

GEORGE SANTAYANA AND THE AMERICAN NATIONAL CHARACTER

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George Santayana left a lasting mark on our civilization primarily as a philosopher and as a man of letters. His five volume philosophy of civilization, *The Life of Reason*, was described by Charles Frankel as perhaps «the finest work in substantial moral philosophy produced in the twentieth century». But more than this, he is undoubtedly remembered as one of the supreme literary stylists in the history of philosophy, from whose pen flowed a series of exquisitely polished essays, poems, dialogues, and a novel.

Less attention, unfortunately, has been paid to him in recent years as a cultural critic and historian; and it is this aspect of Santayana's work which I have chosen to address in this paper. Specifically, I would like to consider his contribution to American cultural studies. My aim is two-fold. First, I believe that this contribution is significant enough to place him in a tradition of distinguished European writers, beginning with Hector St. John de Crevecoeur in the eighteenth century, who have given us deep and lasting insights into the American national character, insights which remain valid to this day. To this tradition belong such writers as Alexis de Tocqueville and Lord James Bryce in the nineteenth century, and D. W. Brogan, Gunnar Myrdahl and others in our own time.

My second purpose is more to the point: it is to argue that Santayana proposes an interesting resolution of two fundamentally conflicting accounts of the national character evident in this literary tradition. There is, on the one hand, the romantic view of Crevecoeur, shared by Thomas Jefferson and Frederick Jackson Turner among others, that the American is essentially an idealist and an individualist. On the other hand, Tocqueville observed the American to be, in his behavior, a materialist and a conformist.

In order to gather evidence to place Santayana in this literary tradition and to describe his approach to this controversy, this paper will be organized into four parts. I will begin with some relevant facts about his life, and will follow this with an account of his general view of American culture. Next I shall focus on his perspective as contained in the essay «The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy», and finally as he modified this perspective several years later in *Character and Opinion in the United States*.

I

George Santayana was born in Madrid on December 16, 1863. His mother had three children by a previous marriage to a Bostonian named Robert Sturgis to whom she had promised, before his death, to raise and educate them in New England. To keep this promise, she took them to Boston in 1869, leaving her husband who preferred to remain in Spain with his son.

Santayana lived with his father in Avila for the next three years. Throughout his life he returned to Avila frequently to visit his father and his half-sister, and he always considered it to be his home, his only home. In 1872, after coming to the conclusion that he could not offer his son the same educational opportunity in Spain, Santayana's father took him to Boston and left him with his mother.

He was nine years old at the time and did not know a word of English. The family continued to speak Spanish in the home, and so he was placed in a kindergarten class with younger children so that he might learn the language. After attending elementary school and the Boston Latin School, he entered Harvard College. In 1883, upon completion of his freshman year, Santayana returned to Spain to discuss his future with his father. Neither of the options presented to him, the military or foreign service, held much appeal. He described himself as feeling «like a foreigner in Spain» with an uncertain grasp of the language. «English had become my only possible instrument», he tells us. Curiously enough, he felt as much a foreigner to Anglo-Saxon culture and confessed, in later years, that «English, and the whole Anglo-Saxon tradition in literature and philosophy, have always been a medium to me rather than a source. My natural affinities were elsewhere».

One must turn to the subject of religion, an important element in Santayana's life and work, to understand something of these natural affinities. He called it the head and front of everything, and identified himself officially as a Catholic as «a matter of sympathy and traditional allegiance» and not as a practitioner who subscribed to the dogmas of the Church. He concluded that religion was largely the product of the human imagination. «But this carried an implication... against which every instinct in me rebelled, namely that the works of human imagination are bad. No, said I to myself even as boy: they are good, they alone are good.» John Dewey, in *A Common Faith*, acknowledges that it was Santayana who first appreciated the significant role imagination plays in religion, and adds in similar fashion that while religion is the product of human imagination, it is not made out of imaginary stuff. For Dewey, «it is made out of the hard stuff of physical and social experience».

