

1937

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Dane Farnsworth. "George Santayana and the Last Puritan." *New Mexico Quarterly* 7, 1 (1937).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol7/iss1/14>

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George Santayana and the Last Puritan

By DANE FARNSWORTH SMITH

BEFORE the appearance of *The Last Puritan*, George Santayana was known to me principally through the words of his detractors and admirers. To Bliss Perry, one time editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and past master of the literary lecture in America, Santayana was merely the most irreconcilable and diabolical of Harvard's philosophical great. Though amicable to his congenial colleague, Professor Royce, he was an ever-lacerating thorn in the side of his chief, William James. Poor James, weighed down with departmental administration at a time when he labored at the Herculean task of laying the basis of American philosophy, found this Spanish Catholic with his incisive intellect and caustic wit the most galling part of his load. Such was the reminiscence of Professor Perry, literary craftsman of romantic leanings and permanent advocate of the fruitful criticism of beauties in its case against the barren criticism of faults.

Irving Babbitt, the humanist, who gained international repute through his great admiration for and abhorrence of Jean Jacques Rousseau, had another tale to tell. He remembered Santayana as the champion of the humanistic virtues in philosophy and of the genteel tradition in life and letters. Santayana, with the clairvoyance that came from his never-ceasing quest for the wisdom of the ages, was willing to accept the opprobrium which always falls upon him who is more loyal to principles than to persons. If James, in his search for an isle of utility or a philosophic buoy to sustain American materialism, had been swept away by his own propensity for fiction, inadvertently to fall below the level of intellectual integrity, into a gulf of wishful thinking, Santayana, accustomed to taking his own bearings by clear-eyed observation and by the lode-star of the Ancients, was not the man to join with the philosophic rabble in cheering him for

perspicuity and accomplishment. To Professor Babbitt, Santayana was urbane, ironical, slightly too poetic, yet a staunch supporter of the classical tradition in its struggle to maintain intellectual values, and a firm believer in the desirability of preserving the tradition of the gentleman and the scholar, at all costs.

In the light of these remarks heard long ago, I was not surprised to find *The Last Puritan* a provoking book, an aristocratic book. It is almost nihilistically aristocratic, for Mr. Santayana's values are absolute values, and, in the light of what amounts to Platonic idealism in this respect, he finds that even the so-called upper class in modern society is, through its vulgarity and its triviality, hopelessly second class. In thus brushing aside the pretensions of even the most exclusive men and women, he actually abolishes all class distinction, and is able to appraise human beings at their true value. With all his philosophical detachment he is warm and friendly and enters sympathetically into the lives of the humble, as well as the great.

To understand all is to pardon all, and this man has an unnatural amount of understanding. Not only is he at home in philosophy and psychology, but, trained in an age when the philosopher took all knowledge for his province, he is equally at home in art, in literature, and to a lesser degree in music. His is the education which Henry Adams sought all his life without finding, and, like Henry Adams, Santayana has lived all his life in the best company on both sides of the Atlantic. He was born in Spain, and, like T. S. Eliot, the Missourian, another writer once around the department of philosophy at Harvard, he has in recent years made his home in Europe.

When two men are found in similar haunts, each of them internationally famous in aesthetics, in poetry, and in philosophy, their similarity of condition can not be ignored; a comparison is well-nigh obligatory. In my opinion, Santayana excels Eliot in prose style, in philosophy, and in general profundity of thought. Where Eliot is abstract and

obscure, Santayana is concrete and clear; where Eliot is snobbish and exclusive, Santayana is kind and comprehensive. Both agree in their condemnation of the stodgy self-sufficiency of Boston blue-blood and in their hatred of the stupid self-complacency of the mill-town aristocrat of New England. Though Eliot is the greater poet, perhaps nothing he has written will outlive *The Last Puritan*.

The Last Puritan is as extraordinary an amalgam of thought and feeling as has ever been confined between two covers. Its composition is said to have occupied the author nineteen years, and each word and phrase in its six hundred pages seems as carefully selected and as polished as it would be were it intended to form a part of a single sonnet. It is not easy reading. The strangeness of the social and intellectual landscape leaves the beginner slightly confused. And when philosophical questions are raised about the utility or futility of the lives of the characters, no ready answer is forthcoming. Is this philosopher-turned-novelist so Olympian in his indifference that he has no philosophy at all? Does he admire lechers, dope-fiends, suicides, and murderers? And finally, is he holding up Puritanism as a noble ideal or is he attacking it? These questions were not answered for the present reviewer until he had read the book a second time.

Academic experts in the technique of the novel were troubled on another score. Prose fiction was subject to laws as old as *The Arabian Nights*, and here all the traditional methods of telling a tale successfully were absent. Perhaps it would have been slightly more tolerable if Santayana, instead of calling his book "a memoir in the form of a novel," and thus flaunting all obligation to antiquity and the academicians, had called it a novel in the form of a memoir. At all events, here was another thousand-legged worm in the world of fiction, a specimen which could not be handled with the conventional instrument, and defied bottling and even classification. One thing was certain, Santayana, for years corralled in Harvard Yard with William James, had some-

where met his brother, Henry James, creator of the international novel. And if William James wrote psychologies that read like novels, and Henry James novels that read like psychologies, George Santayana had somehow profited by their experience and had combined both streams of tendency in one book.

