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‘Lovers of beauty’—George Santayana and his contemporaries

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Title of the dissertation: ‘Lovers of beauty’ – George Santayana and his contemporaries. The oeuvres of George Santayana, Fred Holland Day and Edward Perry Warren as exemplifications of aesthetics of existence influenced by the platonic Eros

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Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* put “genealogy of desiring man” in the center and placed techniques of the self, self-creation and arts of existence into the first line of philosophical debates (Foucault 1990: 5). Foucault and his contemporary, Pierre Hadot’s works affected Alexander Nehamas’ and Richard Shusterman’s thoughts on the aesthetics of existence. Foucault is a turning point, the man who opened the door to the subject matter of therapy of desire. He gave one of the best analyses of the connection between ancient Greek philosophy and lifestyle. Hadot highlighted (1995: 80-83) that we have to esteem Plato’s works as “thought-practices” and spiritual exercises. Alexander Nehamas in *The Art of Living, Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* consistently applied the term “philosophers of the art of living”. I agree with his suggestion that there is no one definitely acceptable lifestyle which can be convenient for everyone, and philosophical life can be only one possible way

among others, but it must be admitted that a philosophical conception which is indeed the art of life does exist (Nehamas 1998: 2-3).

The serious questions of private perfection and self-creation can be the basis of an *ethics of personality*. In Nietzsche's view the greatest examples of the ethics of personality fascinate with his or her existence. According to Agnes Heller the ethics of personality is always the ethics of one person. It is impossible to write a treatise about ethics of personality, in general. We have to illustrate it, if we want to speak about it. So, we have to examine one paradigmatic case, one person, one life, to illustrate its essence (Heller 1994: 7). I believe that we cannot ignore the work's creator when we postulate a personal life-philosophy composed into an oeuvre. Biographical features are essential elements of life-experience, which is a pawn of authenticity, but ideas have to be placed to the achronism of works of art. Writings, pictures, and statues are equally able to show up ideas, so I think we have to amplify the considerations focused on writings, and we have to examine the possibilities of ideas' appearances in different creations. An idea is the mirror of its creator, which helps the process *when one becomes what one is*.

My theory is about lovers of beauty, who tried to aestheticize their existences in different ways, but with the same goal: to make life into an *oeuvre*. They determined the aesthetic thought and artistic life of the USA from the end of the nineteenth century. George Santayana created an aesthetic ontology, Fred Holland Day made a photo composition (*Beauty is Truth*), which is the essence of his aesthetics of existence, and Edward Perry Warren spiritualized the male ideal shaped through the praising of the Uranian Eros. Santayana, Warren and Day revived something from the Greek tradition to the extent of some gorgeous creation but their relations to Platonism is very complicated and complex. Thinking in categories is impossible in their cases. For example, Santayana is not a pure Platonist nor a pure naturalist, he did not believe in independent *ideas*. In my thesis I displayed the sometimes very contradictory features toward Platonism in Santayana's, Day's and Warren's works. With

the aesthetics of the ecstatic feeling toward beauty they evoked the legacy of Winckelmann and every devoted follower of the Greek idea. Carnal beauty led them to the admiration of the spiritual and the admiration of beauty remained the basis of their thoughts. Their British contemporaries had made a huge influence on them, so the aesthetic Platonism became a living presence in America too in the nineteenth century. Perhaps these writers and artists did not know that their attraction created a new style. Indeed, Santayana's, Day's and Warren's completely shaped life-philosophy gave them a clear and liveable system of ideas, which was more real than their own, modern and changing world. These aesthetically sensitive thinkers re-eroticised the philosophical thoughts about self-creation and the aesthetic way of life. Santayana, Day and Warren did not leave behind only their transient lives, but permanent works with all of their motivations and passions.

