

Remembering Santayana

The philosopher George Santayana was an eloquent, contradictory figure—a resolute materialist utterly devoted to the life of the spirit. Little known today, he was a considerable intellectual presence 60 years ago. Our author explains why Santayana deserves to regain a good measure of that lost reputation.

by Wilfred M. McClay

George Santayana (1863–1952) regarded the world with serene detachment. He savored all the tart ironies and bittersweet paradoxes of existence, and he cheerfully faced up to the futility of human striving. The Spanish-born sage would surely be amused to observe how he is remembered today, almost a half-century after his death. His reputation, such as it now is, rests upon a single sentence, a portentous and wise-sounding (though often misquoted or misused) epigram taken from the middle of a paragraph in one of his philosophical works: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

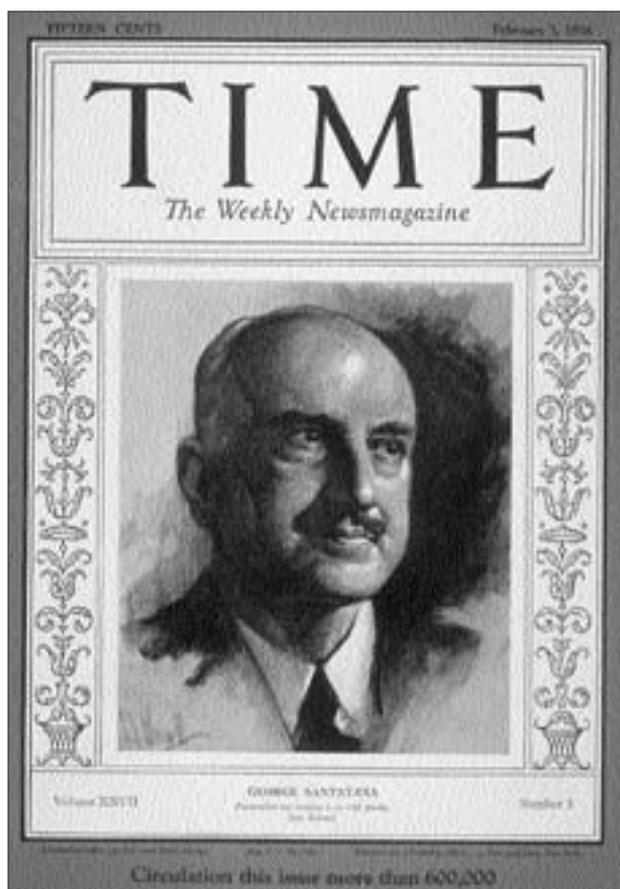
So memorable has the adage proved that we seem condemned rather to hear it repeated endlessly, in sober op-ed pieces, earnest letters to the editor, and bully pulpits of every sort. But the bare sentence does not do Santayana justice. Those who use it rarely know its source or wonder whether, in taking the words out of context, they have altered their meaning. In the 1905 book *Reason in Common Sense*, where the words first appeared, Santayana clearly seems less concerned with the “lessons of history” than with the basic preconditions for adult, civilized life:

Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. In the first stage of life the mind is frivolous and easily distracted, it misses progress by failing in consecutiveness and persistence. This is the condition of children and barbarians, in which instinct has learned nothing from experience.

The irony of ironies is that 11 words praising the faculty of memory form the principal legacy of an otherwise forgotten man. Though Santayana himself might not have been surprised by this fate, such bar-

ren obscurity is not a fit end for one of America's most subtle and interesting minds.

Make no mistake about it: Santayana was an abundantly gifted philosopher, a quicksilver-brilliant, prolific, and versatile writer, and an influential teacher. His years on the Harvard University faculty (1889–1912) were squarely at the center of what historians now call “the golden age of American philosophy.” In addition to a shelf of distinguished philosophical tomes, he wrote poetry, general and occasional essays, literary and cultural criticism, political and social thought, a superb novel called *The Last Puritan* (a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in 1935), and a classic auto-



A celebrated Santayana makes the cover of Time in 1936.

biography, the three-volume *Persons and Places* (1944–53), which is the equal in many respects of *The Education of Henry Adams*. He was a complete man of letters, and what he wrote was written to last.

