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Santayana's Concept of Sympathy and Literary Tradition

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ABSTRACT

Starting from some reflections that Santayana addresses to the literary critic William Bysshe Stein in one of his letters, the aim of this paper is to show that the relationship between Santayana's concept of sympathy and the concept of sympathy as it was treated in Anglo-American literature is multifaceted and, for this reason, stimulating. This line of comparison leads to the conclusion that Anglo-American literature inherits the major fault of modern philosophy, that one of projecting into the nature concepts and words which do not express the real meaning of sympathy.

Keywords: Sympathy, Subjectivism, Humanism, Idealism, Naturalism.

RESUMEN

A partir de la reflexión que Santayana le envía en una de sus cartas al crítico literario William Bysshe Stein, el objetivo de este artículo es mostrar que la relación entre el concepto de comprensión en Santayana y el concepto de comprensión tal como es abordado en la literatura anglo-americana es multifacético y, por esa razón, estimulante. Esta línea de comparación conduce a la conclusión de que la literatura anglo-americana hereda el mayor error de la filosofía moderna, el de proyectar en la naturaleza conceptos y palabras que no expresan el significado real de la comprensión.

Palabras clave: comprensión, subjetivismo, humanismo, idealismo, naturalismo.

In a letter to the young literary critic W. B. Stein, now published in the Book Eight of *The Letters of Santayana*, the last major contribution by Holzberger and his team to the critical edition of the works of the Spanish-American philosopher, Santayana clarifies his views on literary criticism in a way that calls into question his meaningful concept of “sympathy”. “Matters of taste are matters of sympathy”, he says about the judgment of his friend and literary critic Robert Bridges on Shakespeare. In order to understand Santayana’s words, it is appropriate, however, to report more extensively the passage of the letter containing this statement:

I myself am not distressed at the bawdy jokes in Shakespeare; they are part of the fun of human life, and he was pouring out his riches from a cornucopia, carrots [*sic*] and onions with the lilies and violets. It was the Renaissance – matters of taste are matters of sympathy: people who have no taste except for onions sin from ignorance and sensibility, not from liking onions, which is not a sin¹.

The aim of this paper is to show that these words, which Santayana wrote in the last years of his life, confirm once again the views, the feelings and the moods that he expressed in all his works.

As regards the concept of sympathy, it is my opinion that these words can help to enlighten the relationship between Santayana’s concept of sympathy and the concept of sympathy as it was treated in Anglo-American literature.

Anglo-American writers inherited the mutual relationship between two apparently opposite concepts, such as sympathy and impersonality, from Scottish philosophers like D. Hume and A. Smith. According to T.S. Eliot, a very influential literary critic in the first half of the twentieth century, whose literary tastes are in some way shared by Santayana, as it is said in the aforementioned letter, “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality”. Through this “process of depersonalization” the mind of an artist moves from a subjective

to an objective reality working like “a catalyst”, for example like a filamentum of platinum, whose function is to make it possible the chemical reaction between two gases without entering into combination with them. For Eliot, “[t]he mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material” [Eliot (1922), pp. 93-94].

But this analogy between art and science, which Eliot outlines, lends itself to criticism because in this perspective a coolly imaging and an artificial device are adopted by the “impersonal” artist in order to conceive or to enter into the sentiments which are to be expressed, and this way seems far from achieving sympathy. Nevertheless this strand of ideas was a commonplace of literary realism in England and in United States in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Henry James, for example, had supported an analogous impersonal point of view stating that art is a “chemical process, the crucible or retort from which things emerge for a new function” [James (1914), p.275]. Of course, within this scientific frame, for James art “requires, above all things, a suppression of one’s self, a subordination of one’s self to an idea” and imposes the following imperatives: “You must forget yourself in your ideas” or even “You must be *possessed*, and you must strive to possess your possession” [James (1956), pp. 136-137].