Santayana attended Mass regularly in Boston as a youth, but he often attended Unitarian services as well, of which he has this to say:

I had heard many Unitarian sermons (being taken to hear them lest I should become too Catholic) and had been interested in them so far as they were rationalistic and informative, or even amusingly irreligious, as I often thought them to be; but neither in those discourses nor in Harvard philosophy was it easy for me to understand the Protestant combination of

earnestness and waywardness. I was used to see the water flowing from the fountains, architectural and above ground: it puzzled me to see it drawn painfully in bucketfuls from the subjective well, muddied, and half spilt over.

Throughout his life Santayana remained, in his basic temperament and especially in his attitude toward Protestant America, a Spanish Catholic who was always aware and proud of his Latin background.

In 1886, upon graduating from Harvard, he was awarded a two year fellowship to study in Germany. He returned to Harvard in 1889 to join the Philosophy Department where he remained until 1912. Among his colleagues, during this Golden Age of American Philosophy, were William James and Josiah Royce. And among his students were T. S. Eliot, Felix Frankfurter, Conrad Aiken, and Walter Lippmann, who was his assistant.

After a rather abrupt retirement in 1912 he moved to England and spent the years of World War I at Oxford (from 1914 to 1919). After the war he took up residence in Rome where he remained until his death in 1952. In 1941 at the age of 77 he permanently entered a nursing home in a convent near the Santo Stefano Rotondo. It was run by an order of English nuns, the Little Company of Mary, who are affectionately known as the Blue Sisters.

He died there of cancer on September 26, 1952. Although he had lived abroad from his native land throughout his life, he was still a Spanish citizen at the time of his death. And although he had long ceased to practice any religion, George Santayana always remained a Catholic with a profound love for the beauties of that rich religious and cultural heritage. His final request was to be buried in a Catholic cemetery. The American philosopher, Sterling Lamprecht, identified Santayana's three principal philosophical virtues as: (1) Piety in the Roman conception; (2) the Spirituality of the Greeks; (3) a Christian Charity, seeing the unavoidable failure of human aspirations. Note that these are not the rigorous intellectual virtues associated with philosophy in Anglo-Saxon and other cultures of northern Europe.

II

There are perhaps two approaches to the whole question of the national character of people. One approach is intuitive and impressionistic, and the other is more objective and methodical, that of the social or behavioral scientist. Santayana undoubtedly belongs to the school of impressionists. He was one of the few who openly acknowledged the risks and limitations of this approach. To talk about the national character of any people is to talk about a sketch or a caricature rather than a sharply focused photograph. Such a study is not an exact empirical science but is more akin to a myth, he tells us. «I speak of the American in the singular, as if there were not millions of them, north and south, east and west, of both sexes, of all ages, and of

various races, professions, and religions. Of course the one American I speak of is mythical, and it is perhaps as well to do so frankly.»

The American character was so vast and complex that he felt he had to speak symbolically. In *Character and Opinion in the United States* he writes:

As it happens, the symbolic American can be made largely adequate to the facts; because, if there are immense differences between individual Americans... there is a great uniformity in their environment, customs, temper, and thoughts. They have all been uprooted from their several soils and ancestries and plunged together into one vortex, whirling irresistibly in a space otherwise quite empty. To be an American is of itself almost a moral condition, an education, and a career. Hence a single ideal figment can cover a large part of what each American is in his character, and almost the whole of what most Americans are in their social outlook and political judgments.

What was, generally speaking, Santayana's view of America? To begin, it was the view of a detached and indifferent observer, a spectator. He had no strong feelings about or ties to American culture, and he summed up, what was only a tenuous connection, with these words: «Harvard College, a part of Boston, an occasional glimpse of New York made up my America... I have no American or English blood; I was not born in the United States; I have never become an American citizen... I never married or kept house or expected to end my days in America.»