It has lasted. Only the poetry falls short of greatness, perhaps because “reason,” as his admirer the poet Wallace Stevens once observed, “is a jealous mistress” and insists that “a man whose whole life is thought” not stray too far from his calling. But the prose is another matter. All of it, even hastily tossed-off journalistic pieces, bears the signs of mastery. His was a powerful,

supple style—elegant, lucid, spare, and direct—infused with wry and understated humor and made vivid by ingenious and unforced metaphors. In matters of style, Santayana’s prose writings leave those of his philosophical competitors (with the exception, perhaps, of his Harvard colleague William James) far behind. Indeed, the best of Santayana’s prose deserves comparison with the finest in the language—and of how much philosophical writing can that be said? Although his detractors tend to disparage him as a belletteristic dilettante, Santayana did not scatter his energies. On the contrary,

HISTORIANS OF
AMERICAN THOUGHT
TEND TO IGNORE
SANTAYANA BECAUSE
THEY FIND IT SO
HARD TO “PLACE” HIM.

his many creations, in a wide variety of genres, proved to be remarkably of a piece. Each was a different way of organizing and expressing the same philosophical vision. For him, literature and cultural criticism were philosophy pursued by other means. All his works reinforce one another, woven together like the warp and woof of a single fabric.

Yet today those works lie untended and unknown, even in (no, *especially* in) academic departments of philosophy and among specialists who, if only as a matter of professional responsibility, ought to know more about them than they do. To be sure, we Americans are a prodigal people, no less in expending our culture than in expending our natural resources. But the neglect now suffered by Santayana is in such stark contrast to the reputation he enjoyed at the height of his long and productive career that one cannot help but ask, What happened?

Explanations are not hard to find. Though the current fate of Santayana is unjust, it might have been foreseen. His thoughts have always been thoughts out of season, both in his time and in our own, and obscurity is one of the prices paid for being unseasonable. Historians of American thought tend to ignore Santayana because they find it so hard to “place” him. His blend of unflinching materialism and unswerving devotion to the life of the spirit did not have much in common with German idealism, or pragmatism, or any other current of thought prevailing or emerging at the time in the United States. His timing was unfortunate in another way as well. He began to carve out a niche for himself as a philosophically inclined man of letters in the late 1880s, at the very moment philosophy began to be transformed into a professional discipline and the exclusive intellectual domain of specialists and technicians. Along with William James, Santayana fought a brave rear-guard action against that development, employing abstract arguments and, more important, an elegant and engaging way of writing that was accessible to an educated “lay” audience—an indiscretion that helped seal his fate.

>WILFRED M. MCCLAY, a former Wilson Center fellow, holds the Sun Trust Chair of Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He is writing an intellectual biography of the American sociologist David Riesman. Copyright © 2001 by Wilfred M. McClay.



Finding himself a misfit was hardly an unfamiliar experience for Santayana. He lived four decades in Boston and Cambridge, from the time he was transplanted there at the age of eight until the day he left his Harvard professorship for good. But his stubbornly independent spirit could never take root in the stolid Protestant soil. Instead, his imagination was drawn back irresistibly to the Spanish Catholic world of his birth, with its rich storehouse of mythological imagery and poetic resonance. Under the circumstances, it became his responsibility, as he put it, to “say plausibly in English as many un-English things as possible,” a statement that would be even more accurate if “un-American” were substituted for “un-English.”

That was no way to court fame and immortality. We love eccentricity in theory but dislike it in practice. We love to mock conventional wisdom, so long as it is yesterday’s wisdom. Santayana was nothing if not eccentric by the lights of American conventional wisdom. Yet his extraordinary circumstances were precisely what made him so valuable an observer of American civilization, for they gave him the detachment to see American life without first accepting its premises. It was as if his tangled origins and personal history bred him for the role. His thought emerged out of a struggle to give shape to his own experience.

Santayana was born in Madrid in 1863, the offspring of an unlikely marriage whose contours already suggested an interplay between “English” and “un-English.” To begin with, his mother, Josefina Borrás, although the daughter of two Catalonians, had been born in Glasgow. She was brought up there and in Winchester, Virginia. In the company of her diplomat father, she moved to the Philippines, where her father unexpectedly died. That was the first of several tragedies to strike her. The 18-year-old Josefina suddenly had to fend for herself, an orphan in a strange land. Eventually, she met and married a tall, blond Yankee merchant, George Sturgis, who came from a solid Bostonian family. But the marriage too was touched by tragedy. Although Josefina bore Sturgis five children, only three grew to maturity, and the death of her first child, at the age of two, seems to have afflicted her with crippling grief; by all accounts, she was never the same woman again. “She regarded [her later-born children] as inferior,” George Santayana would write, “entirely inadequate to console her for what she had lost.” As a consequence, she became a “cold, determined” mother, absorbed in her “separateness.” When George Sturgis died in 1857, at the age of 40, she moved to Boston to raise her children under the protective wing of her late husband’s family. But on a visit to Madrid in 1861, she re-encountered Agustín Ruiz de Santayana, a retired minor Spanish diplomat in his fifties, whom she had met years before in the Philippines. She married him that same year, and Josefina’s sixth, and last, child was born two years later. Revealingly, he was named George, after George Sturgis.

