Review essay

"Armchair philosopher or poet in slippers"
by Glen Tiller


In 1922 Santayana was living in France. Although he was only fifty-eight years old, he had already been retired from teaching for 10 years. It was an intensely productive time for him. He was hard at work completing Scepticism and Animal Faith, composing his magnum opus Realms of Being, revising the five volumes of The Life of Reason for a second edition, adding new scenes to his novel The Last Puritan, and correcting proofs for his collection of essays Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies. It was in December of that year that he wrote a letter to his nephew which, I suspect, must have brought a smile to the editors at The Santayana Edition when they read it. Santayana wrote 'if my health doesn't play me false, I hope to have time for finishing all my half-written works, before the end comes. I shall turn out to have been a prolific writer; and if there should ever be a complete edition of my works it will look like one of those regiments in uniform that stand on the shelves of libraries which are not disturbed except to be dusted.' (3:13 - references to Santayana's letters are in the form of volume followed by page number.) Santayana was certainly right in thinking himself prolific, and though it is true that since the publication in 1986 of Persons and Places: Fragments of Autobiography the Santayana regiment has been steadily assembling, he did not foresee that his future editors would produce such a splendid edition of his works -- books that are scholarly, beautifully designed, that can be taken off the shelf and read with great pleasure.

The four books of letters reviewed here are half of the eight that will make up Volume V of the critical edition The Works of George Santayana. William G. Holzberger, the general editor of The Letters of George Santayana, deserves special praise for his highly
successful efforts. It was his initial collaboration back in 1971 with Daniel Cory, Santayana’s former assistant, that eventually led to the letters being incorporated into the critical edition. Through years of perseverance, Holzberger and The Santayana Edition located, collated and transcribed over 3000 of Santayana’s letters, telegrams, and postcards that range over seventy years of correspondence. This is a substantial amount of writing from a major philosopher and we are fortunate that his letters should be presented to us in such fine form.

The books are authoritative and easy to consult. Each one includes Holzberger’s well-balanced introduction to Santayana’s life and thought as well as individual prefaces that relate the principal events that occupied Santayana during the years covered by each volume. The index is also nicely done and there is a generous amount of information in the editorial appendix (this includes a brief but useful chronology, a listing of manuscript locations, Santayana’s addresses, and information regarding unlocated letters). Finally Holzberger has provided detailed footnotes which identify recipients, commentaries on philosophers and philosophical terminology, translations, and various other pieces of literary and historical information.

The letters are divided into books of approximately equal size. All have their rewards, and I can only offer a brief account of what each one contains. Book One begins with a letter from 1868 when Santayana was five and living in Spain with his father; it then moves from his enrollment at Harvard in 1892 to the end of 1909, approximately two years after he was promoted from assistant to full professor. Throughout most of his life Santayana associated with an impressive list of philosophers, writers, artists, and aristocrats. Although more luminaries appear in Santayana’s later correspondence after he had become famous, the first book contains interesting letters to William James and Josiah Royce, Santayana’s teachers and eventual colleagues. These letters show a young philosopher of independent judgment, one whose manifest powers are clearly on the rise.

What is most remarkable about these early letters is how they bear witness to Santayana’s claim that his philosophy was no academic opinion and he stood in philosophy exactly where he stood in daily life. Even in his early twenties the main elements of his system are
clearly in place. At the heart of Santayana’s philosophy is a form of materialism that rests on animal faith. Although from the standpoint of rational argumentation Santayana’s doctrine of animal faith in matter may look arbitrary, he maintains that since skepticism cannot be rationally defeated there is a sense in which all basic beliefs are groundless. In a letter from 1887, written while Santayana was pursuing graduate studies in Germany, he wrote to a friend that solipsism ‘cannot be disproved - what theory can? - yet I think it is not without arbitrariness. Not that it is more arbitrary than any other which does not express our mental habits; all I mean is that it has no more reasonableness than any other imagined, artificial system.’ (1:48) But in Santayana’s opinion not all systems are artificial or ‘built on arbitrary axioms’. He held that:

There are certain convictions which cannot be exiled from the mind, convictions about everyday practical matters, about history, and about the ordinary passions of men. A system starting from these universal convictions has a foothold in every mind, and can coerce that mind to accept at least some of its content. (1:64)

For Santayana it is animal faith in matter that cannot be exiled from the mind, at least so long as we are alive. It was to be his life-long project to give this ‘universal conviction’ full expression and work out its implications.