I wrote a philosophical treatise, but Day and Warren were not philosophers. I wanted to display three different people who showed up complete and significant creations full of special meanings built up from the ancient philosophical tradition. It was very important for me, that Day's and Warren's works were completely unknown in Hungary. There is nothing about them in Hungarian. Santayana's case is very strange too, because there was only one translation from Santayana when I started my work. Hungarians knew only one essay of him, *The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy*. I would like to change this impossible situation. Certainly some pragmatist know Santayana's political writings, but generally his philosophy is an unexplored area. Edward Perry Warren is very little known even to Americans. However, he is one of the most important personalities in the history of American archeology and museology, but his literary and philosophical life-work is completely and deliberately forgotten. In all of his life Warren followed one idea, his artistic, poetical and philosophical activities show the same intention. The same passion sustained his works and life. He left behind something whole, that is really a precious record of his

life and of an idea. He truly honoured the Greek or Hellenist idea as he called it, and created a new theory of virtue. This theory became the essence of his oeuvre, he immortalized the most important thesis of his personal philosophy in it. In order to present the development of Warren's idea, I analysed all of his main works: *A Defence of Uranian Love I-II-III* (1928-1930), *Classical and American Education* (1918) and *The Wild Rose. A Volume of Poems* (1928). I did not want to write a traditional, historical treatise. I kept in mind the limits of personal ethics. I displayed the three exemplification in three different chapter but I wanted to show up the characteristics of these men's background. They knew each other; they had common friends and professors. I was interested in the milieu where they lived as young men. The end of the nineteenth century is a very important time in the history of the USA. Boston and the Harvard University had especially huge influence on the young intellectuals, so I examined the cultural background, the university reforms, the intellectual milieu and the cultural impacts. The profile of Day was a good opportunity to criticise Santayana's opinion about photography and the withdrawn lifestyle of Santayana gave the idea to present Warren's aesthetically determined life in his castle.

I chose the aesthetics of existence as clue in my work. I tried to add something to the philosophy of desiring. I suggest that the main feature in Santayana's, Day's and Warren's personality is desiring, after something had disappeared hundreds of years ago, and after the platonic admiration toward beauty. This desiring has an overt erotic trait, and its history of reception is full of obfuscations. Santayana, Day and Warren knew the enticing power of obfuscations well. There are congenial feelings in their works and letters. In my thesis I tried to insist that Plato, especially the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* exerted powerful influences on Santayana's, Day's and Warren's thoughts. Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* are the most important European philosophical texts about the power of Eros, about male love, about the higher forms of knowledge and beauty. There is a higher level of living in Plato's dialogues. According to

Plato, Socrates's friends lived freely, yoked only by amative instincts, but Socrates became the eternal symbol of moderation who wanted to liberate his friends from the shackles of sensual links. Nevertheless, Eros is important and needed, nothing can be vivid without it. Eros is the desire of "the everlasting possession of the good", "the love of generation and of birth in beauty", thus the desire of immortality (*Symposium*: 206 a-e). In the *Symposium* there is one of the most influential theses about rising from the carnal, the fleshly to spiritual, to heavenly, to the divine. At the top of Plato's imaginary ladder there is immortality and the revealed vision of *absolute beauty*, but platonic Eros is not a synonym for the ethereally clean spiritual longing without erotic features. As Gregory Vlastos declared: "Platonic love, is a peculiar mix of sensuality, sentiment, and intellect – a companionship bonded by erotic attraction no less than by intellectual give-and-take" (1973: 40). Santayana in his essay about *Platonic Love* avowed that Platonic love was the essence of Platonic philosophy (1931: 100). Warren and Day felt the same. In my dissertation I devoted a major effort to show up the importance of the influence of erotic passion on Santayana's, Day's and Warren's works. Santayana remarks in an essay that "if there is anything morbid in Platonic love, it is not its unnatural coldness, but its disproportionate fervor, not the barren egoism of it, but its suicidal self-surrender" (1913: 595). The cult of Eros was a living presence for the Victorian intellectuals. We can find the causes for this in the educational system and in their huge respect toward the classics. There are extended researches of Plato's influence on philosophical education in modern Europe. Linda Dowling observed that we could examine two completely different approach toward Plato's philosophy in the nineteenth century: "such leading university reformers as Benjamin Jowett were seeking to establish in Hellenism, the systematic study of Greek history and literature and philosophy, a ground of transcendent value alternative to Christian theology —the metaphysical underpinning of Oxford from the Middle Ages through the Tractarian movement" but "once they had done so, Pater and Wilde and the