The marriage of Josefina and Agustín was strange and unpromising. For one thing, she was committed to bringing up her Sturgis children in Boston,

Remembering Santayana

while Agustín was bound irrevocably to Spain and to Spanish ways. In 1869, Josefina decided to leave George in the care of his father; she returned to Boston with her Sturgis children. Three years later, Agustín and George joined the family in Boston. But Agustín returned to Spain after a year, having found that he could not adjust to American life. George was left behind, in an alien world he would never learn to love. For the next decade, he would know his father only through letters. But in them, Agustín kept alive in the mind of his beloved son, whom he addressed as “Jorge,” the humane warmth and poetry he had known in Spain. The memories were a valued resource, and Santayana frequently drew upon them in coming to terms with the cold unresponsiveness of his mother and with a Yankee “pettiness and practicality of outlook and ambition” that he soon learned to despise. The wrenching away from Spain, and from his father, ensured that all his future loyalties, whether national or personal, would be highly provisional and susceptible to change. Early in life, he had learned the hard lesson of detachment.

If there was great pain in Santayana’s unusual situation, he made the most of it. Like any immigrant, he had a complex perspective on American society, defined by multiple frames of reference. The move from his father’s ancient town of Avila to the Sturgis home at 302 Beacon Street must have brought a dizzying collision of worlds for the boy. He grew up in proximity to members of a distinguished old Boston family, but his own home was bilingual and drawn by inevitable, living ties to the Old World his father still inhabited. From that world, George received a steady stream of epistolary advice and support, in which “a distinctly non-American philosophy of life and language was proffered,” a philosophy that very much included Agustín’s anti-clerical and freethinking agnosticism. It was Agustín perhaps who gave Santayana the idea that the objects of religious faith might be “creations of man himself, like poems,” a lesson he took very much to heart. Exposed when young to radically different perspectives on the world, Santayana learned not to rely on any single one. That may help to explain why, for so many years, he could thrive within the Puritan-Protestant milieu of Cambridge and Boston without being driven crazy by it and without being driven to accept it. From an early age, Santayana learned to ask little of the world, and to keep what was precious to him safe within his thoughts. That was how he made his peace with things.

Evidence of how well he managed that peace can be found in his academic record, for Santayana was very much a success, both in the classroom and in his social activities. During his eight years at the Boston Latin School, he discovered a knack for poetry and filled the *Latin School Register* (of which he was the first editor) with his fluent and clever verses. In his final year at the school, the Spanish boy impressively made both major and lieutenant colonel in the Latin School Battalion. At Harvard, he was an outstanding student, and graduated summa cum laude in 1886. But he also had a full and satisfying social life in college, managing, despite the relative modesty of his financial means, to be active in some 11 organizations, including the *Lampoon*, the *Harvard Monthly*, the O.K. Society, and the Hasty Pudding.

Santayana in His Own Words

Cultivate imagination, love it, give it endless forms, but do not let it deceive you. Enjoy the world, travel over it, and learn its ways, but do not let it hold you. Do not suffer it to oppress you with craving or with regret for the images that you may form of it. You will do the least harm and find the greatest satisfactions, if, being furnished as lightly as possible with possessions, you live freely among ideas. To possess things and persons in idea is the only pure good to be got out of them; to possess them physically or legally is a burden and a snare. (*Persons and Places*, 1944–53)

Art, in its nobler acceptance, is an achievement, not an indulgence. It prepares the world in some sense to receive the soul, and the soul to master the world; it disentangles those threads in each that can be woven into the other. (*Reason in Art*, 1905)

Skepticism is the chastity of the intellect, and it is shameful to surrender it too soon or to the first comer: There is nobility in preserving it coolly and proudly through a long youth, until at last, in the ripeness of instinct and discretion, it can be safely exchanged for fidelity and happiness. (*Skepticism and Animal Faith*, 1923)

My eclecticism is not helplessness before sundry influences; it is detachment and firmness in taking each thing simply for what it is. Openness, too, is a form of architecture. (*Realms of Being*, 1942)

True reason restrains only to liberate; it checks only in order that all currents, mingling in that moment's pause, may take a united course. (*The Genteel Tradition at Bay*, 1931)

