

GROVE AND EXISTENTIALISM

Frank Birbalsingh

BORN IN 1871 of mixed parents (Swedish father and Scottish mother), Frederick Philip Grove spent some of his early, most impressionable years in Paris, Rome and Munich where he acquired interests and attitudes that influenced him throughout his life; but in 1892 he came to North America where, except for brief absences, he remained until his death in 1948. His published work, consisting of eight novels, three volumes of essays, sketches and addresses, some short stories and an autobiography, has been regarded as predominantly of Canadian interest. In spite of their author's long residence in North America, however, and their predominantly Canadian settings, Grove's writings suggest that his preoccupations are primarily European. The treatment of his principal themes, free-will and humanism, reveals insights that are similar in kind, though neither in cogency nor intensity, to those of well known European writers.

The theme of free-will is introduced in the first published novel, *Settlers of the Marsh*, which describes the everyday routine of pioneer Canadian prairie homesteaders during the early years of this century. The Swedish immigrant hero, Niels Lindstedt, is puzzled by the apparently ineffectual nature of his own wishes and desires, and is consequently drawn into frequent speculation about God. The sudden death of a fellow immigrant homesteader prompts Niels to question the significance of events around him:

What was life anyway? A dumb shifting of forces. Grass grew and was trodden down; and it knew not why. He himself — this very afternoon there had been in him the joy of grass growing, twigs budding, blossoms opening to the air of spring. The grass had been stepped on; the twig had been broken; the blossoms nipped by frost . . .

He, Niels, a workman in God's garden? Who was God anyway?

Such questions come instinctively and with special urgency to the lonely pioneers of Grove's four novels set in the Canadian West. So often is patient toil on the land made fruitless by natural disaster, or careful plans ruined by misfortune, that they feel an acute sense of mortality and show a morbid curiosity in the unseen agency which treats their most determined efforts with neutral indifference.

A similar curiosity is evinced by urban characters in *The Master of the Mill*, in which the mill owned by the Clark family makes persistent mechanical demands on its workers and is just as indifferent to their wishes as God is to the plans and labours of Niels Lindstedt and other homesteaders. Yet the exact nature of God or of the mill remains mysterious: all that the homesteaders or the mill workers can glean is the inexorable logic by which God, at least, functions; they are vouchsafed no really satisfactory explanation. Their common ignorance, with which all the author's characters perforce play the game of life, is expressed by Samuel Clark's son, Edmund:

We are sitting at a table playing a game of chance the laws of which we don't understand and somewhere around the board sits an invisible player whom nobody knows and who takes all the tricks; that player is destiny, or God if you like, or the future.

But Grove's characters do not respond passively. Although they acknowledge domination by mysterious and hostile forces, they summon up all possible inner resources in a show of fierce resistance, even when they realize that resistance is futile. John Elliott of *Our Daily Bread*, Abe Spalding of *Fruits of the Earth* and Len Sterner of *The Yoke of Life* all succumb, or are likely to succumb to dominant extra-human influences; but not without, initially, waging valiant and resolute struggle. John Elliott's whole life is dedicated to settling his children on farms around him, each doggedly ploughing a successful living out of the reluctant soil; while Spalding, exercising enormous strength of will and body, strives unavailingly to dominate the land that can yield him sustenance, wealth even; and Len Sterner tries persistently to acquire education in circumstances that scarcely permit him to subsist, much less to read. Ralph Patterson of *Two Generations* (a novel set in Ontario), although more successful than his Western counterparts, is equally prepared to subdue the recalcitrance either of his land or family. Not in one instance does the author counsel supine fatalism or facile optimism; for, while his characters acknowledge the ultimate futility of human aspirations, they nevertheless enjoin unremitting struggle, not instant submission.

