

George Santayana, Literary Philosopher

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George Santayana, Literary Philosopher

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Essays in Literary Criticism by George Santayana (editor)

The Nature and Pursuit of Love: The Philosophy
of Irving Singer (edited by David Goicoechea)

George Santayana, Literary Philosopher

Irving Singer

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To the memory of Walter Jackson Bate and Henry David Aiken

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Preface

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, the American philosopher who meant the most to me was John Dewey. During my early years, which coincided with the Depression and World War II, Dewey represented most of what I believed in at the time: naturalism, humanism, democratic pluralism, pragmatism as the clue to knowledge. I felt that he, better than any other philosopher I had read, understood the goodness of a healthy-minded life that combines the best in science and in art. My undergraduate honors thesis on Dewey's theory of

value was a sympathetic, though somewhat critical, attempt to extend his fundamental orientation beyond the limits he had set. I never thought of myself as a disciple, and Dewey's impoverished literary style often made me cringe. Nevertheless, I saw him as a model of how an intellectual could also be an active force in society, efficacious through his writing as well as through his devotion to liberal causes that mattered greatly to me.

As the years went by, I gravitated more and more toward the work of George Santayana. I wrote my graduate dissertation on his aesthetics, which seemed to me more challenging and possibly more fertile than Dewey's. I later realized that, among philosophers trained in the Anglo-Saxon traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, only Santayana had exhaustively investigated the questions about love that increasingly interested me—questions about love as a topic in philosophy as well as a theme in literature and all the other arts. From the start, I considered Santayana's Neoplatonism a serious impediment in his official outlook. But since I had always loved the dialogues of Plato as supreme examples of literature no less than philosophy, I was fascinated by Santayana's merging of a twentieth-century version of Platonism with an up-to-date materialism to which he gave equal importance.

Relying on Dewey as my touchstone for a wholesome, balanced, and defensible alternative to both Platonistic idealism and reductionist materialism, I found myself in the anomalous position of repudiating Santayana's doctrine while also relishing his resplendent construction of it. Though I concluded that his attempt to unify Platonism and naturalism fails as philosophy, I felt then, and always have, that it succeeds as an exciting and uniquely inspirational expression of humanistic imagination. Santayana was what the Spanish call a *pensador*, a thinker in the broadest sense, whose books were filled with rich aperçus and wise inventiveness. I found his thinking closer to actual experience than any other contemporary phi-

losophy in the English language. His prose glittered and was bur-nished in a manner that invited emulation at whatever level I my-self might someday attain.

I was additionally attracted to Santayana's approach by the fact that it encompasses persistent modes of alienation recurrent in his own experience but characteristic of the world as I knew it too. Santayana was both an insider and an outsider in American life. Al-though he resided in the United States for more than forty years, he remained until he died a European man of letters and a Spanish citizen. Throughout his life he was a Catholic and an atheist, a scholar and an author addressing the intelligent public at large, a man who saw the world as many other Spaniards did but one whose works were written in English, a technical philosopher as well as a poet, critic, novelist, and cultural historian, a product of his time yet never at home in it. He was all these as they enacted a permanent coun-terpoint of divisions within himself. I was not divided in the same way as he, but his example helped me to see the extent to which I was alienated as well. If the benign and consummate activism of Dewey proffered an ideal that I might contemplate at a distance, study of the problematics of Santayana's philosophy showed me the residual rifts that my kind of person would have to face up to sooner or later. Dewey could never have elicited that awareness in me.

A few years ago I was asked to participate in a documentary about Santayana's life and work, to be directed toward teen-age Hispanics in America. At first I thought that the project was utterly unrealistic. How many young people nowadays, regardless of their ethnic origin, would even have heard of Santayana? How many of them would want to know about anything he had published? But then it occurred to me that this venture could serve a useful pur-pose. Most of the students who would watch the video were also alienated from their American surroundings. Not entirely but to a large degree, they experienced many of the inner divisions that

Santayana underwent. The young Hispanics might never read much of what he wrote, but they could easily appreciate the nature of his situation as a human being. Learning that he survived, even flourished, through faith in his capacity to surmount his alienated condition, to transform it creatively by works of individual talent that his imagination made available to him, they might intuit a comparable solution for themselves. Whether or not the video would actually attain this goal, I was happy to participate in it after all.¹

This book may be taken as a similar attempt. It is an introduction to the part of Santayana's philosophy that has meant the most to me. Though it begins with an account of my first acquaintance with his thought, and my visit to him in Rome, it is a portrayal of his lasting achievement from the perspective of its humanistic relevance. It concentrates on problems about the nature of art, criticism, love, and the good life as Santayana formulated them in his books. Over the years my own writing as a literary philosopher was frequently inspired by developments in Santayana's approach, even when I did not agree with them. The present book is a study of those developments, together with my reaction and running commentary.

