinction in the final chapter: "When I came from Europe, I came as an individual; when I settled down in America, at the end of my wanderings, I was a social man." These are the terms in which his quest is achieved.

NOTES

- ¹ Frederick Philip Grove, *A Search for America* [1927] (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, New Canadian Library, 1971), pp. 13-14. All subsequent references, incorporated into the text, will be to this edition.
- ² See Douglas O. Spettigue, "Frederick Philip Grove," *Queen's Quarterly*, LXXVIII (Winter 1971), 614-615; and "The Grove Enigma Resolved," *Queen's Quarterly*, LXXIX (Spring 1972), 1-2.
- ³ *Over Prairie Trails* [1922] (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, New Canadian Library, 1957), p. 86.
- ⁴ "Postscript to *A Search for America*," *Queen's Quarterly*, XLIX (Autumn 1942), 198. In this article the distinction between Branden and Grove is virtually ignored.
- ⁵ George Borrow to Theodore Watts-Dunton, quoted in Herbert Jenkins, *The Life of George Borrow* (London: Murray, 1912), p. 396.
- ⁶ *In Search of Myself* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1946), pp. 378, 391.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 378-379.
- ⁸ See Desmond Pacey, ed., *Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto: Ryerson, Critical Views on Canadian Writers, 1970), pp. 105-117.
- ⁹ *In Search of Myself*, p. 381.
- ¹⁰ *It Needs to be Said* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929), p. 12.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 145n.