Since they are capable of independent decision these characters cannot be correctly regarded as mere pawns or as impersonal beings responding mechanically to external stimuli. Implicitly they exercise a certain measure of free-will even if its exact degree and moral implication remain vague. At the same time their actions lack adequate self-consciousness and appear automatic: defiance is so instinctive as to be almost reflex, which has led to the belief that Grove's characters are, in fact, mechanically determined by local factors.

Yet Grove was no naturalist. His characters are anything but impersonal beings reacting mechanically to outside influences, nor do they transmit inherited traits and behaviour patterns from one generation to the next like the Rougon-Macquarts in Zola's great twenty-novel sequence. More often than not younger characters are at loggerheads with their elders precisely because they wish to assert contrasting individual concerns and interests. If their rather quick, retaliatory actions lack sufficient premeditation and due self-consciousness, it is not because they represent a consciously naturalistic outlook, but because the author fails to provide his characters with a satisfactory intellectual framework to define the moral significance of their actions.

The stress on the distinctive individuality of each character is in fact incorporated in a separate theme — humanism. Humanism in Grove's novels is concerned with the sanctity of human personality and with respect for the homely virtues of a Wordsworthian life close to Nature; it emphasizes the pre-eminence of fundamental human values over artificial, technologically-inspired ones. In the prairie novels the simplicities of rural, family life are revered, and patient tilling of the soil for one's daily bread is regarded as sufficient for complete satisfaction. On the other hand, urban industrialism denies satisfaction by inducing servility, as in the following illustration given by Bruce Rogers, foreman of the Clark mill:

Suppose a new hand starts work with us. He's an ordinary human being: he laughs and jokes as he goes to work. But within less than a year something comes over him. Whatever he does, he seems to do automatically; in reality, the pace forces him to be constantly on the watch; it isn't that he becomes a machine; that would be tolerable if undesirable. What he becomes is the slave of a machine which punishes him whenever he is at fault.

Rogers asserts a belief that the influence of machines can be evil, that their uncontrolled power can dehumanize, and what he implies is that true value resides in the farmer, the lone individual who makes life with his own heart and hands.

In stressing the pre-eminence of personal values, Grove's novels in fact counteract the naturalistic overtones which some have found in his writing. His characters stoutly defend their basic humanity from threatened domination either by natural adversaries or by artificial ones present in industrial connurbations. Instinctively they reject the mechanical determination of their lives by any agency, and their motives are not narrowly social or political like those of the author's American contemporaries; for example, Sherwood Anderson and Theodore Dreiser, who also warn against the sacrifice of human rights and liberties to the God of industrial Mammon. The Americans speak mostly from Marxist or quasi-Marxist convictions, whereas Grove's view is certainly non-Marxist. As will be shown later, his chief characters may often be taken as spokesmen for the author himself and it is the author's view that Edmund Clark expresses when he tells his father: "Let all men be equal in an economic sense and one incitement to live is gone." Grove's anti-industrialism is not narrowly political. Passionate support for individual integrity and unyielding belief in the sovereignty of fundamental spiritual values derive from a wider if not deeper philosophical outlook that is neither socialist nor naturalistic but existentialist.

EXISTENTIALISM not only contradicts naturalism; it belies the fatalism and determinism which are sometimes attributed to Grove. Fatalism signifies weak-kneed acceptance, an abdication of human responsibility; determinism, likewise, implies that all our actions even those involving moral judgments, are wholly determined by previously existing causes. Existentialism, by stressing the value of independent, personal choice in defiant action, both acknowledges human responsibility and affirms man's ability to live without panic or hysteria in a world of growing uncertainty and seeming hopelessness. Grove's protagonists voluntarily oppose cosmic odds whether in the form of inexorable Fate or of suffocating industrial organization, and although they fail in the end, they never flinch from the struggle or give way to despair. Theirs is an enforced, sisyphian way of life that is resigned without being defeatist, combative but not aggressive. To them neither despair nor hope, pessimism nor optimism, are practical alternatives. Samuel Clark sums up their approach when he says with impassive finality: "Life is a concatenation of events beyond praise or blame."

