On the philosopher, occasioned by the publication of The Letters of George Santayana.

Human infirmity in moderating and checking the emotions I name bondage: for when a man is a prey to his emotions, he is not his own master, but lies at the mercy of fortune: so much so, that he is often compelled, while seeing that which is better for him, to follow that which is worse.

—Spinoza, The Ethics

“Aplomb in the midst of irrational things”—that’s my motto!

—Santayana to William Morton Fullerton, 1887

It is poverty’s speech that seeks us out the most. It is older than the oldest speech of Rome. This is the tragic accent of the scene

And you— it is you that speak it, without speech, The loftiest syllables among loftiest things, The one invulnerable man among Crude captains, ...

—Wallace Stevens, “To an Old Philosopher in Rome”

When John McCormick published George Santayana: A Biography in 1987, he began the introduction by registering his “bewilderment that so moving and powerful a figure, justifiably famous in his own day, should have been so unjustifiably neglected in ours.” McCormick noted with disgust that even The Last Puritan (1935)—Santayana’s one novel and probably his most famous work—had been “unavailable … for years.”

McCormick’s lament was understandable. There was a time when Santayana’s work was part of the normal furniture of educated discourse. Not only his semi-autobiographical novel, but also his poetry, essays, and wide-ranging philosophical writings were eagerly read and digested, flowering in turn in the sentiments and opinions of several generations of readers. At Harvard, Santayana’s official and unofficial students included Conrad Aiken, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Witter Bynner, Walter Lippmann, Wallace Stevens, Scofield Thayer, Max Eastman, Van Wyck Brooks, Felix Frankfurter, and James B. Conant, many of whom (conspicuously excepting Eliot) registered their profound debt to his teaching. Until yesterday, it seems, Santayana’s influence was woven into the living tapestry of intellectual life. In our amnesiac day, Santayana’s influence seems to
have been reduced to the literary equivalent of a geometric point: a single epigram, to wit, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” (Santayana is deliciously quotable, but his only other saying that has survived in wide currency is the admonition that “Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim.”)

The years following publication of McCormick’s book have partly redressed his bewilderment about Santayana’s neglect—but not without irony. In 1986, after *George Santayana* was completed but before it was published, the MIT Press brought out *Persons and Places: Fragments of Autobiography*, the fat first volume of its Critical Edition of *The Works of George Santayana*. *Persons and Places* was undeniably a good place to begin. Originally published in three volumes from 1944 to 1953 (the year after Santayana’s death at eighty-eight), the book, like *The Last Puritan*, is among Santayana’s most popular works. As its subtitle suggests, *Persons and Places* contains a good deal about Santayana’s own life. It recounts his birth in Madrid in 1863 and early years in Avila with his father, his emigration, at eight, to Boston to live with his Scottish-born Catalan mother and her children by a previous marriage (to “a tall blond Puritan of aquiline features and perfect innocence of mind, George Sturgis of Boston”). Santayana takes the reader though his education at the Boston Public Latin School, Harvard, and in Germany, his relations with his family and peers, and his career as a philosophy professor at Harvard. Though in many ways a retiring personality, Santayana seemed to know almost everyone worth knowing, and so *Persons and Places* also contains any number of vivid character sketches: of Bertrand Russell and his brother John Francis, of Lady Ottoline Morrell and Siegfried Sassoon, of Logan Pearsall Smith, Bernard Berenson, and Robert Bridges. Santayana’s splendid accuracy as a judge of character may be gleaned from his description of Lytton Strachey, whom he met in 1915: “a limp cadaverous creature,” “like a caricature of Christ”: “Obscene was the character written all over him.”

Again like *The Last Puritan*, *Persons and Places* was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, a fact that added greatly to its sales. And *Persons and Places* was a notable critical as well as popular success. Edmund Wilson, for example, searching for appropriate literary parallels, enthusiastically compared it to *The Education of Henry Adams*, Yeats’s memoirs, and finally to Proust’s great novel. Moreover, *Persons and Places*, coming late in Santayana’s career, had not made it into the previous collection of his works, the handsome Triton Edition published in fifteen volumes by Scribners from 1936 to 1940. All of which is to say that everyone interested in Santayana had reason to welcome the republication of *Persons and Places*.

