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Reading Santayana's Marginalia

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GEORGE SANTAYANA, *Santayana's Marginalia: The Works of George Santayana*, vol. VI. 2 bks. Edited by John McCormick, MIT press, Cambridge, MA, 2011 ISBN: 978-0-262-01629-2 (vol. 1) pp xxix + 495; ISBN: 978-0-262-01630-8 (vol. 2.) pp xix + 460

Santayana's Marginalia is a wonderful book. Without a doubt, Santayana scholars will welcome this latest publication from MIT's series of his complete works. It is not, as the financial times require, a complete record of his marginalia, ignoring those that were previously published (on Royce and Lotze) and the occasional book that was unavailable to the editor. But it is a fantastic resource, cradling Santayana's jewels of wit, profundity and his spontaneous lyrical outbursts. The *Marginalia* covers Santayana's extant library, listing authors of texts in alphabetical order, whether or not they received marginalia. Each section contains the passage from the text, followed by his marginalia printed underneath. John McCormick introduces the volume and offers his expert editorial and interpretative comments. The text is presented in a variety of different fonts to distinguish between quotes from his library, his actual marginalia, his underlining, and the editor's remarks. Translations of non-English passages are also provided. The result is not the most beautiful page but the variety of fonts offers the reader the delightful, nearly visceral impression that he is rifling through the books and notes of the author. And there is a wealth of information here. We uncover Santayana's insightful remarks upon famous philosophers, but we are also thumbing through his library; revealing a world of

fascinating and obscure texts, now forgotten. The marginalia offer insight into the intellectual world of the early twentieth century but they also reveal Santayana's spontaneous and private intellectual moments. As John McCormick writes in his introduction, the marginalia reveal Santayana being: "quirky, always critical, sometimes slangy, literary, frivolous, and sometimes bitchy: only that word will do" (p. xii).

Interest in a philosopher's marginalia is usually limited to the experts. But Santayana has always had an appeal outside of professional philosophy due to the breadth of his interests and his unique and beautiful writing style. Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Santayana's Marginalia* has this wider appeal, for Santayana's spontaneous prose is still a delight. "Religion" he wrote in Caird's book *The Evolution of Religion*, "is a joyful sacrifice of the soul: it is not true or false" (1:128). Scholars will appreciate the contrast between Santayana's public prose and his private remarks. The contrast (as McCormick notes) between Santayana's "friendly" public review of John Dewey and his marginalia reveals the depth of Santayana's passionate critique. Here the marginalia reveal how philosophers are most severe in their criticism to those whose views are closest to their own.

But we also find him taking on the luminaries of the time, in particular Henri Bergson and F. H. Bradley. Writing of the latter, Santayana's passion breaks out: "How can this distinction be defended? This is disgusting. Your absolute reeks with evil: it is a poor and helpless man of sentience" (1:80). Helpless Bergson also comes in for criticism: "His own mind is fanatically closed to almost all ideas. His smooth language and wide information (not always correct or impartial) are gathered as protective colouring for his bitter hatred of the intellect" (1:64). But one might worry that this harsh criticism could be turned upon Santayana himself, given his smooth prose and the dearth of explicitly formulated arguments in his corpus. There is more. *Santayana's Marginalia* includes his comments on many others: "Bertie" Russell, Alfred Whitehead, R. J. Collingwood, William James, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger,

Jacques Maritain, Hans Vaihinger, and his friend, Charles Strong. Santayana's relationship to the phenomenological movement is relatively unexplored territory and so his remarks here are particularly intriguing. The great historical authors aren't forgotten: Plato, Lucretius, Spinoza, Mill, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Spencer and Hegel all receive fascinating comment.

Particularly interesting is Santayana's notes on books about himself. In his marginalia on Milton Karl Munitz's *The Moral Philosophy of Santayana* we find some insightful reflections. Munitz writes that Santayana's "contributions to ontology and the theory of knowledge are best viewed as outgrowths of an interest in exploring the environment in which the activities of life take place" which sounds like a decent summary of a naturalist's motive. Santayana steers us back, writing: "Religion was my original interest, and to substitute truth for function in placing human life." (2:70). When Munitz describes nature as dynamic, quantitative and qualitative Santayana notes "This passage is excellent" but is clearly annoyed when Munitz makes essence the product of the imagination. More intriguing is Santayana's uncertain replies to Munitz's claim that he has two conceptions of the spiritual life: detachment and understanding (the latter requiring engagement.) Santayana complains: "spiritual life is not "engaged in inquiry". It is a culmination concomitant with all life; but in anxious inquiry there is an element of slavery and distraction" (2:73).