However diffuse it may be as a systematic philosophy, existentialism usually advocates vigorous protest against policies of action in which human beings are

regarded as helpless pawns or as wholly determined by the regular operation of natural processes: as already shown, all Grove's heroes vividly demonstrate this type of protest. These heroes are caught in situations similar to those in the plays and novels of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who usually portray ostensibly helpless people trapped by ordinary and natural processes. Indeed, the characters of Sartre and Camus feel a more intense and pervasive awareness of human inadequacy than Grove's protagonists. Circumscribed by hostile forces which all but annihilate him, Roquentin, the hero of Sartre's *La Nausée*, faces a predicament familiar to all Grove's heroes; only he experiences such an intense form of spiritual impotence that for much of the time he is incapable of either protest or defiance; certainly he does not react quickly or instinctively. Unlike Grove's heroes, whose sole interest is to get out of their predicament, Roquentin is as much concerned with investigating his as with getting out of it. He therefore gains a fuller understanding of his predicament; and so does the reader.

Camus also writes about people with a strong, almost hypnotic sense of crippling limitation and total helplessness; nor do they always achieve that defiant act of will that comes so readily to Grove's characters. Although he goes through distressing experiences, Meursault, hero of Camus's *l'Étranger*, manages no more positive emotional reaction than a sort of dazed bafflement: he commits murder and is condemned and his most visible reaction is listless detachment. Roquentin and Meursault desire "engagement" — the existentialist term for defiant act of will — more desperately than Grove's heroes, but they encounter greater difficulty in achieving it. Instead they transcend their pressing need for "engagement" by finding salvation in thorough analysis and understanding of their problems. Mathieu Delarue, hero of Sartre's three-volume *Les Chemis de la Liberté*, fails to commit himself to any positive action until the end of the third volume, but during his lengthy period of indecision he searchingly probes the apparently absurd circumstances of his concrete situation, thus laying bare its precise moral characteristics. Since self-knowledge is gained during the time that he is perplexed and undecided, indecision itself proves as much a part of his salvation as the positive commitment he finally makes. In existentialist terms salvation is the fulness of being which he gains by self-conscious probing of his whole experience.

The basic assertion of Sartre and Camus, as well as Grove, is that in an absurd or irrationally organized world men have liberty of personal choice to make what they want of their lives. All three writers present characters in roughly the same predicament and all three prescribe roughly the same remedy — the achievement of salvation by a self-conscious act of will (which may or may not

be defiant in Camus). Where the comparison breaks down is in the process of achieving salvation: Roquentin, Meursault and Delarue take a long time investigating the moral imperatives open to them and in so doing they clarify and illuminate their predicament, while Grove's heroes are instantly defiant and so achieve the required act of will almost automatically, thus avoiding the introspective probing and analysis which might have illuminated their actions and given them moral significance. The result is that the reader comes to see the existentialist situations in the French writers more clearly and to understand their perceptions and intuitions with greater intelligence, whereas Grove's situations remain largely obscure and his existentialist insights appear inchoate and stunted.

Parallels between Sartre and Camus on one hand and Grove on the other come from their common ideological background — the ferment in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Two major influences at this time were Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Kierkegaardian futility within a Christian universe jostled with an insatiable Nietzschean will to live and the intellectual flux thus produced contained the essential elements out of which existentialism was to emerge. Under the influence of Jaspers, Heidegger and others existentialist ideas gradually took coherent shape in the early decade of the twentieth century until they were moulded into a more or less consistent system of thought principally by Sartre in the World War II era. One reason why the intellectual framework of Grove's novels is fragmented is that he was not open, in Canada, to the direct cultural associations of constructive comment, analysis and discussion available to Europeans like Sartre and Camus. The philosophical ideas which he brought from Europe in 1892 and which remained largely stagnant in his mind more accurately represent an earlier nascent existentialism out of which the coherent theories of Sartre and Camus later evolved.