But there was an ambivalence and perhaps even a touch of irony in all of this. His distaste for so much of American life (the tendency toward a mass society, the pretentiousness of the genteel class, the commercialism, etc.) was balanced by a sympathy for other elements. There was also an irony in his sense of detachment and indifference because Anglo-American culture was in a way part of his own heritage. His maternal grandfather, an exile from Spain, lived in Scotland and moved from Glasgow to Virginia where Santayana's mother spent her early years.

In 1900, in a collection of essays published under the title *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, he argues a fundamental distinction between the northern and southern cultures of Western Civilization. In an essay on «The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare» he concludes that Homer and Dante, as poets of the south, are superior to Shakespeare because they saw the universe as a drama «and endowed it with tragic unities». In a word, they lived in a symbolic universe which was translucent with meaning. By contrast, «the silence of Shakespeare and his philosophical incoherence have something in them that is still heathen; something that makes us wonder whether the northern mind, even in him, did not remain morose and barbarous at its inmost core».

Santayana generalized this last point by saying that in certain ways Anglo-Saxon

culture, at least to the extent that it embraces and is based upon industrialism and a domination of nature, is still a barbaric culture. In their rush toward industrialism, the cultures of the north have «disowned the natural furniture of the mind» which he identifies as «our sense, fancy, and pictorial knowledge». He knew, as a Latin and as a Spaniard, «that the great part of human life, by a biological necessity, must always be carried on in terms of *sense, passion, language*». Genteel, Puritan America is deficient in sense, passion, language. Which is to say it lacks a soul, the kind of soul that animates the cultures of the south. I would add that America, if it has this soul, has been given it by the immigrant and minority cultures of Southern and Eastern Europe as well as Africa and other parts of the world.

III

Shortly before he left the United States permanently in 1912, Santayana addressed the Philosophical Union of the University of California on «The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy». In this essay, which has become something of a classic statement, he proposes the thesis that America is divided into two mentalities, two personalities, each with its own distinct philosophy. Because it is such a young country with all the energies of youth, we might expect it to have been too absorbed in material preoccupations, «too much engrossed in living to reflect upon life or to have any philosophy». But the opposite is the case. Americans possessed a living philosophy, a distinct vision of the universe, from the beginning. «Not only have you found time to philosophize in California», Santayana tells his audience, «but the eastern colonists from the beginning were a sophisticated race. As much as in clearing the land and fighting Indians they were occupied, as they expressed it, in wrestling with the Lord».

Years later in *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920) he again underscores this point: that from the beginning America possessed a «pure flame of mind».

It is notorious how metaphysical was the passion that drove the Puritans to those shores; they went there in the hope of living more perfectly in the spirit. And their pilgrim's progress was not finished when they had founded their churches in the wilderness; an endless migration of the mind was still before them, a flight from those new idols and servitudes which prosperity involves, and the eternal lure of spiritual freedom and truth ¹.

This insight, one of Santayana's most original, is echoed in Robert Frost's poem, «The Gift Outright», where he observes that «the land was ours before we were the land's». And it is evident in such cultural critics as Eric Larrabee who argue that America was «born in an act of Self-Consciousness»² out of this pure flame of mind, this metaphysical passion.

¹ *Character and Opinion in the United States* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), p. 4.

² Eric Larrabee, *The Self-Conscious Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 11.

But America is simply not a new country with an old mentality. It is a country with two mentalities:

One half of the American mind, that not occupied intensely in practical affairs, has remained...slightly becalmed; it has floated gently in the backwater, while, alongside, in invention and industry and social organization, the other half of the mind was leaping down a sort of Niagara Rapids. This division may be found symbolized in American architecture: a neat reproduction of the colonial mansion –with some modern comforts introduced surreptitiously– stands beside the skyscraper. The American Will inhabits the skyscraper, the American Intellect inhabits the colonial mansion... The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition³.

