

avows any censoriousness in calling ours an age of Decadence, arguing that “the term is not a slur; it is a technical label.” Nor does Barzun mean to license nostalgia toward past ages falsely perceived as idyllic times: every age, he insists, is “An Age of Troubles” to some degree. Yet his characterization of our time leaves no doubt that the cultural trends which have created it constitute a lamentable surrender of earlier achievements. A time of “paralysis in one domain—and incompetence in many,” our era can, in Barzun’s view, credibly claim progress only in science and technology. In judging all other facets of culture, Barzun joins his voice with that of Ortega y Gasset in bearing witness against decay. In politics, in literature, in mores and manners, in art, in education—everywhere he turns, Barzun confronts muddled thinking, lowered standards, group propaganda, and irreverence. In the relentless drumbeat of “the shocking, the bizarre...the repellent, the intrusively (sexually) intimate, the disturbing, and the disturbed,” he detects a barbaric cadence acceptable only to a people so inured to decadence that they “accept futility and the absurd as normal.”

Even more disquieting is Barzun’s speculative prediction—offered in his conclusion from the perspective of an imaginary historian looking back from the year 2300—of two more centuries of cultural sterility: bureaucratized uniformity, welfare-state docility, computer technocracy, spiritual lassitude. But at last Barzun does hold out hope. Eventually, he anticipates, some brave band of pioneers will rediscover “the old neglected literary and photographic texts.” These long-forgotten texts will, he prophesies, finally rekindle “enthusiasm in the young and talented” and so catalyze a “nascent—or perhaps we should say, renascent—culture.”

The hint could hardly be more direct. How do we find our way out of our cur-

rent cultural malaise? How do we rediscover the path to progress? The key lies in reclaiming the riches of our past—riches rarely laid out with greater munificence than in this very book.

Exemplar of the Humanistic Tradition

JAMES SEATON

George Santayana, Literary Philosopher, by Irving Singer, *New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. 240 pp.*

IRVING SINGER’S *George Santayana, Literary Philosopher* provides an opportunity to reconsider the legacy of one of the greatest American philosophers almost a half-century after his death. Professor Singer himself prefers to remember Santayana “as a humanistic thinker” rather than as a philosopher in the narrow sense. In his reassessment, Santayana’s novel *The Last Puritan* (1935), his literary and art criticism, and his ideas about love and personal relationships are emphasized. Singer comments that Santayana’s observations on friendship “represent the humanistic strand that always accompanies, or enriches, his writings about either the life of reason or the life of spirit.” In contrast, Santayana’s “philosophy of love” is vitiated by his unsuccessful attempt to “incorporate the outlook of Freud and Plato.” In Singer’s view, Santayana fails to appreciate that love may be something more than either “instinctual gratification” or “sacrificial

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martyrdom"; it may be "a vital attachment," a "bestowing of values."

Singer's portrait of Santayana as an exemplar of the humanistic tradition is attractive. He is surely right to observe that "in the past few decades, the danger to the humanistic spirit has accelerated greatly," and most readers of Santayana will agree that works like *The Last Puritan* and *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910) serve admirably "as a reminder of what we have had, and as a model for what we may yet regain." For Singer, the chief danger to the "humanistic spirit" derives from the extent to which "intellectual and academic fields have become increasingly splintered in the twentieth century, even split into hermetically distinct compartments." Singer's objection joins a long and honorable history of protest that goes back at least to the Romantic outcries against the division of labor occasioned by the industrial revolution. Adam Smith's point about the efficiency gained and the productivity achieved through specialization has been overwhelmingly vindicated in the marketplace, but one does not have to be a Romantic to doubt that efficiency and even productivity are as easily measured in the humanities as in industrial production, nor to question whether they provide the appropriate standards to judge humanistic accomplishment in any case.

The limitations of Singer's portrait become evident, however, when one takes a fuller account than he does of both the current danger to the humanities and of Santayana's rich legacy. In "the last few decades" the main threat to humanistic study has not come so much from the pressure to specialize as from attempts to unify the various disciplines of the humanities under the rubric of "cultural studies." The most influential contemporary theorists reject the humanistic belief that study of the achievements of high culture—including literature, art, philosophy, and religion—pro-

vide access to truths that can be learned in no other way. Assuming that the traditional humanities have been made obsolete by the advent of post-structuralist, deconstructionist, and now postmodernist theorizing, the academic radicals aim to replace the old humanistic disciplines with cultural studies, an all-encompassing super-discipline that rejects the concept of truth altogether. *George Santayana, Literary Philosopher* makes no reference at all to these developments, so it is not clear whether its author thinks a revival of Santayana would help or hinder their progress. One would like to think that anybody who appreciates Santayana would be unable to abide the contemporary transmogrification of the humanities into cultural studies. Unfortunately, Singer's curious silence on what are certainly the dominant trends in academia "in the last few decades" makes it impossible to dismiss the suspicion that in the passage quoted below he is commending Santayana's work as a "supplement" to the "new achievements" of deconstruction, new historicism and the like: "As a reminder of what we have had, and as a model for what we may yet regain as a supplement to the new achievements on which we can rightly pride ourselves, Santayana's books merit the renewed study that some scholars are now giving them."