The irony mentioned above enters when one considers the MIT edition in the light of McCormick’s complaint about the neglect of Santayana’s work. During his life and after, Santayana was sometimes criticized for overwriting. He commanded immense fluency and could be tempted into gorgeous elaborateness. (“To some people,” he complained, “my whole philosophy seems to be but rhetoric or prose poetry.”) Although trained as a philosopher, Santayana was an intensely literary man; occasionally, he descended into literariness. This was especially, although not exclusively, true in his poetry, most of which he wrote before 1900: often it listeth toward Georgian preciousness. Even in his philosophical works—the bulk of his output—Santayana
tended to prefer nimble metaphor to patient exposition or argument. This preference is not, I hasten to add, necessarily a liability, even philosophically. As the philosopher David Stove observed, “some of the best philosophers never argue at all… Santayana, for example. He simply tells you how he thinks the world is, and delicately makes fun of some other philosophers … who think there is more to the world, or less, than he does.”

Besides, at his best—and he was often at or near his best—Santayana wrote with beguiling grace. Although he was a professor of philosophy for more than twenty years, he was never pedantic or willfully obscure. Even at his most technical (which was not all that technical)—in the five-volume *Life of Reason* (1905–1906), say, or *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923)—he is accessible to the educated general reader. His charm is irresistible. He begins *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, for example, with the admission that he comes bearing “one more system of philosophy.”

If the reader is tempted to smile, I can assure him that I smile with him, and that my system … differs widely in spirit and pretensions from what usually goes by that name. In the first place, *my system is not mine, nor new.* I am merely attempting to express for the reader the principles to which he appeals when he smiles.

Santayana is every bit as clever as any German metaphysician, only he is light-years less ponderous. It is important to stress that Santayana is accessible not merely stylistically—in the singing clarity of his prose—but also in terms of content. His philosophy dealt not with difficult abstractions but with matters of patent human exigency. “It was happiness or deliverance,” he wrote in “A General Confession,” an intellectual self-précis written in the 1930s, “that alone really concerned me. This alone was genuine philosophy: this alone was the life of reason.”

Above all, Santayana wrote to be read. For many readers, he is most agreeable as an occasional essayist—in *Soliloquies in England* (1922), for example, which was written during and just after World War I when Santayana had installed himself in Great Britain. Ostensibly bagatelles on miscellaneous topics from “Atmosphere,” “Cloud Castles,” and “Dons” to “Death-Bed Manners” and “Skylarks,” these fugitive pieces are full of pungent observation and sound judgment. Writing about “The British Character,” at a moment when England was still mistress of an empire, he notes that “What governs the Englishman is his inner atmosphere, the weather in his soul.”

Instinctively the Englishman is no missionary, no conqueror. He prefers the country to the town, and home to foreign parts. He is rather glad and relieved if only natives will remain natives and strangers strangers, and at a comfortable distance from himself. Yet outwardly he is most hospitable and accepts almost anybody for the time being; he travels and conquers without a settled design, because he has the instinct of exploration. His adventures are all external; they change him so little that he is not afraid of them. He carries his English weather in his heart wherever he goes, and it becomes a cool spot in the desert, and a steady and sane oracle amongst all the deliriums of mankind. Never since the heroic days of Greece has the world had such a sweet, just, boyish master. It will be a black day for the human race when scientific blackguards, conspirators, churls, and fanatics manage to supplant him.
That is eloquently said, and the intervening eighty-odd years have underscored its accuracy.

Pleasure of a certain refined stamp was Santayana’s lodestar in life, and such pleasure was what he sought to communicate through his writing. The beautifully produced Triton Edition (limited to some 950 sets) was the perfect correlative of Santayana’s style. It has no editorial notes. But it makes up in readability what it lacks in critical apparatus. It is an edition to be read.

The MIT edition is meant to be … Well, let’s see. The Letters of George Santayana: Book One,[1] [1868]–1909 is the first of a projected eight volumes of letters. Altogether, those eight books will count as Volume V in the Critical Edition of Santayana’s works.[2] Daniel Cory, who met Santayana in 1927 when he was twenty-two and who became the aging philosopher’s confidante, secretary, and literary executor, brought out a selection of letters in 1955. That volume includes some 300 letters; he added dozens more in a 1963 portrait of Santayana’s later years. Santayana’s letters—some of them, anyway—are certainly worth reading. Consider this 1937 missive to Cory about Ezra Pound:

For Heaven’s sake, dear Cory, do stop Ezra Pound from sending me his book. Tell him I have no sense for true poetry, admire (and wretchedly imitate) only the putrid Petrarch and the miserable Milton; that I don’t care for books, have hardly any, and would immediately send off his precious volume to the Harvard Library or to some other cesspool of infamy. That is, if he made me a present of it. If he sent it only for me to look at and return, I would return it unopened; because I abhor all connection with important and distinguished people, and refuse to see absolutely anyone except some occasional stray student or genteel old lady from Boston.