We have no claim to any of our possessions. We have no claim to exist; and as we have to die in the end, so we must resign ourselves to die piecemeal, which really happens when we lose somebody or something that was closely intertwined with our existence. It is like a physical wound; we may survive, but maimed and broken in that direction; dead there. Not that we ever can, or ever do at heart, renounce our affections. Never that. . . . On the contrary, I wish to mourn perpetually the absence of what I love or might love. Isn't that what religious people call the love of God? (Letter to the Marchesa Origo on the death of her little son, 1933)

Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim. (*Reason in Common Sense*, 1905)

[Americans have] the habit of thinking in terms of comparison, of perpetual competition; either a thing must be the biggest and best in the world, or you must blush for it. But only ways and means are good comparatively and on a single scale of values. Anything good intrinsically, anything loved for its own sake, is its own standard, and sufficient as it is. The habit of always comparing it with something else is impertinent and shallow. It betrays a mind that possesses nothing, loves nothing, and is nothing. ("Marginal Notes on Civilization in the United States," in *The Dial*, 1922)

Remembering Santayana

Yet even during his years as a Harvard undergraduate, Santayana's connection to Spain remained strong. His mind was capable of moving comfortably on two tracks at once. The steady flow of correspondence from his father in Avila kept him informed about events there and refreshed his Spanish sympathies. And after a week caught up in the round of Cambridge life, he would repair to his mother's house on weekends and speak Spanish with her and his half-sister. He spent part of the summer after his freshman year with his father in Avila, the first time he had seen Agustín in a decade. He would make such visits frequently in the years to come. In shuttling between his father's old Avila, with its medieval walls and its static way of life, and the drab industrial modernity of cold, progressive, Anglo-Saxon Boston, Santayana became a traveler between worlds, a practical relativist. This oddly dichotomous existence would continue for as long as he remained in the United States.

After graduation, Santayana went to study in Berlin. He then returned to Harvard, applied himself to graduate studies, and dutifully produced a dissertation on the German philosopher Hermann Lotze. The dissertation was accepted, and Santayana (who was, members of the faculty told him, "the most normal doctor of philosophy that they had ever created") was offered an instructorship in 1889. Despite his growing reservations about American academic life, especially as it was evolving under the direction of such educational entrepreneurs as Harvard president Charles William Eliot (whom he loathed), he was now to be a part of it. Eventually he would rise to full professor and become a fixture in the department of philosophy.



Once Santayana joined the faculty at Harvard, his annoyances with that institution, kept at bay during his student years, began to build. The problems were rooted partly in clashes of taste, personality, and temperament. But, as was always the case with Santayana, the clashes correlated ultimately with disagreements about ideas. Santayana found his colleagues—who included William James, Josiah Royce, Hugo Münsterberg, and George H. Palmer—to be insufferably narrow and moralistic, their minds filled with an unwarranted sense of Anglo-Saxon cultural superiority, and their hearts reflexively bound by archaic Protestant pieties that had no basis in reason or nature. Even James, whose pragmatism and openness to experience Santayana admired, fell victim to that harsh verdict. "I wonder if you realize," Santayana complained in a letter to James in 1900, "the years of suppressed irritation which I have passed in the midst of an unintelligible sanctimonious, and often disingenuous Protestantism, which is thoroughly alien and repulsive to me." Santayana's own reverence for pagan thinkers such as Lucretius and for the rich pageant of Spanish Catholicism was bound to set him at odds with the others, and even the hypertolerant James derided Santayana's thought as "a perfection of rottenness . . . representative of moribund Latinity."

What, then, was this system of perfect rottenness? Although Santayana's thought, like that of most accomplished philosophers, is very difficult to sum-



The Harvard Philosophical Club, with its president Santayana seated at the center.

marize, its basic elements are easily grasped. Santayana was a convinced materialist, and that conviction was never absent from anything he wrote. He did not grant any separate existence to the soul. He held that consciousness was merely a special outgrowth of matter, the result of nothing more than a chain of complex chemical interactions. He accepted, without difficulty, Charles Darwin's conclusions about the origin and development of species and the implications of those conclusions for humankind's status in the universe. He entertained no illusions about humanity's significance in the great scheme of things.