I have considerably revised or rewritten most of the material in the text that originally appeared on other occasions. The sources are documented in the endnotes, but here I wish to remark that my discussion of Daniel Cory's biography in Chapter 2 had a different title when its earlier version was published in *The New York Review of Books*. Without my foreknowledge, the editors of that journal attached a heading that I consider pejorative to Santayana's genius. They entitled the piece "Marble Faun." While this allusion to Hawthorne's novel about American expatriates in Europe is accurate and suggestive in various ways, it intimates a type of feckless, even effete, aestheticism that is grossly untrue to the

mature wisdom that Santayana acquired and expressed in his later years.

In retaining its focus upon Santayana's humanistic philosophy, the book cites but scarcely discusses many important publications by other Santayana specialists. Since the Santayana Society came into existence twenty years ago, much has been written that is worthy of detailed attention. I hope such promising research will get the professional recognition it deserves. Though my work is designed for a more general audience, it also seeks to find a niche within that vital area of scholarship.



Among the many people who have aided and abetted the completion of this book, in one way or another, I am particularly grateful to the following persons: James Engell, Cayetano Estébanez, Cándido Pérez Gállego, Carmen García-Trevijano, Manuel Garrido, Morris Grossman, Felipe Guardiola, José Antonio Gurpegui, Henry Hardy, Larisa Heimert, Angus Kerr-Lawson, Paul Grimley Kuntz, Richard A. Macksey, Timothy J. Madigan, Frederick Morgan, Joel Porte, Manuel Villar Raso, José M. Ruiz Ruiz, Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr., Michael Shinagel, Jo Singer, David Wapinsky, and David F. Wheeler.

George Santayana, Literary Philosopher

I A Pilgrimage to Santayana

WHEN HISTORIANS in the twenty-first century assess the nature of twentieth-century philosophy from their own perspective, they may have some difficulty in placing the mind and works of George Santayana. There are two ways in which we might appraise his contribution. We could take him as a writer about the human condition who also did philosophy; or else as a theorist in various branches of philosophy who wrote essays, literary criticism, history of ideas, social commentary, volumes of poetry, a best-selling novel,

and so on. Both approaches to his talent must be employed, and interwoven, in order to attain a clear idea of what Santayana accomplished in his books.

More than any other great philosopher in the English language, Santayana not only harmonized the two types of writing—the literary and the philosophical—but also made harmonization of this sort a fundamental resource in his doctrinal outlook. In the preface to *Scepticism and Animal Faith* he writes that if the reader is tempted to smile at the idea that he is offering “one more system of philosophy,” he smiles as well.¹ Despite its systematic structure, Santayana’s philosophy was intended to be an expression of the author’s personal experience and imaginative interpretation of his life as he lived it. Neither in his works nor in anyone else’s, he thought, could a reader find the certitude and objectivity that so many others promised.

In taking this attitude, Santayana believed that philosophical speculation was inherently a literary pursuit and therefore a branch of the humanities rather than of the sciences. Santayana sought to further humanistic acuties that would permeate philosophy as they also permeate fine arts and the various forms of criticism that interpret and evaluate them. He denied that these different facets of human inspiration could be reduced or rendered subservient to technical procedures that science (correctly) employs for its own expertise. He recognized that the life of the mind, above all in the humanities, becomes stunted when artificial barriers are reared between philosophy and literature or between philosophy and history or, in a different dimension, between creative and critical insights. Ideally these would not be separated from one another. To the extent that they establish a harmonious interpenetration, they enrich each other.

