
A book like this has two aspects. First, there are the introductions and commentary by Wilson and Dawidoff. Secondly, there is the work of Santayana himself. Besides the two introductions, each essay is further introduced by a brief note of its own. Not having access to the 1967 volume, I'm not sure whether these are by Wilson or Dawidoff, but I suspect the former.

Dealing with Santayana, there are at least two quite opposite problems one can fall into. The first is to overemphasize his conservatism. From this comes Santayana the cranky old curmudgeon, flinging from his Roman cloister invective against the modern world in general. The second is to overemphasize his radicalism. From this comes Santayana the underminer of all certainty, the forerunner of postmodernism. Both are, of course, true, which is part of his fascination, but neither presents a complete picture. The commentary in this volume leans a little too much in the second direction for my taste.

My differences with Dawidoff are small, perhaps even picky. He notes, "You can quote Santayana, but you can't use him"(viii). On the contrary, I suspect the popularity of the one quotation by which he is best known has to do with the fact that it can be used by any side of any question. Dawidoff misunderstands the 1960s, as many do, by saying they "...canonized the preoccupation with the present that has led to the marginalizing of the past..."(ix). This contrasts not only with such aspects of that time as "back-to-nature" communes but also with his own noting of the old-fashioned aspects of the New Age, a direct outgrowth of the 60s. Its also not clear to me that Santayana "...stopped writing poetry because of what he dared not reveal (his homosexuality)"(xiv). It may be he just concluded he was not a gifted enough poet for his own satisfaction. If the former were true, one would expect to find significant numbers of unpublished poems after he ceased poetic publication. It should also perhaps have been pointed out that Santayana's interest in America's "...philistine material and athletic vitality..."(x) and "...modern and rude energies..."(xvi) were because of what that
vitality and energy might eventually lead to and become, not for themselves.

I find less to disagree with in Wilson, and less reason to do so, since his contribution has now been around for 32 years and has presumably been adequately dealt with. I would only note that certain characteristics of the United States mentioned by Santayana and Van Wyck Brooks could have been placed in a broader context. We Americans tend to exaggerate our own uniqueness, sometimes boastfully, sometimes critically. Perhaps that sentence itself was an example. It seems to me the "split in the national mind..."(9) could be said as truly of Ancient Rome, with its hard-headed, practical administration and engineering and its superstitious faith in all manner of diverse cults, and the division between Edwards and Franklin (22) is just an aspect of the much wider one between religion and science in general.

Turning to Santayana himself, what is most striking in this collection is his deep ambivalence about the United States, which comes out more in the post-World War I pieces. The average American, who remains patriotic, would probably not find him even-handed, but rather overly critical, and his criticisms are well known. But American intellectuals have never shaken off their sense that there is something uniquely inferior about our culture. Someone who could write the following surely did not find the United States without value: "If it were given me to look into the depths of a man's heart, and I did not find goodwill at the bottom, I should say without any hesitation: you are not an American" (122). Indeed, some of his strongest criticism is reserved not for the United States but for its intellectual critics: "...none of them seems ever to have loved anything..."(142). One might add, nothing American anyway.

Irony clings to Santayana, and the irony here is that one who made his mark partly as a critic of the genteel tradition must appear in our age of Marilyn Manson and Howard Stern as the very epitome of gentility himself. Of course, what he has in mind is not merely what used to be called "good manners," not upsetting people for the sake of doing so, but something much deeper. Its roots, as he shows, are in Calvinist Protestantism (101, 194) and in idealism and its American variant, transcendentalism (44-5, 104). Interestingly, his philosophical foes also include empiricism, (94-5, 104-6) with which his relations were quite complex, as evidenced by one of his professors saying, and truly, that he had "Hume in his bones." It is not hard to see where he would get a reputation as a
conservative, since he is at least somewhat critical of almost all modern trends of thought beginning with the Renaissance (1558) and not excluding pragmatism (113-4). What ties together all these problems of modernity for him is their egotism, their sense that either the universe revolves around human beings (old egotism) or human beings construct their own universe (new egotism) (88, 90, 179).

It often happens that the first and last stages of a process of development resemble one another more than either resembles the middle one, thus the postmodern may resemble the premodern, but it is still an odd sort of postmodernist who sometimes seems to imply we might have been better off if we had stuck with St. Thomas Aquinas. A correspondence theory of truth also seems much at variance with postmodernism: "An opinion is true if what it is talking about is constituted as the opinion asserts it to be constituted."(110)

But there are tantalizing hints that his opposition to one modern ism may be just a wee bit less complete than is generally believed. I mean romanticism. There was a romantic strain in him, at least in terms of being rooted in a time and place and blooming where one is planted: "When a way of thinking is deeply rooted in the soil, and embodies the instincts or even the characteristic errors of a people, it has a value quite independent of its truth..."(97)

A book's strength is often its weakness. By focusing down on Santayana's works of social criticism of the United States, this book avoids the "scattergun" approach to selection. But it also presents just one facet of a multifaceted thinker. Since Santayana is, alas, regarded as a minor thinker, to whom entire courses are rarely devoted, its narrow focus may rule it out as the one work of his chosen for a survey of American Philosophy course. It may find a home in American Studies.

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John Dewey's legacy for American philosophy continues to