On the other side, many European and American critics judged James “cold-blooded” and “unsympathetic” with his own works. In some way this criticism seems justified in the light of James’s intellectualistic attitude towards an impersonal point of view reminding the Smithian concept of “impartial spectator”. However, it is to be noticed that, for James, “the teller of a story is primary, nonetheless, the listener of it, the reader of it too” [James (1934), p. 63]. Therefore, within the same hermeneutical context of other

“realists”, he tried, in his own way, to show how the artist allows us “to live the life of others” [James (1956), p.33].

Actually an American writer who influenced James as a novelist was N. Hawthorne, whom he appreciated for his ability in translating “his heavy moral burden into the very substance of the imagination” [James (1879), p.46]. On him we should focus, now, to grasp the concept of sympathy within the frame of American literature, since this is something specifically noticed by Santayana. In Hawthorne’s famous *The Scarlet Letter*, sympathy plays an important and complex role, since it is the locus of arising psychological, ethical, religious, and social sentiment.

It has often been observed that in Hawthorne’s novels the first and heavier consequence of sin is the isolation of an individual from the community. As it is described in *The Scarlet Letter*, isolation is a horrible condition which is developing in many ways: the first, the macroscopical, moral and social isolation of Hester Prynne by means of her marked letter “A”; the second, the inner, hidden, moral and religious isolation of Dimmesdale, whose “intercourse with the ordinary everyday world is no longer open to him” [Fick (1955), p. 104]; the third, chosen and intentional, the isolation of Chillingworth in hiding his identity to discover the secret identity of Pearl’s father.

In each of these cases, sympathy is always a strong bond, though it operates in a different manner. For Hester, “shame”, “despair”, “solitude”, do not provoke an absolute rebellion to the rules of community; rather they become her “teachers”, making her strong and capable to gain forgiveness from the community and to return to it. As Hawthorne says, it was as if the letter “gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in others’ hearts” [Hawthorne (1991), p. 80]². For Dimmesdale, the Puritan minister of the community, his unconfessed sin is what causes his mind’s disorder, but is also what makes him more closed to people’s sufferings. On the other side, sympathy can operate as immoral bond, as it is in the case of Chillingworth, who is sure to discover the adulterer’s partner

reading in his mind the effect of a sin that he himself knows. In any case, the way of sympathy is not easily open. For Hester it will arrive after an unsuccessful attempt to convince her lover to evade the community, later for Dimmesdale. Though the latter submits to the law of the community, there is a “lack of sympathy”, as J. Alkama puts forward, which “governs Dimmesdale’s action and attitudes”, since “as a minister he embodies the debilitating Puritan sovereignty that has victimized Hester and Pearl”; but, at the same time, because of his evading his paternal obligations, “his inattention to Pearl may be, from Hawthorne perspective, the worst of his sins” [Alkama (1997), p.73]. However, sympathy arises in Dimmesdale’s benevolence towards the sinners of community. On the contrary, the abstract sense of justice which Chillingworth declares as motive of his actions, is a lack of sympathy not overcome and shifts into sin because of his unnatural want of intruding in the secrets of Dimmesdale’s heart.

Finally, public confession is the solution of the sin both on religious and on social side, and it is also the validation of sympathy as social bond, indeed as a domestic bond, since as again Alkama states, “[t]he source of sympathy, in Common Sense thought is the home, and it is through the operation of domesticity that the most dramatic transformation of the novel may be understood” [Alkama (1997), p. 78].

At this point a rightful objection could be the following: since we know that Santayana has never shown to appreciate such a limited concept of sympathy, why dwell on this topic?