John McCormick's marvelous editing and interpretative remarks are worth noting and may be an occasion for some friendly criticism. McCormick offers interpretative remarks that are quite noticeable. Occasional interpretative comments can have considerable effect upon the reader, perhaps more than a full-blown running commentary, because the comments are more memorable to the reader due to their relative rarity. Such comments are therefore rather important to directing the reader's interpretation. Exactly what receives an editorial commentary and what does not becomes important, given the dramatic effect such comments can have upon the read-

er's memory. In reaction to a passage on love from Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* Santayana wrote "penetrating analysis" (1:9) and McCormick asks: "Ironic underlining?" and when Santayana makes a note about the state of Italian politics McCormick writes: "Alleged to approve of Mussolini's Fascism, Santayana here strongly implies criticism" (1:14). In the marginalia to M. P. Nicolas' *De Nietzsche a Hitler* (2:89) Santayana writes above Nicolas' long description of Nazis and anti-Semitism: "You can't get one chosen people to love another". McCormick footnotes the passage, remarking: "Here Santayana is not only anti-Semitic but also cynical." McCormick also identifies subtle anti-Semitism. When Munitz claims the spiritual life recalls the spirit from its concern with the intelligible structure of nature "... it is essentially a variant of the advice to render unto Caesar those things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's, and of the belief that the Kingdom of God is within us." Santayana writes: "Not bad company. Better than New York!" McCormick instructs us: "to the seasoned reader, this translates into one more expression of anti-Semitism" [sic]. But other significant social attitudes are not marked. Santayana underlined a passage in Collingwood's *The New Leviathan*. Collingwood wrote: "For there can be no such difference between communities; because a type of demand which a community lacks even the power to satisfy soon ceases to be a demand." (1:157) Santayana comments: "Ask the simpler class or tribe or woman about this!" And after a long horrible passage of pseudo-Hegelianism, penned by Plato scholar Benjamin Jowett, Santayana writes: "female philosophy". Although Santayana's apparent anti-Semitism is remarked on, his apparent sexism is not.

But McCormick becomes passionate in his defense of Santayana and other favorites. For example, Santayana writes on a passage from Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*: "Style and philosophy slump together." Incredulous that Santayana would criticize Thomas Mann, McCormick writes a complex note: "Santayana's comment may be unfair. Mann give us Hans Castrop's meandering reflections, meandering in part because he suffers the constant fever

of a man slowly dying of tuberculosis, hence “slump”. But if the comment describes Mann’s own style, it is mistaken, surely” (2:9). Here McCormick is more an interpreter than an editor.

McCormick also likes to note the rare reference in Santayana’s corpus. The Dreyfus affair (1:7), the philosopher Unamuno and Santayana’s reflection on homosexuality and monstrosity (1:9) are each marked for being topics Santayana wrote *little* about. One might puzzle over why such rare comments on issues Santayana cared little about should be noted for the reader. McCormick’s interpretations are thus controversial including some of his minor comments. He frequently tells the reader that Santayana is paraphrasing, but occasionally Santayana’s comments looked more critical than summary. Santayana’s comments on Bradley (1:78), for example, seemed to mix paraphrase with criticism and were not merely summarizing Bradley’s views. But an editor is always an interpreter, even if we desire to keep their roles separate. McCormick’s editing and interpretations, along with his guides to the texts, are a fantastic stimulus for a new look at Santayana’s corpus, through the lens of the marginalia.

Santayana’s Marginalia is not a book to read from cover to cover, having no plot or argument to carry us along. Instead, one will flip through its pages, ready to dive into the potpourri of fascinating information provided, whether it is Santayana’s brilliant reflections, McCormick’s cheeky and stimulating interpretations, or the world of academics and philosophers long passed away. It is a marvelous resource and a fascinating read.

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