But Santayana was no garden-variety mechanistic philosopher, for he was equally devoted to the life of the spirit. That was a residue, in part, of the Catholicism in his makeup. The spirit, to be sure, was nothing more than a byproduct of matter. But the realm of the spirit was all the more to be cherished because it was the only truly human consolation within the vast indifference of nature. As Santayana argued at length in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1911), the sphere of the spirit encompassed poetry as well as religion, for the two were different expressions of the same thing. "I am not myself a believer in the ordinary sense," he admitted, "yet my *feeling* on this subject is like that of believers, and not at all like that of my fellow-materialists." The enduring value of religion lies not in its pretension to deal with matters of fact, but in "its ideal adequacy, in its fit rendering of the meanings and values of life, in its anticipation of perfection." In his later work, Santayana elaborated a doctrine of "essences," which was meant to define with more precision the realm in which the "meanings" and "anticipation" had their being.

Small wonder, then, that Santayana objected so violently to liberal Protestantism's attempts to demythologize Christianity by eliminating from it all beliefs that could no longer pass scientific muster. That was exactly what religions should *not* do. Liberalism, he complained, "subtracts from faith that imagination by which faith becomes an interpretation and idealization of human life," and leaves behind only "a stale and superfluous principle of superstition." Nor did he have a higher opinion of those who gave themselves over entirely to materialism and the natural sciences, for they neglected the noblest and most precious capacities of man. Thus, he found himself in an unusual position, as a kind of materialistic idealist, or an atheistic Catholic, and, at bottom, his thought was an attempt to reconcile the opposition between the two. Like the romantics, Santayana reserved his deepest reverence for the products of the imagination; and like the faithful, he valued religion for the glimpses of eternity it promised. Yet he always insisted, at the same

LIKE THE ROMANTICS,
SANTAYANA RESERVED HIS
DEEPEST REVERENCE FOR
THE PRODUCTS OF THE
IMAGINATION; AND
LIKE THE FAITHFUL, HE
VALUED RELIGION
FOR THE GLIMPSES OF
ETERNITY IT PROMISED.

time, that such creations of the mind had no ground in nature.

It was a paradoxical stance, guaranteed to confound the literal-minded. But however odd his ideas may have been in the context of the time, he was very well liked by the Harvard students he taught, and the feelings were warmly reciprocated. Santayana preferred the company of students, and it is astonishing how many intellectual figures of the 20th

century can be counted among those he taught. A short list would include T. S. Eliot, Walter Lippmann, Gilbert Seldes, Max Eastman, Van Wyck Brooks, Horace Kallen, Conrad Aiken, Wallace Stevens, Samuel Eliot Morison, Felix Frankfurter, and James B. Conant. Many of them remembered Santayana, with awe and reverence, as a quiet, reserved, and gently aristocratic presence. He dressed with impeccable care and attention to detail. Instead of an overcoat, he liked to wear a military cape, which he would swing off in a single dramatic sweep as he entered his classroom. His lectures were models of clarity and eloquence. Captivated no less by his powerful dark eyes and exotic Spanish features than by his exotic ideas, many students spun elaborate fantasies around his person. Conrad Aiken compared him to Merlin or Prospero, "with his wizard's mantle from Spain." Another (Herbert J. Seligman) saw in "his poise, with the fine domed forehead, the brilliant myopic brown eyes, the fine dark moustache, and the smiling detachment . . . something akin to the presence of a Chinese sage or a Mongolian Buddhist." The fanciful descriptions suggest how striking a figure he cut.

But the pleasure Santayana took from his students' admiration and affection was insufficient compensation for his ever-growing discomfort in Harvard Yard and in the United States. Despite his success, Santayana was never comfortable as a professor. He believed that professing other people's philosophies was not the same as being a true philosopher. He had come to feel that the circumstances of American intellectual life would always be unpropitious for a thinker like him, and he began plotting his escape. In 1912, Santayana left Harvard and the United States, never to return again. He would spend the next three decades in a second career as a peripatetic scholar, living in rooms and hotels all over Europe, before finally settling in Rome in 1941 at the Clinica della Piccola Compagna di Maria (known as "the Hospital of the Blue Nuns" for the habit worn by its staff). There he remained secluded for the last 11 years of his life—a final act, as it were, of withdrawal.



The summer before Santayana left America, he delivered a lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, in which he made clear some of his reasons for leaving. The lecture, which he titled "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," bequeathed to subsequent observers not only an indispensable term of analysis, "the genteel tradition," but an enduring diagnosis of what Santayana perceived to be a fault line in American culture. The American mind was divided, he said, between what was inherited and what was native born, or, as he expressed it, between "the belief and standards of the fathers" and "the instincts, practices, and discoveries of the younger generation." The latter represented the burgeoning, if somewhat callow, vitality of a young, prosperous, and enterprising industrial America—an America Santayana thought admirable and healthy, even if its crudeness was not entirely to his own taste. But the former represented the artificial, derivative, moralistic, and disconnected world of "genteel culture"—what passed for intellectual and artistic achievement on the American scene. That was the world he had known for many years in Boston and Cambridge, and that world, in his view, was hopeless. As he wrote in a letter to Van Wyck Brooks in 1927, "Art, etc. has a better soil in the ferocious 100% America than in the Intelligentsia of New York," for it is "veneer, rouge, aestheticism, art museums, new theatres, etc., that make America impotent. The good things are football, kindness, and jazz bands."