The influence of this earlier, unstable existentialism is to be found in the work of Europeans such as Ibsen, Strindberg, and even — earlier — Dostoevsky. Like Grove, these writers portray tormented and strong-willed protagonists opposed to either a moral or a social order which is contradictory if not incomprehensible. Yet the struggles of Ibsen's heroes and heroines against a stifling bourgeois social order are carefully analysed, the sexual conflicts in Strindberg's characters are brilliantly illuminated, and the crises encountered by Dostoevsky's heroes are searchingly investigated so as to bring out and clarify the moral problems involved. Ibsen, Strindberg and Dostoevsky may offer different solutions to their underlying problem of reconciling harsh human reality with the dominion of a

supposedly loving Christian God, but they explore the problem comprehensively and their reputation rests on this inspired exploration rather than on the solutions they offer. Ibsen and Strindberg lean towards Nietzsche in asserting a powerful will to survive, while Dostoevsky tends towards Kierkegaard in stressing human fulfilment by deeds of love and compassion; together these three writers may be said to anticipate twentieth-century existentialism. Their philosophical sources were also volatile and unstable, but they were able to marshal them into sustained, whole and original perceptions.

GROVE'S WORK suffers by comparison either with his successors, the mature existentialists, or with his immediate European predecessors whose plays and novels anticipate existentialism. The immature or stunted quality of his thought cannot therefore be wholly attributed to deficient historical or cultural influences. Since they do not enlarge the reader's perceptions, the arbitrary constraints and harassments visited upon his protagonists appear gratuitous, and the gratuitous presentation of a whole series of characters who are physically persecuted and spiritually tortured only to be destroyed conveys a strong flavour of sado-masochism. When the unmistakably masochistic overtones of his novels are set against the author's own extremely harsh experiences in North America, it becomes clear that his art does not serve simply as a vehicle of objective views and judgements, but also vicariously as a means of projecting subjective dissatisfactions that are exclusively of personal interest. The ragged intellectual framework of his novels comes out of the unstable contact between his mixed European inheritance and his unhappy life in Canada. This contact engendered irrepressible tensions in Grove, and fiction provided him with a convenient means of release. This explains why he re-states identical themes in seven novels without ever probing them, for constant re-statement satisfies urgent psychological need; that it ignores purely aesthetic criteria was apparently of less moment.

From his arrival in North America, Grove endured poverty, illness, bereavement and what he, at any rate, thought was shameful neglect. In his treatment of free-will, the dogged but vain resistance of his heroes partly registers self-pitying disappointment with his own untiring but largely unsuccessful literary efforts. His attitude to failure is clearly stated in his autobiography *In Search of Myself*:

Perhaps, very likely even, I was foredoomed to failure in my [literary] endeavour; in fact, I seemed to see even then, that I was bound to fail; but the attempt had to be made.

Unwavering dedication to literature sublimates what really is an intolerable disappointment in himself as a writer, and it is partly to stabilize himself psychologically for renewed efforts that he wishfully projects a dedicated but assumed fighting spirit in all his chief characters.

Similarly limiting personal motives enter into his representation of humanism as well. Concern for the mill workers in *The Master of the Mill* is not closely integrated into the novel's unwieldy plot; it is prompted, it would seem, by strong prejudice rather than by artistic considerations. The suspicion of prejudice is reinforced when we discover the author's expressed animus against American industrial social organization. In *In Search of Myself* he deplores the ascendancy of purely acquisitive instincts over more genuinely creative ones in America, and American subservience to a morality based on credit elicits contempt:

It is the peculiarly American philosophy of life that to have is more important than to be or to do; in fact, that to be is dependent on to have. America's chief contribution to the so-called civilization of mankind, so far, consists in the installment plan; and that plan imposes a slavery vastly more galling, vastly more wasteful than any autocracy, any tyranny has ever imposed. A free life is impossible under its rule except for the rich who can dispense with it.