How did this schizophrenic condition first arise? For the answer we must look at the Calvinistic philosophy the first settlers brought with them, a philosophy which has become a not insignificant dimension of the American mind and the national character. Santayana defines Calvinism simply as «expression of the agonized conscience» which is rooted in the assertion that sin exists, that it is punished, and that it is beautiful that it should exist to be punished. To be a Calvinist philosophically, then, is «to feel a fierce pleasure in the existence of misery, especially of one's own, in that this misery seems to manifest the fact that the Absolute is irresponsible or infinite or holy».

This, to Santayana from the perspective of his Latin and Catholic background, is the very essence of American Protestantism. Such a philosophy lacks the sense, passion, and language of Homer and Dante which he found so conspicuously absent in Shakespeare. His Catholic and Latin background had given him a strikingly different view of the universe in which life is a compelling drama and, in spite of the existence of sin and evil, is not ultimately a tragedy. This perspective is aptly expressed by Greeley when he writes that for the Catholic, «the cosmos is a love affair, life is a romance whose purpose is the giving and receiving of love... Good conquers evil (if only just barely), love triumphs over hate (though by a hair's breadth), and life is victorious over death (though only at the last moment)⁴». The Catholic possesses this romantic view of the universe because for him it is translucent with meaning. He lives and moves in a forest of symbols. By comparison, the world remains opaque for the Calvinist.

Calvinism, then, is the cornerstone of an aristocratic intellectual tradition in America which is rooted in a peculiar kind of nominalism. This nominalism in turn has given

³ *Winds of Doctrine and Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1971), p. 188.

⁴ Quoted in *The New Republic* (March 17, 1979), p. 36. The author goes on to say that Father Greeley quotes James Joyce «to illustrate the Catholic's relation to Protestantism. Someone asked Joyce if, in giving up his Irish Catholicism, he had become a Protestant. "Good heavens, sir", he replied, "I may have lost my faith; but I have not lost my mind". I think many Catholics must feel this way when their Protestant friends speak of the dark night of the soul, or the leap of faith, or the baseness of human nature. It all seems too bleak to be true. They have memories of a warmer faith». *ibid.*

rise to a subjectivism; Santanaya calls it a «systematic subjectivism». The result has been an elitism, an aristocracy of the mind which stands at the center of the Genteel Tradition and which was most vividly exemplified for him (as it was for Emerson as well) in Unitarianism, a cold, lifeless and sterile religion lacking in sense, passion, and language.

From the outset, however, the Genteel Tradition has been undermined by what he calls a crude but vital America which sprang up «from the soil, undermining, feeding, and transforming the America of tradition». This crude but vital America first arose to a level of poetic expression in Walt Whitman, the first writer to leave the Genteel Tradition. He founded what the literary critic Philip Rahv calls the cult of experience in American writing, an aspect of a more generalized cultural phenomenon which I would characterize as the democratization of experience. Rahv writes:

Since Whitman and James the American creative mind, seizing at last upon what had long been denied to it, had found the terms and objects of its activity in the urge toward and immersion in experience. It is this search for experience, conducted on diverse and often conflicting levels of consciousness, which has been the dominant, quintessential theme of the characteristic literary production –from *Leaves of Grass* to *Winesburg, Ohio* and beyond⁵.

Santayana declares that Whitman carries this democracy of experience into psychology and morals. «The various sight, moods, and emotions are given each one vote; they are declared to be all free and equal, and the innumerable commonplace moments of life are suffered to speak like the others⁶».

But Whitman's rebellion against the Genteel Tradition was primitive and passive and indolent. It offered no alternative in the way of a disciplined, systematic vision of the universe. For such a vision we must turn to William James who became the central spokesman and representative of the cult of ordinary experience before the learned world. The following is the best, most perfect account of the personality of James (whom Alfred North Whitehead once called «that adorable genius») and of his role in mounting a challenge to the Genteel Tradition. This description of James is also an excellent example of Santayana's exquisite style.