The letters in Book Two (1910-20) provide a vivid picture of Santayana during the most momentous decade of his generally placid life. During these years he resigned from Harvard, gave some farewell lectures at the University of California at Berkeley, experienced the death of his mother, crossed the Atlantic for Europe for his thirty-eighth and last time, and found himself fortuitously ‘trapped’ in England for the outbreak and duration of World War I. Despite his reputation for being Olympian and detached from earthly events - without doubt he has his cold-blooded moments -- Santayana was terribly disillusioned and depressed by the war. In one of his many letters to his oldest friend, the philosopher Charles Augustus Strong, he writes that ‘The war is the only thing on my thoughts - painfully persistent, like a nightmare.’ (2:200) Later the same year he writes to another close
friend, Mary Williams Winslow, the letters to whom are among the most interesting and intimate, that ‘The War has destroyed my moral’. For him ‘Germany deserves to be opposed, because she pushes: she would deserve to be hated if anything could deserve that, because she cultivates hate.’ (2:206) Santayana felt too old to take any part in the physical struggle and reported that his only available reaction to the war was to turn to writing and reflection. ‘I have read and am reading all the German books I can find that throw light on their attitude, and I have begun to write about it - not particularly because I want to, but because it is impossible to think seriously or consecutively on any other subject.’ (2:207) The result of these reflections was his controversial book *Egotism and German Philosophy* (1915), a book which he thought was justly reviewed only by Dewey.

It was also during these years that Santayana began seriously organizing the materials for *Realms of Being*. In 1911 he had conceived that it would ‘not be a long book, but very technical’ and it might take a few years to complete. (2:37) In fact the book would not be completed and published until 1940 and, if one includes the introductory text *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, it would run well over a thousand pages. While in England (though before the war) Santayana was able to discuss his system with Russell and Moore. We read here that he regarded ‘their views are near enough to mine to be stimulating to me, while the fact that they live in an atmosphere of controversy (which for myself I hate) renders them keenly alive to all sorts of objections and pitfalls which I need to be warned of, in my rather solitary and unchecked wanderings.’ (2:95) One can only wonder what these ‘three-cornered talks’ must have been like and just what influence they had on Santayana’s work. The letters do not tell as much as one would wish, but they do reveal Santayana growing ever more distrustful of Russell’s judgment and philosophical projects, even while continuing to regard Russell’s critical and logical acumen as ‘matchless’. (2:167)

Book Three (1921-1927) takes us from Santayana’s fifty-seventh to his sixty-fourth years. During these years he mostly divided his time between France and Italy, frequently staying at Charles Strong’s apartment in Paris or at his Villa le Blaze near Florence (Strong had married into the Rockefeller family). In this volume and the next
the letters are the most interesting philosophically and
the ones to Strong are particularly helpful. As Holzberger
notes, Strong was constantly trying to convert Santayana to
his own philosophical views, and Santayana as a consequence
was repeatedly moved, for the most part patiently, to
explain his own positions and raise objections to Strong's
proposals. For example, Santayana held a symbolic account
of knowledge. He did not think that knowledge required that
the terms of thought and judgment, which Santayana calls
'essences', should mirror or reproduce the properties of
matter. He objected that Strong's contrary proposal was
based on an untenable empiricism:

...you are rather an heir of Humeian or
Jamesian principles: you want to weave
existence out of psychic stuff...You ask why
the given essence is not, without further
ado, the essence of the object! Why on
earth, I said to myself, should it be? If a
sensitive plant or an animal in its shell is
being rained upon, why on earth should the
chill or the fear or death which it may feel
be the essence of the rain; whether we
conceive the rain as the eyes of men
perceive it, or as a down-pour of grey
drops, or as some dynamics of point-instant
might describe it? It is simply a
preposterous, unnatural suggestion that the
essences given to a vegetative thing, like
the psyche, should be the essences of the
surrounding forces, under the influence of
which that psyche is living, and which, when
it becomes materially cognitive, it will
describe to itself in its own poetic,
mythologial, sensuous language. (3:12-13)

Several years later in another long and detailed
letter Santayana was again led to explain his views to
Strong, this time on why existence is not identifiable with
any ideal terms.

The principle of existence, I think, cannot
be any absolute or static being, whether
pure Beings or sentience conceived as self-
centered and self-existing. It must be the
very fact of passage or flux, involving the
establishment (by an unsynthesizable
succession) of contingent or irrelevant relations between its assignable terms. It will not suffice for your point-instants to "be", each in itself: if they are to exist, they must vindicate their existence by pushing and generating one another. Existence must be enacted: it cannot be given or conceived. (3:304-305)

Letters like these (and there are many of them) shed a great deal of light on the key terms of Santayana’s philosophy, such as ‘animal faith’, ‘intuition’, ‘intent’, and ‘natural moments’. They are a valuable resource for anyone seeking to understand his system.