Uranian poets could not be denied the means of developing out of this same Hellenism a homosexual counterdiscourse able to justify male love in ideal or transcendental terms: the “spiritual procreancy” associated specifically with Plato’s *Symposium* and more generally with ancient Greece itself” (Dowling 1996: xiii). We do not have to ignore the homoerotic sexual-aesthetic discourse around Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds and his contemporaries. Aesthetic Platonism derived and became stronger by Pater and Symonds in the nineteenth century. If we want to examine the Platonist features in Santayana’s, Day’s and Warren’s oeuvre we need to know every possible meaning of Plato’s words. Santayana’s remark determined my dissertation: “You must remember that we were not very much later than Ruskin, Pater, Swinburne, and Matthew Arnold: our atmosphere was that of poets and persons touched with religious enthusiasm or religious sadness. Beauty was then a living presence, or an aching absence, day and night: history was always singing in our ears: and not even psychology or the analysis of works of art could take away from art its human implications” —he wrote in a letter in 1928 (McCormick 1987: 84).

Many scholars agree that George Santayana had no independent aesthetic theory. The Spanish born philosopher’s own writings confirm the unnecessary of an isolated discipline called aesthetics. But the background of Santayana’s thoughts are very complex. He denied every scientific enclosure because he felt that aesthetic interest is not separable from all other interests. In one of his treatises about aesthetics (*What is Aesthetics?*, 1904) he wrote: “A single and complete aesthetic science, natural or ideal, is an idol of the cave and a scholastic chimera” (1904 :327). In Santayana’s view the sense of beauty, imagination and the aesthetic sensibility are the most important abilities in our lives. He created one of the first aesthetic writings in America in 1896, *The Sense of Beauty* but his ideas about the role of aesthetic in human knowledge became clearer after the publication of his *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, *Three Philosophical Poets*, and his autobiographies (*Persons and Places*, *The Middle Span*,

My Host the World). According to his works the creative activity of imagination can call forth the greatest aesthetic values. Santayana could not draw distinctions between moral and aesthetic values. We can find artistic and aesthetic terms in his descriptions about good life. Santayana valued good life as an objectified perfection or a work of art. Harmony plays the most important role in his theory: "Harmony, which called an aesthetic principle, is also the principle of health, of justice and of happiness — says Santayana" (1942: 20). Philosophizing was a lifestyle for Santayana, he called his philosophy a lay religion based on the disciplining of the mind and the heart. Thus, the early vital philosophy of Santayana and his own personal life is a perfect exemplification to display one paradigmatic case of an ethics of personality. Santayana's writings about searching for beauty are not isolated theoretical works, but poetically composed self-expressions, elements of his self-training. He created a contemplative life-philosophy. The main goal of this philosophy is aspiration toward happiness and perfection. Perfection is a very important but obfuscated concept in his writings. There is a possible meaning in connection with Platonist dialogues but there is another in connection with the aesthetics of Baumgarten who talks about the perfection of perception. I showed up the important role of association, imagination, perfection, happiness and beauty in Santayana's thinking. I provided a close reading of his early works but my main aim was to declare that the process of the writing and the created work is the interpretative reliving of Santayana's life and thoughts. Its biggest value is authenticity, which is the most important feature in a personal ethics. The thought of self-training connects Santayana's philosophy with ancient philosophical ideas and with the current philosophical theories of Hadot, Foucault, Nehamas, Nussbaum, Rorty and Shusterman. The good life to Santayana, as to the Greeks and to the followers of the Greek philosophical tradition, is both an art to be practiced and an ideal to be contemplated. Contemporary philosophical conceptions about philosophies of art of living and Santayana's remarks are connectible with each

other. I displayed Santayana as the forerunner of the current philosophical concepts about self-creation and aesthetic way of life, and as the successor of the ancient philosophies of care of the self.

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