William James kept his mind and heart open to all that might seem, to polite minds, odd, personal, or visionary in religion and philosophy. He gave a sincerely respectful hearing to sentimentalists, mystics, spiritualists, wizards, cranks, quacks, and imposters... He thought, with his usual modesty, that any of these might have something to teach him. The lame, the halt, the blind, and those speaking with tongues could come to him with

⁵ Philip Rahv, «The Cult of Experience in American Writing», *Image and Idea* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1957), pp. 9-10.

⁶ *Winds of Doctrine*, p. 202.

the certainty of finding sympathy... and they began to feel that after all to have only one leg, or one hand, or one eye, or to have three, might be itself no less beautiful than to have just two, like the stolid majority. Thus William James became the friend and helper of those groping, nervous, half-educated, spiritually disinherited, passionately hungry individuals of which America is full. He became, at the same time, their spokesman and representative before the learned world⁷.

Such an openness to the ineffable richness and variety of experience is central to James's view of the cosmos and to his version of pragmatism with its melioristic attitude toward the possibilities of life. In this version intelligence is not an idle faculty by which we passively mirror a world of static events and things. It is a tool or instrument by which the human species actively adapts to its environment. To put it another way, intelligence is an experimental act. This gives rise, according to Santayana, to the following philosophical perspective:

The universe is an experiment; it is unfinished. It has no ultimate or total nature, because it has no end. It embodies no formula or stable law... What a day may bring forth is uncertain, uncertain even to God. Omniscience is impossible; time is real; what had been omniscience hitherto might discover something more today. «There shall be news», William James was fond of saying with rapture... «there shall be news in heaven⁸».

Is this sanguine evolutionary view in which the world is regarded as a gradual and unpremeditated improvisation, Santayana argues that James deals a staggering blow to the Genteel Tradition. The result is a new respectability to this «underside» of the national character which has sprung up from the soil of a crude but vital America.

IV

Is the American a materialist? A crass materialist? Or is he an idealist, a utopian dreamer? He is both, and neither, for he is a very peculiar kind of creature whom Santayana labels «an idealist working on matter». This represents a significant breakthrough in his thinking, for in his earlier writings he saw no connection or interaction between the Genteel Tradition and the crude but vital America of experience. But in an essay on «materialism and Idealism in American Life» which appeared in *Character and Opinion in the United States*, he discovers an important link between these dimensions of the national character. Materialism and idealism are not only not in-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

compatible and mutually exclusive, they form a complementary union, a kind of symbiotic relationship with one another.

To understand the full significance of Santayana's argument in this essay, we must place it into the context of a larger literary tradition. Within this tradition we find two competing claims. On the one side Thomas Jefferson claims that the national character is most perfectly embodied in the independent farmer who, in his fierce love of freedom and of democracy, is both an idealist and an individualist. On the other hand, Alexis de Tocqueville was appalled at the degree of materialism and conformity he found in Jacksonian America. We have, then two distinct and contradictory sets of images of America: idealistic and individualistic on the one hand materialistic and conformist on the other.

In formulating his response to the question, which is the true image, Santayana joins company with the pragmatists Charles Pierce, William James, and John Dewey for whom matter and mind are conjoined to the point that neither can ultimately be defined except in terms of the other. Pragmatism in this regard may be described as a philosophical articulation of two concurrent themes: the naturalizing of mind and the mentalizing of nature⁹. As an example of this Dewey defines matter as the conditions: for the realization of ideals, and also as the infinite capacity of the world of our ordinary experience to absorb thought. In the same vein, Pierce simply states that mind is effete matter.

Matter and mind are no longer antithetical categories in America because life in the 18th and 19th century wilderness would not permit the continuance of any final distinction between them. For one thing, the discovery of the New World captured the imagination of dreamers and idealists in Europe before any other kind of person, and attracted them to its shores in greater numbers. Once settled into the primitive conditions of life on the frontier, these inhabitants found that they no longer needed (nor could afford to hold on to) the traditional European way of placing matter and mind over against each other. The wilderness experience was essentially an experience of continuities of all sorts. The result has been a new kind of idealism, a materialistic idealism, and a different sort of materialism, an idealistic materialism.