One hopes that this surmise is mistaken; yet one cannot help but wonder further when Singer concludes his celebration of his "literary philosopher" by asserting an equivalence between Santayana's view of human nature and that of John Dewey in the next-to-last paragraph of his book: "As Dewey also did, he [Santayana] recognized the value of philosophy that delineates a significant harmony between nature and spirit in the hope that human beings can thereby work out their destiny with insight and personal success." To emphasize putative similarities between

Santayana and Dewey without at the same time acknowledging the crucial differences between them, as Singer does at this key point in his exposition—the conclusion—is to invite misunderstanding about both. If the notion of a “literary philosopher” means anything, it surely means that the style with which a philosopher communicates bears some intimate connection with the substance of the ideas communicated. Santayana is recognized even by his intellectual adversaries as one of the great masters of English prose, while the clumsiness of Dewey’s writing is conceded even by his followers. Santayana wrote with grace and clarity not only because he had rare talent but also because his ideas were not at odds with the genius of the language nor with the human experience embedded in language.

Dewey’s pragmatism, on the other hand, saw the prejudices embedded in everyday language as the enemy. Dewey struggled, for example, to find words that would allow him to transmute the notion of truth from the traditional notion, articulated by Santayana as “identity between the fact asserted and the fact existing,”¹ to a conception that was nebulous but in accord with his new “experimental and functional type of logic.” If that logic “be not understood,” Dewey warned, “any attempt to present the theory of truth is bound to be confusing.”² Dewey placed his faith in “the active tendencies of the day” as opposed to old sources of religion and art that, in his view, had been definitively “discredited,” as he puts it in the conclusion of *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Santayana, on the other hand, never made any secret of his dislike of many of the most powerful “active tendencies” of the modern world, while some of his most characteristic insights derive from his belief in the relevance of “old sources of religion and art.”

Today Dewey’s pragmatism, in the

version championed by Richard Rorty, is one of the chief intellectual sources of both the institution of cultural studies and the dismissal of the search for truth as a rationale for academic study. It is true, one must note, that Santayana’s epistemological skepticism and his rejection of any transcendent basis for morality can be cited on behalf of the claim that he, like Dewey, is among the intellectual ancestors of postmodernist skepticism and even the Foucaultian belief that arguments about truth and morality are ultimately nothing more than struggles for power. Singer classifies Santayana as a “moral relativist” who is unable to “meet the arguments of one who believes that Might makes Right.” All the more reason, then, to emphasize—as Singer does not—that Santayana drew very different conclusions from his skepticism than those affirmed by the postmodernists, whether the latter believe that their deconstruction of traditional wisdom underwrites revolutionary egalitarianism or nihilistic indifference. In doing so, however, one must recognize that, like most major thinkers, Santayana may be misinterpreted by those who quote from a single passage or even a single work without considering its place in the overall *oeuvre*.

In *The Genteel Tradition at Bay*, for example, Santayana sounds like a thoroughgoing relativist.³ If the New Humanists hoped “to maintain an absolute criterion of taste and morals,” Santayana advised them to “hasten to embrace supernaturalism.” Otherwise they could have no answer to his mocking question, “But can the way of Matthew Arnold and Professor Norton be the way of life for all men for ever?” For the philosopher, Santayana seemed to say, morality could only be contingent: “But in philosophy, when ultimately the spirit comes face to face with the truth, convention and absurdity are out of place; so is humanism and so is the genteel tradition; so is mo-

reality itself." One suspects, however, that the polemical energy of Santayana's essay against Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More does not derive so much from his rejection of their ideas themselves as from his dislike of what he saw as their Protestant and New England provinciality. Santayana did indeed object on principle to the notion that any individual, no matter how intelligent or how saintly, could invent a valid morality. That did not mean, however, that Santayana was unable to provide any basis for making moral judgments.

The important point is that he does not turn to reason, even the reason of a philosopher—which he seems to think is the error of Babbitt and More—but to the wisdom of the ages. In his early *The Life of Reason* (1905-1906) he defends "traditional morality" on the grounds that "it represents on the whole the verdict of reason. It speaks of a typical human will chastened by a typical human experience."⁴ Later he distinguished between "the theologically heathen" and the "essentially heathen": "So that while the theologically heathen may be those who have no Bible, the morally and essentially heathen are those who possess no authoritative wisdom, or reject the authority they have; the untaught or unteachable who disdain not only revelation but what revelation stood for among early peoples, namely, funded experience."⁵ Santayana worked out this conception further in his essay "Philosophical Heresy." There he contrasted the inevitable one-sidedness and partiality of any system or set of theories devised by an individual or a school with the "human orthodoxy" that he described as "merely the current imagination and good sense of mankind—something traditional, conventional, incoherent, and largely erroneous...yet something ingenious, practically acceptable, fundamentally sound, and capable of correcting its own innocent errors."⁶ The philosopher

may hope to clarify and supplement in some details this "human orthodoxy," but any attempt to provide a radical new alternative is doomed to failure unless—says Santayana—it is offered simply as a work of art, and thus an addition to the human heritage rather than a replacement for it.