Above all in the United States, but now in most other countries, intellectual and academic fields have become increasingly splin-

tered in the twentieth century, even split into hermetically distinct compartments. The long humanistic tradition that linked the early Renaissance to the art and history of the ancient world, and then continued to evolve for the next five hundred years, has suffered disabilities from which it may never recover. In the past few decades, the danger to the humanistic spirit has accelerated greatly. As a reminder of what we have had, and as a model for what we may yet regain as a supplement to the new achievements on which we can rightly pride ourselves, Santayana's books merit the renewed study that some scholars are now giving them. Though far from completed, the new critical edition of his works has already encouraged this return to Santayana and what he represents as a philosopher.²

In a book published in 1949, Somerset Maugham laments the fact that it was in the service of philosophy that Santayana used his "great gifts, gifts of imagery, of metaphor, of apt simile and of brilliant illustration." Maugham doubts that philosophy needs "the decoration of a luxuriance so lush." He regretfully concludes: "It was a loss to American literature when Santayana decided to become a philosopher rather than a novelist."³

In saying this, Maugham fails to recognize that Santayana's literary gifts were not employed for mere decoration, even when his prose was lush and luxuriant, but rather as the means by which he could express his view of the world in a way that transcends any preconceptions about what either literature or philosophy "ought" to be. Santayana's fusion of the two disciplines was an enrichment, not a loss, to both American philosophy and American literature.

Writing in 1937, John Crowe Ransom said: "Among philosophical personalities probably the most urbane and humanistic since Socrates is Mr. Santayana."⁴ In one of his letters Santayana remarks: "In my old-fashioned terminology, a Humanist means a person saturated by the humanities: Humanism is something cultural: an accomplishment, not a doctrine."⁵ In renouncing hu-

manism as a doctrine, Santayana was asserting his usual belief that the imagination must never be constrained by any fixed or codified tenets. By serving as an accomplishment, humanism would illustrate the fact that virtually all areas of learning can find a home within the mentality of a person who is truly cultivated and radically enlightened. Santayana's writings themselves embody the highest aspirations of this humanistic faith, and throughout its subtle modulations his thought serves to buttress even the most diversified types of humanism.

Nevertheless, Santayana's philosophical novel *The Last Puritan* was generally neglected by professionals in literature as well as philosophy for almost sixty years after it was first published, and during most of that time there existed no inexpensive edition that English-language readers could readily acquire. For the most part Santayana's other works were ignored not only by the prevailing tendencies in contemporary thought but also by the popular culture. His ideas survived mainly in a few well-turned epigrams, such as the famous line (often misquoted) from *Reason in Common Sense*: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."⁶ These words were traced in large letters on a placard just behind the altar in Jonestown, Guyana. After the massacre they were visible in photographs of the site that appeared in newspapers. They were, in fact, the only text to be seen—like holy script wrenched out of context.

This desecration of Santayana's perceptiveness, and the unfriendliness toward his philosophy in academic circles, may yet be rectified. My hope is partly based on healthy changes that are now occurring. More than at any time since Santayana's death in 1952, work is being done in the kind of humanistic approach that Santayana favored. In various ways, though not massively as yet, American philosophy is returning to questions about the nature and quality of human experience, of living the good life, of creating or discover-

ing values and expressing them in action as well as works of art. In Santayana's day the subject matter would have been called morals. The French still use the word *moralité* in this fashion, though the practice itself seems to be almost as imperiled with them as it is in the United States. The study of morals includes what philosophers currently categorize as "normative ethics." It is best investigated by thinkers who are at home in all the areas of the humanities—in history, literature, and the other arts, as well as in the broadest spectrum of philosophical speculation.

In this realm of the intellect Santayana's contribution is, I believe, superior to the efforts of any other American philosopher. I do not minimize the importance of his work in more technical branches of philosophy—in ontology, epistemology, aesthetics proper—but Santayana's achievement as a humanistic thinker is what I admire most of all.



Concentrating on that aspect of Santayana's productivity, my chapters cluster about his insight into the nature of imagination. In book after book, beginning with *The Sense of Beauty* in 1896 and continuing throughout his career as a philosopher, Santayana charted the ever-present functioning of what he called "the constructive imagination" in human existence.⁷ "The systematic relations in time and space," he wrote, "and their dependence upon one another are the work of our imagination. . . . Unless human nature suffers an inconceivable change, the chief intellectual and aesthetic value of our ideas will always come from the creative action of the imagination."⁸ The work he did in this area primarily interested the two persons to whom my book is dedicated. From these mentors at Harvard, I first learned how to appreciate Santayana's thought. Their enthusiasm eventuated in my pilgrimage to the man himself, and

that propelled me into the explorations embodied in later pages of this book.