The becalmed artificiality of the American intellect, Santayana concluded, resulted from its continuing enslavement to a moralistic Protestant tradition. That tradition was rigidly upheld, even though its basis in reality had disappeared and the strain of holding on to beliefs that ran contrary to nature made the production of a vibrant culture next to impossible. Unless Americans abandoned the genteel tradition—the outmoded premise that "man, or human reason, or the human distinction between good and evil, is the center and pivot of the universe"—a disjunction would persist between their intellectual life and their actual life, and neither would do much to inform the other.

Remembering Santayana

Better, he argued, to remember how infinitesimal is one's place in the vastness and impersonality of nature: "What you can do avails little materially, and in the end nothing." Better to dispense with the genteel tradition and to learn instead "what you are really fitted to do, and where lie your natural dignity and joy, namely, in representing many things, without being them, and in letting your imagination, through sympathy, celebrate and echo their life." It is the "interest and beauty of this inward landscape, rather than any fortunes that may await [man's] body in the outer world, [that] constitute his proper happiness." The conquest of nature and the perfection of material life are not goals worthy of our human nature, Santayana believed. "Let us therefore be frankly human. Let us be content to live in the mind." Like some strange hybrid, a cross between Lucretius and Teresa of Avila, or between his fellow Spaniards Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Santayana could hardly have projected a more puzzling image to Americans in this, his valediction.

Santayana's willingness to "live in the mind" certainly bespeaks the aspect of him that preferred to withdraw. To some, it also bespeaks a cold and isolated man, who delighted more in the inner music of rhymes and rhythms, the daydreams of intellect, than in passionate engagement with the world. It's an impression many have had of Santayana, but it's not entirely fair, for it presumes that he was without passion, and to do that would be dead wrong. Consider, for example, the following passage from his autobiography (a passage that is also an admirable sample of his prose style):

The passion of love, sublimated, does not become bloodless, or free from bodily trepidation, as charity and philanthropy are. It is essentially the spiritual flame of a carnal fire that has turned all its fuel into light. The psyche is not thereby atrophied; on the contrary, the range of its reactions has been enlarged. It has learned to vibrate harmoniously to many things at once in a peace which is an orchestra of transcended sorrows.

The words bespeak not an absence of affect but intense interior drama—an unending series of inner battles, renunciations, and transformations. A stoic learns not to join battles he cannot win, for the will is most free when it reaches for what it can grasp: the realm of essence, not the realm of nature.

The passivity in Santayana's makeup, his willingness to dwell in the mind at the expense of the world, strikes Americans as a strange combination of dreaminess and asceticism that is alien to their temperament. Alien, too, is Santayana's disdain for the idea of progress, which he derided as a destructive superstition: "[Progress] seems to multiply opportunity, but it destroys the possibility of simple, rural, or independent life. It lavishes information, but it abolishes mastery except in trivial or mechanical efficiency." Nor did he have much respect for modern liberalism, the political handmaiden of progress. He thought that it denied the very existence of an intractable human nature, and Santayana's first philosophical loyalty was always to nature. Liberalism's genius lies in the provision and extension

of individual freedom, but precisely because of its dogma of tolerance, it is silent as to how that freedom should be used. As Santayana argues in *The Genteel Tradition at Bay* (1931):

A universal culture always tolerant, always fluid, smiling on everything exotic and on everything new, sins against the principle of life itself. We exist by distinction, by integration round a specific nucleus according to a particular pattern. Life demands a great insensibility, as well as a great sensibility. If the humanist could really live up to his ancient maxim, *humani nil a me alienum puto* [Nothing human is foreign to me], he would sink into moral anarchy and artistic impotence—the very things from which our liberal, romantic world is so greatly suffering.