Now, if inner action, which concerns the psychologist, is just as important as outer action, if Wordsworth was right in believing that the feeling and the thought are more significant than the event and situation which give rise to them, one cannot agree with the critics who insist that the book is lacking in plot and architectonic skill. Santayana is making use of an entirely new technique, and they are so busy quarreling with the convention, with the psychological medium in which he pictures the minds and relates the inner life of his characters, that the whole book seems to them artificial and unreal. And so does a tin soldier, and so does a bronze statue, to those who insist that no soldier is made of tin, that no trooper has blue paint instead of eyes, that no horse has hair of bronze and no man a skin of metal. Perhaps, like Wordsworth and Coleridge at the turn of the century, Santayana must wait until his art has cultivated the taste necessary for its own acceptance and enjoyment.

His method of portraying characters, which can be regarded either as the blemish or the glory of his book, is based upon a fundamental truth of human nature. The feeling of every normal human being at a given instant is composed of instincts from within, sensations from without, plus the reflections of the mind upon both these indigenous and these exotic elements. Though the cultivated intellect can more easily translate the complexity of feeling into words, nevertheless as all consciousness is made up of the same internal and external elements, the same compound of emotions is present but inarticulate in the untutored mind. If the streetsweeper or the scrubwoman could unravel the internal tangle of the thoughts and emotions which make up consciousness at a given moment, even their words would

be philosophical, subtle, and full of the most delicate distinctions. Shakespeare enables his characters to express their private emotions by endowing them with his own gift of language. Santayana allows his Harvardians, Etonians, sailors, and inn-dames to develop the philosophical speculations latent in their minds by bequeathing them his peculiar gift of philosophy. Accept the convention and the unreality disappears. For the real part of any person is consciousness rather than profile, inside rather than outside.

For the serious reader, *The Last Puritan* is a rich mine of experience. Through it he finds himself in a society and in an intellectual environment ordinarily denied to all but the extremely well-to-do. Hereditary wealth has enabled its aristocracy to choose, without financial limitation, rare ways of life and exquisite forms of amusement. The most positive character in the book glides o'er the seven seas in a boat which is half sailing-machine, half floating-museum. In following the ramifications of his family, in Boston, in New York, and in London, we find ourselves behind the most impenetrable of social barriers, sensing the magnificence and the triviality of families with every advantage of wealth, of cultivation, and of position.

From an atmosphere stuffy with heavy velvet trappings, we escape with the young men of the family into the freer, yet still conventional, milieu of school and college. We take up residence in Eton, in Harvard, and in Oxford, oases in a desert of worldliness, at times appearing more barren than the world from which they are the refuge. After some tarrying and some approval we are glad that the imaginative sweep of the author moves ever in the direction of the sea, and, once on the deck of whatever craft is sailing, we soon admit that man's best moments, like his worst, are found on shipboard.

The Last Puritan is protean like the old man of the sea. It has many forms and many functions. First, the story itself is a Platonic dialogue within a framework of Platonic dialogue. Philosophy is again made flesh and blood,

with something of the same literary excellence as is found in Plato. Then, it is a treatise on the philosophy of education. Next, it is a catalog of all the good things of this world, spiritual and carnal, intellectual and artistic. In another moment, it is an international gallery of types—the American, the Englishman, the Teuton, the Latin. Then again, it is a collection of literary images and phrases as remarkable as lines in a great poem. Finally, it is a manual for a personal philosophy and a guide-book to the enjoyment of things, not as they ought to be, but as they are actually found on this earth.

Is not the implication in the last phrase one of sheer hedonism? What philosophy of life *does* the author advocate? Santayana says unequivocally in the introductory dialogue that there follows the story of "Puritanism Self-condemned." "Puritanism is a natural reaction against nature." The true Puritan "is not one of those romantic cads who want to experience everything." He'd "rather be desolate than drunk." He keeps "himself for what is best." He is "conscious of being, and determined to remain . . . self-directed and inflexibly himself." Artistically his case is best presented by his self-indulgent friends

"I don't prefer austerity for myself as against abundance, against intelligence, against the irony of ultimate truth. But I see that in itself, as a statuesque object, austerity is more beautiful, and I like it in others." And "one is never happier than when other people are good."

George Santayana is "not arguing or proving or criticizing anything, but painting a picture." He would but enable the reader "to turn with greater intellectual gaiety to the carnival of facts and ideas filling the world." This concept is not indifferent to morality. If we "could only learn to look at human things inhumanly, mightn't they, too, become intelligible and inoffensive?" In other words, George Santayana is as good a Catholic as Chaucer, who was willing in many points to trust *le bon dieu*:

"There is an obscure natural order in the universe, controlling morality as it controls health; an order which we don't need to impose because we are all obeying it willy-nilly."

DANE FARNSWORTH SMITH.

Sublimation

By WILLIAM RADLOFF

Upon this deadened log he lay,
Yet he saw the forest quenched by fire;
And trembling, hurled a torch of it,—
And blackened hung his hands, like night
Within the forest doomed.

Anthem of Silence

By MAUDE E. COLE

Never will mountains
Be emptied of peace,
Though millions of souls
Drink deep and long,
Invisible streams of it
Flow without cease
In rhythmic tones
Of unending song.

Time may heap centuries,
Storms thunder down,
Man blast and tunnel,
But neither will mar
The anthem of silence
That lifts till the crown
Of a mountain is linked
To the wing of a star.