The point is that Santayana himself, in his famous “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy”, refers to Hawthorne as one of the “three American writers whose personal endowment was perhaps the finest”, together with Emerson and Poe. But, in the same time, he is caustic in emphasizing the inherent limitations of their mind. For him

The genius of Poe and Hawthorne, and even of Emerson, was employed on a sort of inner play, or digestion of vacancy. It was a refined labor, but it was in

danger of being morbid, or tinkling, or self-indulgent. It was a play of intramental rhymes. Their mind was like an old music-box, full of tender echoes and quaint fancies. These fancies expressed their personal genius sincerely, as dreams may; but they were arbitrary fancies in comparison with what a real observer would have said in the premises. Their manner, in a word, was subjective. In their own persons they escaped the mediocrity of the genteel tradition, but they supplied nothing to supplant it in other minds³.

This aspect leads us to reflect on an aspect of sympathy not clearly arisen, until now, within this literary approach. I refer to sympathy as a way of understanding not only social bonds among human beings, but also as a deeper bond, such as the one between human being and nature.

Indeed the criticism of subjectivism that Santayana moves towards the three American writers can be compared to the criticism of idealism and humanism that he addresses to W. Wordsworth, the English poet, celebrated for his “naturalism”. But, according Santayana, instead of championing “naturalism”, Wordsworth, “a poet of landscape”, since “the landscape was the scene of human nature...was still fundamental a poet of human life, or merely of his personal experience”. For this reason, “when he talked of nature he was altogether moralizing and subject to the pathetic fallacy; but when he talked of man, or of himself, he was unfolding a part of nature, the upright human heart, and studying it in its truth” [Santayana (1956), 29-30].

In a similar vein Santayana criticizes American poet’s naturalism. In his writings he often focuses on “American imagination” referring to all major American poets through criticisms and reflections not easy to grasp: apart from Santayana’s usual ironical attitude, in his writings the reader finds a complex interweaving of both contempt and appreciation for the different sides of American mind. That is what we now should try to understand starting from a point of view which goes beyond the known question about his “Americanism”. To this end it seems possible to see Santayana close to Henry James (whose relation to the genteel tradition is moreover remarked by

the former), because they surely shared a similar double mind, Euro-American, and, more profoundly, they shared the same interest for the kind of philosophy that is involved in the American poetry and literature of nineteenth century. For James, “[t]he great question as to a poet or a novelist is, How does he feel about life? what, in the last analysis, is his philosophy?” [James (1878), p. 238]. For Santayana, “Why was one poet’s inspiration turned into a convention rather than another’s?”⁴.

In this regard we have to notice that for Santayana sympathy is a way to understand nature within limits beyond which reason and sympathy give way to mere fancy and dreams and that this is what happens especially in German transcendentalism, while it is only an embedded risk in American transcendentalism, as it is different from the former, according to Santayana⁵. For him what saves American poets from this fatal error is their naturalism. American poets felt the mystery of the unity of nature in all its forms, including man, and tempted to express such an inexplicable bond through sympathy: Henry D. Thoreau through his naïve though celebrated naturalism; Emerson and Whitman revealing “a more acute insight” into the nature. “There need no vows to bind Whom not each other seek but find. They give and take no pledge or oath, Nature is the bond of both”, says Emerson in his *Celestial Love* expressing a sentiment by no means shared by Santayana. The same sense of identity with nature is expressed by Whitman in his famous lines: “There was a child went forth every day...The early lilacs become part of this child And grass, and white and red morningglories, and white and red clover, and the song of the phoebe bird...”⁶.

However Santayana does not share the naturalism of both poets for opposite reasons. On the one hand Emerson, whose great merit was to be “too keen, too perceptive, and too independent” to be totally absorbed in the genteel tradition, “fed on books...And to feed on books, for a philosopher or a poet is still to starve. Books can help him to acquire form or to avoid pitfalls they cannot supply with substance, if he is to have any”⁷. On the other hand Whitman,

with his instinctive and undifferentiated love for nature, “is nothing if not a spectator, a cosmic poet to whom the whole world is a play. And good and evil, although not equally pleasant to experience, are equally interesting to look....The world is so heavenly to him that he finds nothing to do in it”⁸. On the one hand a bookish knowledge supports Emerson’s transcendentalism converting nature in his own view of nature. On the other hand, instead, “the singularity of Whitman’s genius” so “full of sympathy and receptivity” is connected with no education”, *ergo* “no ideal”⁹.