Good stuff, no? But the Critical Edition will run to some 3000 letters. Are they all indispensable? The present volume, which takes Santayana through schooldays to the threshold of fame at age forty-six, contains about 350 letters. Some, like those to William James, his teacher and then senior colleague at Harvard, shed light on his thought. Some, like those to the sexually ambidextrous William Morton Fullerton (the lover of Edith Wharton, among many others), are amusing and provide glimpses into Santayana’s developing character. Not a few are like this one from 1906 to his beloved half-sister (and godmother) Susana: "April 3.—It is delightful here in Montpellier. I think constantly of Avila & Greece. It is Spring at last." How many such reports do we really need?

This volume also features—in addition to the standard preface, acknowledgments, introduction, bibliography, index, and copious footnotes—some twenty pages of textual commentary, a long chronology of Santayana’s life as well as a register of the dozens of addresses he occupied in the course of his many European and American travels. There are sixty pages of textual notes, which detail Santayana’s every misspelling, crossing out, and insertion. There is a list of manuscript locations, letter recipients, and thus-far unlocated letters. There is even a Report of Line-End Hyphenation, which to my eye has an undeniable poetry: “good-looking” is followed by “anti-Hegelianism,” which is followed by “ghost-and-faery-blind,” etc.: a euphonious and edifying procession.
I wonder whether this is the sort of rescue from neglect that John McCormick had in mind? Such attention implies a certain flattery, of course. But then so does the process of embalming. It is not as if there are any grave difficulties about the texts that Santayana bequeathed to posterity. We are not dealing with a heap of damaged, barely legible papyrus or collations of scribal errors, after all. We are dealing with an eminently accessible twentieth-century writer whose texts are about as transparent and unproblematic as texts can be. It is interesting to speculate about what Santayana would have made of the Critical Edition of his work. His sense of humor, I suspect, and possibly his vanity, would have been gratified: Santayana always had a lively appreciation of the absurd. His sense of proportion would have been appalled.

Santayana enjoyed aspects of college life. He liked the semi-cloistered existence, the intellectual intimacy with burgeoning young minds, the easy proximity to handsome young faces. But he always loathed the academic industry. Indeed, no sooner had he started teaching than he began plotting his escape. Being a teacher, he remarked in *Persons and Places*, was forced upon him by the necessity of earning a living, “but being a student was my vocation.” He lived frugally, saved diligently, and was finally able to announce his departure in 1912, just shy of fifty, when his mother died leaving him a legacy of $10,000 (nearly $200,000 today). He left for Europe and never set foot in the United States again. (Santayana was not without affection for America, but he liked to say that his love for it, like his love for Spain, was “manifested … by living there as little as possible.”)

Harvard, Santayana thought, had been ruined by people like Charles Eliot, the ambitious president from 1869–1909, who strove to transform Harvard College into a great modern university. Eliot and Santayana were like oil and water. Early in his teaching career, Santayana chanced to encounter the president; asked about the progress of his classes, Santayana explained that he had finished with Plato and was moving on to Aristotle. “No, no, Santayana,” Eliot said, “what I mean by my enquiry is, how many students have enrolled for your lectures?”

It wasn’t just a matter of administrative expansionism that bothered Santayana, though. The very discipline of academic philosophy rubbed him the wrong way. “That philosophers should be professors is an accident,” he wrote, “and almost an anomaly. Free reflection about everything is a habit to be imitated, but not a subject to expound; and an original system, if the philosopher has one, is something dark, perilous, untested, and not ripe to be taught, nor is there much danger anyone will learn it.” Looking back on his Harvard days in *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920), he spoke of the new breed of philosophy professor who was “very professional in tone and conscious of his Fach,” “open-minded, whole-hearted, appreciative,” but also—deadly phrase—“toasted only on one side.”