These obviously exaggerated feelings become especially significant when we realize that it was principally his anti-Americanism that drove the author to a miserable existence on a bleak and inhospitable Canadian prairie. Like dogged resistance in his treatment of free-will, Grove's humanistic belief in individual integrity largely expresses a narrowly idiosyncratic resentment. In the former case resentment is directed against the failure of his writing while in the latter it is pointed at American social values.

The sexual attitudes revealed in Grove's novels also underline the undue subjectivity of his art. In *The Yoke of Life* Len Sterner plainly states his expectations of Lydia Hausmann:

He saw Lydia etherealised, de-carnalised . . . She stood before his mental vision, untouched, all the more desirable for having been tempted, white in immaculate innocence. In order to justify his condemnation of the world, he needed to idealise her; and he did so with the facility of youth.

When Lydia, without convincing psychological pretext, suddenly turns from virgin innocence to besmirching promiscuity, Sterner's ethereal illusions are

shattered and he "cursed the world and all the facts of life." He then endures prolonged self-torture which is finally relieved only by suicide. Grove's own sexual attitudes are not much different; he writes in his autobiography:

Woman as such remained a mystery to me. Even the prostitute whom I had seen through the open door of the brothel seemed a superior being to me, something almost divine because it was different from myself.

Although we may not know for certain that Grove experienced consequent frustration similar to Sterner's, we can be reasonably certain that his rather innocent idealization of women was contradicted by actual experience, and if the passion he shows in his reaction to literary failure and American society is genuine, he is likely to have responded to sexual frustration with the same intensity as he shows in his main themes. This would explain why there are scarcely any happy sexual relationships in the novels or why his women are drawn without subtlety, either as wicked and promiscuous like Clara Vogel and Lydia Hausmann, or as saintly and virginal like Ellen Amundsen and Alice Patterson; for, as in his main themes, Grove is not so much giving an objective portrait of credible human relations as expressing unbalanced, unstable and probably uncontrollable retaliatory feelings born of his own frustrations.

Sterner's reaction when disillusioned by Lydia is revealing, because it clearly illustrates the masochistic, self-pitying spirit of grievance common to all Grove's heroes. Their pathological outlook makes them retaliate blindly and irrationally against life itself, not simply against specific sources of irritation or dissatisfaction. In psychological terms Grove's themes are undeveloped because his heroes are too overcome by emotion to keep the bare minimum of moral equipoise necessary to any successful character in fiction. Sterner and his spiritual kindred in the other novels are not ultimately convincing as human beings in whom both emotional and cerebral impulses co-operate to maintain some form of equilibrium as in normal experience. All that they do is either to inflict or to endure punishment, and in the end their sadomasochistic activities are too non-cerebral and therefore too unbalanced to sustain moral examination. Their real value is not artistic but psychological—in providing the author with a means of airing strong grievances or prejudices and thus relieving powerful inner tensions.

No assessment of Grove's novels that ignores either his existentialism or his psychological dependence on his writing can arrive at a fair estimate of his achievement as a novelist, for these two are essential factors of his art. The evidence already presented suggests that his purely artistic intention, namely to

represent a view of life that is basically existentialist, is corrupted by an extra-literary motive, that of fulfilling wholly personal psychological needs and expectations. The aesthetic content of his work is thus undermined and his novels are of inconsiderable value as art; their most successful feature is patient documentation of pioneer homestead routine which is both solid and authentic. The best of Grove's writings are, in fact, not the novels, but the autobiography, the sketches and essays, in which compelling, idiosyncratic dissatisfactions can be freely expressed without much regard for aesthetic form or objectivity. On the whole we do not much admire the man's writing, but we do not fail to admire the man himself — his astonishing singlemindedness, his tenacity and his courage in the face of great adversity.