That thoughtful challenge to liberalism tells us something important about its author. Santayana himself possessed both a great sensibility and a great insensibility, and it is impossible to separate the two. The preternatural serenity with which he contemplated the human condition made him a most penetrating observer; but the same detachment led him into a quietism that bordered on fatalism. Any serious and deeply considered conservatism faces the same risk, for a premature acceptance of existing evils may shrink too soon from opposing those evils that can be altered. There was a strain of irresponsibility in Santayana's naturalism—not in the sense that he was reckless, but in the strict sense that he never regarded his insights as categorical imperatives or rules by which we all should live. On the contrary, his philosophy was an exquisitely wrought image of his own highly individual condition. It was rather like one of his custom-tailored European suits: cut from fine material, artfully tailored, elegantly turned out—and designed to fit just one body.



Like any number of other modern philosophers, Santayana could make political judgments that were less than acute, and sometimes downright appalling. When William James objected to American annexation of the Philippines, on the ground that such imperialism violated the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the Spaniard brushed aside the moral reservations. The Declaration was “a piece of literature,” he sniffed, and a “salad of illusions.” James was lapsing into the genteel tradition, imposing universalistic Protestant morals on the amoral workings of history. Santayana also had surprisingly benign feelings about the Mussolini government in Italy, and on a number of occasions expressed a preference for the focused energy of authoritarian regimes—whether fascist, communist, or theocratic—over the “moral anarchy” and centrifugal impotence of liberal regimes.

Perhaps the least attractive of all Santayana's views were his anti-Semitic thoughts and sentiments, which were never systematically propounded but, rather, pop up disturbingly in various letters and obiter dicta. The sentiments



In the summer of 1944 an 80-year-old Santayana looks out over the Vatican from his residence in Rome, the city where he spent the final 11 years of his life.

became far more prominent as he entered old age, during his post-American years, but they are certainly detectable early on in his writings. In general, they reflect the automatic prejudices characteristic of his Avila upbringing and his fin-de-siècle Harvard milieu, although, somewhat more ominously, we also know that in the 1930s he frequently read the virulently anti-Semitic writings of Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Santayana was certainly no Ezra Pound. But it is difficult nonetheless to reconcile a taste for Céline with the equipoise and fineness of mind Santayana shows elsewhere. According to his biographer, John McCormick, who is the most judicious and knowledgeable of Santayana's critics, the philosopher's anti-Semitism was the exception rather than the rule. But McCormick also insists that so deplorable a failure of moral imagination not be minimized. It was an example of Santayana's insensibility, the shadow side of his sensibility, and that insensibility is impossible to accept in the wake of Auschwitz.

Perhaps his self-satisfied and self-protective detachment made Santayana prone to such lapses. We mere human beings cannot face the world with



absolute composure without also sacrificing some of our humanity. The spectacle of Santayana's wartime years with the Blue Nuns in Rome reveals both the strengths and the weaknesses of his mind. Recall the historical circumstances. By the time General Mark Clark and his Fifth Army finally made their triumphal entry into Rome on June 1, 1944, the Eternal City had gone through nine months of German occupation and had experienced all the horrors of modern warfare: Allied bombing raids, fierce guerrilla clashes between Germans and partisans, forced-labor roundups of Roman men, mass deportations of Italian Jews to German death camps, grisly executions (culminating in the Germans' murder of Mussolini and his mistress), and the hungry roving the

AFTER YEARS OF ISOLATION, SANTAYANA WAS NOW, HE REMARKED AMUSEDLY, "VISITED BY DOZENS OF STRANGERS, AS IF I WERE ONE OF THE RUINS OF ROME."

countryside in packs, in desperate search of food. But amid the darkness and the chaos, Santayana (by then in his eighties) continued to work placidly and industriously on his many projects: He reflected upon the highest things, as he had done all his life. There is something awesome in that picture and something deeply disturbing as well. Great genius often contains an element of the monstrous, and even the godly single-mindedness of saints manifests itself, on occasion, as an icy hardness of the heart.

Santayana's war years became a form of benign imprisonment. Travel was unthinkable, and communication with America and the rest of Europe increasingly difficult. Perhaps the circumstances reinforced his predisposition to "live in the mind," but they did not diminish his literary presence in America, where successive volumes of his memoirs were published to considerable attention and impressive sales. Soon after the liberation of Rome, a steady stream of admirers began to appear at the Blue Nuns, pilgrims bent on seeing the mysterious sage in the flesh. After the years of isolation, he was now, he remarked amusedly, "visited by dozens of strangers, as if I were one of the ruins of Rome." First came U.S. military men and war correspondents, such as Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times*; then the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, the Spanish poet José María Alonso Gamo, the American poet Robert Lowell, and the literary scholars Richard Lyon, Cyril Clemens, and Edmund Wilson. Wilson's word-portrait of Santayana became the basis for Wallace Stevens's magnificent poem of homage "To an Old Philosopher in Rome."