A reconsideration of some of Santayana's key ideas may not only clarify the differences between Santayana and contemporary postmodernism but also point the way to an alleviation of at least one of what Jerry Z. Muller calls the "dilemmas of conservatism."⁷ Muller distinguishes between those who defend "existing institutions and practices because they are metaphysically true" and those who defend them "because they are thought to have worked rather well." Muller argues that the former, whom he terms "the orthodox," are not true conservatives, since the belief in a transcendent order can be used to justify revolution as well as acceptance. On the other hand, he points out that "a self-conscious and historically informed conservatism entails a certain measure of historicism and relativism." This particular "dilemma," like the others to which Muller draws attention, is real and cannot be resolved by verbal juggling. Yet it is suggestive that "human orthodoxy," which Santayana views as ultimately authoritative, recognizes the "revelation" affirmed by Muller's "orthodox" as roughly equivalent to the "funded experience" that Muller's "conservatives" acknowledge. Santayana praised Christian dogma for emphasizing "the truth that moral distinctions are absolute,"⁸ even though no human beings could claim absolute authority to make the appropriate distinctions in every case. He found the reality of moral categories confirmed by everyday life:

Yet the essential assertion that one thing is really better than another remains in-

volved in every act of every living being.... It is accordingly a moral truth which no subterfuge can elude, that some things are really better than others. In the daily course of affairs we are constantly in the presence of events which by turning out one way or the other produce a real, an irrevocable, increase of good or evil in the world.⁹

Santayana insists that the awareness of human difficulties in arriving at the truth does not discredit the validity of the conception itself. In the preface to his *The Realm of Truth*, Santayana reasserted his belief that the everyday meaning of the notion of truth was philosophically valid and in doing so restated his ideas about the relation between philosophical analysis and "human orthodoxy":

An unsophisticated reader will find no difficulty in understanding the sense in which the word truth is used in this book. It is the sense which the word bears in ordinary conversation; and such refinements as I may be led to suggest are not calculated to subvert the plain signification of the word, but only to clarify and confirm it. In this matter, and in many others, I follow common sense; not indeed in its conventions, not in respect to popular dogmas which may be local, verbal, mythical, and contradictory; but I follow common sense in its general momentum and presuppositions, which are indeed the only possible foundation of science, of literature, and of human intercourse.¹⁰

Like the Marxists who railed at the "false consciousness" of the masses, or the Freudians who blamed every critique of psychoanalysis on the neurosis of the critic, today's academic theorists are confident that their theoretical sophistication allows them to ignore common sense and the culture of the past. The obscurity of their prose is for its authors only another confirmation of their superiority to the unilluminated. In contrast, Santayana's undoctinal humanism is evident in both the lucidity of his prose and his willingness to acknowledge the

authority of the "funded experience" of the human race in whatever form it presents itself—in religion, in literature, in art, in history, and in everyday life. Irving Singer's little book will accomplish a great deal if it will turn our attention to a philosopher whose stylistic elegance and intellectual clarity are derived from such wise modesty.

1. George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (New Brunswick, 1991), 156. 2. *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York, 1950), 128. 3. George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition at Bay* (New York, 1931), 177. 4. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (Amherst, N.Y., 1998), 445. 5. George Santayana, *The German Mind: A Philosophical Diagnosis* (New York, 1968), 145. Originally published in 1915 as *Egotism in German Philosophy*. 6. George Santayana, *Philosophical Heresy, Obiter Dicta*, ed. Justus Buchler and Benjamin Schwartz (New York, 1936), 95. 7. Jerry Z. Muller, "Dilemmas of Conservatism," *The Public Interest*, 139 (Spring 2000), 50-64. 8. George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (New York, 1957), 98. 9. *Ibid.*, 100. 10. George Santayana, *The Realm of Truth*, The Works of George Santayana, Triton Edition, Vol. 15 (New York, 1940), 3.

The Last Stand

EDWARD S. SHAPIRO

A Defender of Southern Conservatism: M. E. Bradford and His Achievements, edited by Clyde N. Wilson, *Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1999. 193 pp.*

AS THE CAREER OF M.E. Bradford (1934-1993) illustrates, it has not been easy in the twentieth century to be a conservative intellectual. The attitude of the American intelligentsia toward conservatism was perhaps best expressed by Lionel

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