Politics was never far from Santayana’s mind. From his correspondence we learn that his final book published in his lifetime, Dominations and Powers, was thirty-four years in the making. To Santayana’s way of thinking modern political systems are thought of as ‘experiments’, and in a particularly interesting letter he maintains that new institutions:

cannot be established merely because someone wants them, or can show with considerable eloquence that they might be admirable; Plato’s Republic, and many another, would have long been a fact, if that were enough. Organs have to be found, interests have to be enlisted, before any institution can establish itself: and these organs and interests must pre-exist, or must arise of themselves. They cannot be spirited into existence, or voted to exist...The question is: Can you enlist the interests and efforts of actual people, and actual organs of action, in your new undertaking?’(2:382)

The sentiments he expresses here perhaps explain in part Santayana’s seemingly ambivalent attitude toward America. Santayana strongly criticized consumer culture and the unrestrained embrace of technology. He commented that in the reports from American ‘What appalls me in this picture of young American life is the passivity of it, the incapacity of everybody to swim against the stream of mechanical automatisms carrying the world along. It is life
in a luxurious inferno: everybody rich, ignorant, common, and unhappy.’ (4:302) Santayana lived very comfortably and died wealthy, but he was also skeptical about what he perceived as the precarious nature of capitalism and international markets, thinking its distribution of wealth -- particularly the rise of his own -- highly artificial. Nevertheless he saw America as essentially young and just beginning to direct itself. In 1921 he wrote that:

The old genteel America was not happy; it was eager to know the truth, and to be “cultured”, and to love “art”, and to miss nothing that made other nations interesting or distinguished...You see, I am content to let the past bury its dead. It does not seem to me that we can impose on America the task of imitating Europe. The more different it can come to be the better: and we must let it take its own course, going a long way round, perhaps, before it can shake off the last trammels of alien tradition, and learn to express itself simply, not apologetically, after its own heart. (3:45-36)

Six years later he would make similar remarks about American art, stating that it ‘has a better soil in the ferocious 100% America than in the Intelligentsia of New York. It is veneer, rouge, aestheticism, art museums, new theaters, etc that make America Impotent. The good things are football, kindness, and jazz bands.’ (3:332)

Although he would live until 1952, Santayana was approaching his later years when he wrote the letters in Book Four (1928-1932). He was sixty-nine in 1932 and during the years covered by this volume he was living principally in Rome at the Hotel Bristol. He still took occasional trips, making final visits Spain, and The Netherlands, where he gave an address at the philosophical congress commemorating the tercentenary of Spinoza’s birth, and to England, where he gave an address to commemorate the tercentenary of the birth of John Locke. But his life of incessant travel was drawing to a close. In a letter to a boyhood friend to whom Santayana had become reacquainted Santayana reported: ‘My own existence is absolutely monotonous. I live only in hotels; work every morning for
two or three hours in a dressing gown: I am worse than an arm-chair philosopher: I am a poet in slippers.’ (4:348).

The picture of Santayana that emerges from these letters shows a man full generosity and genuine concern for his friends and family. Many of the letters in the fourth Book concern his careful arrangement of his will for the benefit of many relatives, his friends, and his literary assistant Daniel Cory. We also see that although Santayana’s materialism meant that for him human existence was essentially about decay and loss -- he writes: ‘I feel so much the continual death of everything and everybody’ (4:293) -- the tragic side of material life in his case was mixed with levity and sharp wit. At the age of sixty-six Santayana wrote to his nephew: ‘It is true that I am carrying out various methods of treatment recommended by doctors and dentists in the hope of dying in the remote future in perfect health’. (4:152) The letters also show him to be a man of resolutely balanced passions. While great social upheavals and personal tragedies occurred all around him, he always stayed outside the fray, ‘treading the wine press alone’ and committed only to a calm life of reflection. In the letter to his reacquainted friend Santayana continued: ‘I have more literary projects than I shall live to execute; I read a lot of beautiful and interesting books, old and new; I take a daily walk in the most approved and quiet places, wherever the priests walk; and I am, Deo gratias, in good health and in easy circumstances. What more can one desire at seventy? Love? Faith? If I am without love or faith, I am not without a certain amused connivance at the nature of things which keeps me tolerably happy.’ (4:348)

These letters are from a time when pen was put to paper regularly and with great care. Indeed it is a marvel to think that Santayana had time for such an involved correspondence in addition to all of his other literary activities. His gifts as a writer are well known, and these letters are interestingly composed with a somewhat freer hand than his beautifully polished prose. Their total effect, although there are four more volumes to come, is to reinforce rather than make us revise our understanding of Santayana as a philosopher with a penetrating intellect and broad vision, an individual with a tremendous amount of imaginative sympathy combined with constant reason.

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