But Santayana belongs entirely to the particular country, not geographical but cultural, of learned people, so he could still say with Henry James that the moral is “that the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it takes a great deal of history to produce little literature, that it needs a complex machinery to set a writer in motion”¹⁰.

But even these cannot be the last words to enlighten Santayana’s sympathetical stance in literature. At this point I must stress two philosophically significant aspects of the concept of sympathy in Santayana: first, for him sympathy *is* reason, and it is intended as the power to understand and to interact with other living beings and even with physical nature (when it is object of aesthetical intuition, for example). Second, beyond this boundary, nature opens a different field of experience which is exploited by two other systems of knowledge, each of which has its own means, aims and language: they are common sense (not the Common Sense of Scottish philosophers, of course, but that one of lay people) and science¹¹. These last two approaches put no doubt in the existence of matter and of a world independent from ideas and governed by causal laws. The decisive fault of modern philosophy has been that one of projecting into the nature concepts and words unfitting as it is the term “idea”, and this fault was absorbed by modern literary tradition as well.

Indeed the only poet of nature for Santayana is one of the three philosophical poets, Lucretius. Being “a poet of universal nature”,

he “studied everything in its truth”. He also “sees human life and human idealism”, but sees them “in their mutual setting” and for this reason “has a saner and a mature view of both than has Wordsworth”. Finally

Nature, for the Latin poet, is really nature. He loves her and fears her, as she deserves to be loved and feared by her creatures...Lucretius sees everything in its causes, and in its total career. One breath of lavish creation, one iron law of change, runs through the whole, making all things kin in their inmost elements and in their last end. Here is the touch of nature indeed, her largeness and eternity. Here is the true echo of the life of matter....¹²

That is sympathy.

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NOTES

¹ *The Letters of George Santayana*, Book Eight, 1948-1952, edited with an Introduction by William G. Holzberger, in: *The Works of George Santayana*, H.J. Saatkamp & W.G. Holzberger eds., Vol. V, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p. 196.

² About the “sympathetic bond” between Hester and “her fellow sinners”, see: Male, R.R. (1953) ‘Hawthorne and The Concept of Sympathy’, *PMLA*, vol. LXVIII, No 1, p. 143.

³ Santayana, G. (1991), ‘The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy’, in *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana*, edited with an Introduction by Douglas L. Wilson (1967), reprinted with an Introduction by R. Dawidoff (1998), Bison Books Edition, University of Nebraska Press, pp. 43-44.

⁴ Santayana, G. (1968), ‘Walt Whitman: A Dialogue’, in *Santayana on America: Essays, Notes, and Letters on American Life, Literature, and Philosophy*, Richard Colton Lyon ed., New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, p. 288.

⁵ Santayana, G., 'The Genteel Tradition', p. 45.

⁶ Whitman, W., *There was a child went forth*, in *Leaves of Grass*.

⁷ Santayana, G., 'The Genteel Tradition', pp. 43-4.

⁸ Santayana, G., 'Walt Whitman: A Dialogue', p. 290.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 293-4.

¹⁰ James, H., *Hawthorne*, p. 2. It is right to recall how much controversial is also James's attitude towards Emerson and other American transcendentalists, as it has been often underlined. See, for example: Wellech R. (1958), 'Henry James Literary Theory and Criticism', *American Literature*, vol. xxx, No 3, pp. 293-321; Jobe S.H. (1990), 'Henry James and the Philosophical Actor', *American Literature*, vol. LXII, No 1, pp.32-43.

¹¹ These are the main points of my communication, 'The Concept of Dramatic Sympathy in Santayana's Philosophy', submitted to the III Conference on Santayana, 16-19 November 2009, forthcoming.

¹² Santayana, G. (1956), *Essays in Literary Criticism*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, p. 30.

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