Santayana notices a striking parallel in this regard between this situation in America and that of the Hebrews in the Old Testament. Both have a profound sense of the holiness of matter. Moreover, the American wilderness experience is a reenactment, a conscious re-enactment, of the Old Testament wilderness. The vast stretches of empty space seem to have stirred something primordial in the human soul resulting in what may be called a culture of movement, a nomadic culture not unlike that depicted in the Old Testament. He asks us to consider the great emptiness of America, not merely the primitive physical emptiness «but also the moral emptiness of a settlement where men and even houses are easily moved about, an no one, almost, lives where he was born¹⁰». The great empty spaces «bring a sort of freedom to both soul and body».

The mobility in American life, not only physical but social and economic mobility as well, tied as it is to vast stretches of virgin land, has liberated the enormous ca-

⁹ These are themes identified by Max Fisch in his book *Classic American Philosophers* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951).

¹⁰ *Character and Opinion*, p. 172.

capacity of the human imagination. «The American is imaginative», Santayana tells us, «for where life is intense, so imagination is intense also¹¹». Because of this intensity, he lives much more in the future than he does in the past. His imagination is pre-eminently practical and the future it puts him into contact with is an immediate, practical future. His ideals therefore cling close to nature and it is quite easy for him to conclude that the ideal and material orders of reality converge in the most dramatic ways. Moreover, because his ideals cling so close to nature, the American is not, by temperament, a revolutionary, for the idealism of a revolutionary is born of unrest and dissatisfaction. In America one finds on the other hand a general feeling of satisfaction and contentment, a sense that Americans are on the right track and moving, for the most part, in the right direction because God and nature are working with them.

Santayana considers yet another way of expressing materialism and idealism as dimensions of the American character, and that is by pointing to the quantitative and qualitative facets of American life. The quantitative is the more striking and obvious feature, for it is but another manifestation of the primacy of the material order. The American has a tendency to be preoccupied with bigness, with size, that is, with the category of quantity in general.

To my mind the most striking expression of his materialism is a singular preoccupation with quantity. If, for instance, you visit Niagara Falls, you may expect to hear how many cubic feet or metric tons of water are precipitated per second over the cataract; how many cities and towns (with the number of their inhabitants) derive light and motive power from it¹².

But Santayana does not dismiss this trait as a coarse materialism or as precluding the possibility of idealism.

There is a tacit optimistic assumption about existence, to the effect that the more existence the better... The young soul, being curious and hungry, views existence a priori under the form of the good... Respect for quantity is accordingly something more than the childish joy and wonder at bigness; it is the fisherman's joy in a big haul, the good uses of which he can take for granted¹³.

There is therefore a qualitative dimension to quantity in America, and it gives rise to a moral attitude toward matter. Santayana labels it a «moral materialism». Nature is material, he argues, but it is not, materialistic. «It issues in life, and breeds all sorts of warm passions and idle beauties¹⁴».

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

In struggling with these seemingly incompatible categories of the material and the ideal, nature and spirit, he proposes a novel resolution which represents a somewhat abrupt departure from much of the preceding literature on this problem with the national character. For this resolution he draws upon the pragmatic tradition and its emphasis upon the primacy of convergence in dealing with antithetical philosophical categories. So too, ideality and materiality ultimately converge in the dynamic currents of American life.

To conclude, during his stay in America, George Santayana witnessed its transition from a 19th century agrarian society, dominated by the aristocracy of the Genteel Tradition, to a 20th century industrial society which was crude and vital but no less barbaric. On both sides of this transition he found something missing: the life reason animated by imagination and articulated through sense, passion, and language. The United States as the archetypal modern, industrial culture of the North lacked these qualities. But by the time he wrote *Character and Opinion in the United States* he began to see possibilities which he had not seen before, possibilities that America was capable of producing these qualities of life which he, as a native son of Spain, so cherished.