When I studied at Harvard shortly after the Second World War, Henry David Aiken was the most dynamic teacher in philosophy there at the time, and virtually the only one whose interests ranged through all the fields of the humanities. He was the resident aesthete and a former student of David W. Prall and Ralph Barton Perry. Prall had taught courses similar to Santayana's, and Perry had been a disciple of William James. Through this derivation one could feel that Aiken, at his best, exemplified the spirit and many of the ideals of the Golden Age of Harvard philosophy to which Santayana belonged.

As an undergraduate I had the good fortune to meet Walter Jackson Bate and to become one of the students he befriended. His specialty was English literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, but he saw in Santayana's belletristic style a living proof that philosophy could still express itself in vibrant and graceful writing. For Bate as for Aiken, philosophy remained a humanistic activity rather than a conglomeration of inquiries into logic, linguistics, or the foundations of science. They revered Santayana as one of the last humanists in this sense of the word. Aiken and Bate were both convinced that liberal education attains its greatest sustenance in writing such as his.

Neither Aiken nor Bate found Santayana's beliefs wholly tenable. At different times in his career, Aiken preferred the philosophy of Hume, the pragmatists, English and American logical analysis, and (for a while) Continental existentialism. At an early age, Bate had fallen under the influence of Alfred North Whitehead, whom he knew in the Society of Fellows at Harvard. Whitehead's idealistic organicism plays a substantive role in Bate's work, whereas Santayana's combination of Platonism and materialism does not.

For Bate as for Aiken, Santayana nevertheless served as a model

of what could be attained by literary philosophy and philosophical literary criticism. Aiken detailed Santayana's comprehensive importance in an essay entitled "George Santayana: Natural Historian of Symbolic Forms," and Bate chose him as the only twentieth-century philosopher writing in English who was worth including in his anthology of the history of criticism.⁹ Whitehead himself, when asked which living philosopher was "most likely to be read in the future," is reported to have answered: Santayana.¹⁰

When I began to read Santayana, in one of Aiken's courses, books like *Reason in Art*, *The Sense of Beauty*, and *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* initially seemed to me somewhat archaic and very unequal in quality. Much of their contents I could not understand, and long stretches appeared precious and overblown. I could see the many evidences of a brilliant mind, but I was not able to perceive the coherent structure that unifies Santayana's statements in even these early works. During a year that I spent at Oxford doing graduate study, I read *The Last Puritan* as an antidote to the philosophy of ordinary language that was practiced there in those days (1949–50). The novel left me unsatisfied, however, and it was almost out of determination to discover what I had been missing that I decided to look for Santayana himself when I would be in Italy the following summer.



I had no idea where he was living, but someone suggested that the authorities at San Giovanni in Laterano—the Mother Church of Rome—would surely know. I went there and talked to a priest who became very indignant when I referred to Santayana as an American philosopher. "He is *not* an American," he said. "He is a Spaniard." I muttered something about Santayana's having lived in America for forty years, but the priest continued to glower and so I turned

away. But then an inner voice must have moderated his anger at my obvious ignorance. He called me back and told me that Santayana was living in the sanatorium of the English Blue Nuns adjacent to the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo.

I was surprised at how easy it was to meet Santayana. Having learned that I was a graduate student at Harvard, he sent word that he would welcome a visit the following afternoon. I hardly knew what to expect. The only great philosopher I had ever met was Alfred North Whitehead. In December 1947, when I was still an undergraduate, Bate had pushed me into a telephone booth and insisted that I call the Whitehead residence. Mrs. Whitehead answered the phone and arranged for me to see her husband immediately. I had an hour's conversation with him two weeks before he died. Dressed in a dark suit and wearing a bright blue cravat, the eighty-year-old Whitehead looked cherubic. Having tea with him was like chatting with a modest and extremely gentle parson who had somehow been transplanted from Cambridge, England, to Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was reluctant to talk about himself or his ideas. He remarked that he no longer read the books and articles on his philosophy that were sent to him—"I just turn the pages occasionally," he said—but he was eager to know what was going on in the world of philosophy in general. He kept asking what the young people at Harvard were interested in nowadays.

My visit with Santayana was totally different. Since it was a hot day in August and my wife and I were bicycling through the countryside, I arrived dressed in scanty Italian shorts. When Santayana opened the door to his room in the sanatorium, his first words were: "I am so glad that you are dressed informally. For I am always, as you see, in my pajamas." For about three hours Santayana regaled us with reflections about everything that came to mind. He seemed to want to talk only about the world as he experienced it, about himself and his ideas. He asked very few questions that might encourage a re-