It was, of course, both ironic and fitting that Santayana chose to spend his last days in the company of nuns—ironic because, by all indications,

Remembering Santayana

he remained a firmly convinced materialist to the end; but fitting, too, because there remained in his temperament to the end a profound Catholicism, an unyielding respect for religious insight as a form of poetic truth and an “anticipation of perfection.” Stevens’s poem provides not only an evocative glimpse of Santayana’s last days, but a faithful distillation of the philosopher himself, and of the ends toward which he directed his life’s work:

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,
The candle as it evades the sight, these are
The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome,
A shape within the ancient circles of shapes,
And these beneath the shadow of a shape
In a confusion on bed and books, a portent
On the chair, a moving transparence on the nuns,
A light on the candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part only of that of which
Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.

The flurry of attention after World War II proved, to use one of Santayana’s favorite bittersweet metaphors, an Indian summer for his reputation and influence. After he died in 1952, interest in his work fell off rapidly, and by the 1970s he seemed well on his way to permanent obscurity. But a modest revival of interest has been underway for more than a decade. The respectful reception of McCormick’s magisterial biography, a finalist for the 1987 Pulitzer Prize, was an encouraging sign, as has been the appearance of the first four volumes in a definitive critical edition of Santayana’s collected works, published by the MIT Press and supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. There has been a sharp increase as well in the attention paid other serious American thinkers, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James, in part because of their insistence that philosophical writing not become the exclusive province of specialists. That insistence is bound to work to the advantage of Santayana’s even more masterly and evocative prose.

But Santayana’s writings will never be more than a minority taste in this country, and his thought will never be as widely cherished as that of Emerson and James, who perform for us something of the role of national philosophers. Santayana would not have relished that role, to put it mildly, and he is unlikely ever to be nominated for it. His thoughts ran doggedly against the American grain, and especially against its modern, Protestant, democratic, liberal, progressive, technological, and quantitative propensities—although, to be sure, he had no desire to counterevangelize the American people or transform their institutions in his image. The principal task of Santayana’s philosophy is the task of interior cultivation. In the end, that is its weakness. And yet,

that is also its strength. If it is not all-sufficient—and what philosophy is?—it offers a corrective precisely where one is most needed: It presents, by the richness of its example, a bracing challenge to a civilization that tends to dote on the external, the perishable, and the quantifiable.

Like Alexis de Tocqueville—another European observer of American society, to whom he bears some resemblance—Santayana fully accepted the demise of the world of the *ancien régime* and the rise of egalitarian liberal democracy. He was not a reactionary, dreaming of a Bourbon Restoration. But he worried that our fervent, one-sided faith in progress, especially material and technological progress, might lead us thoughtlessly to despoil all the spiritual fruits that had given life meaning in the past—just as, in a very different way, the effects of the genteel tradition estranged us from the sustaining vitality of nature. Contrary to the usual pattern, Santayana was a conservative precisely because of his materialism. He had no doubt that the realm of essences rested upon the fragility of civilizations, and that civilizations, in turn, were answerable to the ineluctable force of nature. But he cherished the ideal realm above all else, because it alone makes our lives worth living, by fulfilling our peculiar human need for beauty, love, speculation, and meaning—our need to be in contact with that “hovering excellence” toward which the flickering candlelight gestures. Such an aspiration was fundamentally spiritual, not material. Indeed, Santayana believed that the aim of perfecting material existence was doomed to inadequacy:

Man, if he is a rational being, cannot live by bread alone, nor be a laborer merely: He must eat and work in view of an ideal harmony which overarches all his days, and which is realized in the way they hang together or in some ideal issue which they have in common. Otherwise, though his technical philosophy may call itself idealism, he is a materialist in morals; he esteems things, and esteems himself, for mechanical uses and energies.

Such words deserve a hearing in any age, but especially in our own.

The late professor of philosophy Charles Frankel had good reason to remark, in 1956, that “what happens to Santayana’s reputation will be a touchstone of the quality of our culture, and of our growth in maturity and wisdom.” The statement does not mean that we ought to turn Santayana into the new Emerson and demand that his every dictum be a star to which we can confidently hitch our wagons. It means rather that Santayana’s vision and example have much in them by which our current civilization, and especially our current intellectual life, might be made saner, richer, more modest, and more sustaining. We ought not deprive ourselves of a voice so independent, a presence so singular, a life so devoted. Rarely in our history have we seen his like. Santayana to the contrary notwithstanding, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to lose it. And that we cannot afford. □