It is sometimes suggested that William James, though he died in 1910, had been instrumental in poisoning the atmosphere for Santayana at Harvard. This is emphatically not the case. Everyone quotes James’s description of Santayana’s early work as exhibiting a “perfection of rottenness” and “moribund Latinity.” Few supply the context: “The great event in my life
recently,” James wrote to a colleague in 1900, has been the reading of Santayana’s book [Interpretations of Poetry and Religion]. Although I absolutely reject the platonism of it, I have literally squealed with delight at the imperturbable perfection with which the position is laid down… . I now understand Santayana, the man. I never understood him before. But what a perfection of roteness in a philosophy! I don’t think I ever knew the anti-realistic view to be propounded with so impudently superior an air. It is refreshing to see a representative of moribund Latinity rise up and administer such reproof to us barbarians in the hour of our triumph.

James ends by asking that his letter be passed along to Santayana, adding: “He is certainly an extraordinarily distingué writer. Thank him for existing!”

Temperamentally, the two men were complete opposites—James bluff, hearty, the thorough New England pragmatist in manner as well as philosophical outlook: Santayana the super-refined, sonnet-writing, exquisitely disillusioned Catholic Spaniard. In many ways, Santayana was closer in spirit to William’s brother Henry. They met only once, in England, toward the end of Henry’s life. “In that one interview,” Santayana recalled—sadly, I think—he “made me feel more at home and better understood than his brother William ever had done in the long years of our acquaintance. Henry was calm, he liked to see things as they are, and be free afterwards to imagine how they might have been.” High praise from that apostle of clarity animated by subjunctive dispensation. Despite their differences, however, there was no contemporary to whom Santayana owed more, intellectually, than William James, whose “sense for the immediate,” “for the unadulterated, unexplained, instant fact of experience” Santayana celebrated. The problem with Harvard was not William James but the increasing professional drift of the institution.

Although the Critical Edition of Santayana’s works will probably help resuscitate the philosopher as a subject of academic lucubration—we can expect, I believe, to see an uptick in dissertations on his work—there is a sense in which it is likely to extend rather than remedy the neglect he has suffered in recent decades. As John McCormick noted in his biography, Santayana “conveyed an attitude toward existence rather than a set of axioms, a totality of response rather than a geodetic survey of the world.” That attitude, that totality of response, is not necessarily aided by excessive scholarly integument. Whatever one’s final judgment about the value of Santayana’s philosophy, he is certainly among the most approachable of writers. The Critical Edition assumes an amount of starch and formality that is almost comically at odds with the spirit of this genial and smilingly radical writer.

Many people who know Santayana only from anthologies are surprised to discover how thoroughly naturalistic a thinker he was. It somehow seems strange for a poet of his sometimes trembling fervency. But right from the start Santayana’s primary philosophical inspirations were radical materialists like Lucretius and Spinoza (Spinoza, he said, “in several respects laid the foundation of my philosophy”).

Santayana’s naturalism assured his implacable hostility to supernaturalism: the patent
variety—his native Roman Catholicism, for example—as well as the covert versions populating many schools of philosophy—German idealism, say, in both its original and transplanted-to-England-and-America forms. (One of Santayana’s most effective polemics is Egotism in German Philosophy, first published in 1916. The description of Hegel’s dialectic as a futile attempt to make “things conform to words, not words to things” says everything one needs to know about that intellectual monstrosity.) In 1890, when he was in his late twenties, Santayana wrote to William James that “I doubt whether the earth supports a more genuine enemy of all that the Catholic Church inwardly stands for than I do,” and he later noted that he had “never been what is called a practising Catholic.” It was a position from which he never wavered. It is worth stressing this. Santayana spent the last twelve years of his life at the Blue Sisters’ clinic in Rome. This has tempted some commentators to suggest that his atheism softened or even evaporated with age. But this was not the case. During his last illness, Santayana took pains to advise Daniel Cory that if he were unconscious and the sacrament of Extreme Unction were administered, no one should interpret that as a deathbed conversion.

But if Santayana was a thoroughly naturalistic thinker, he came armed with a remarkable aesthetic sensibility and native appreciation of the imaginative resources that religion offered. Religions, he insisted, “are the great fairy-tales of the conscience.” Nevertheless he also believed that religions are indispensable, not least because they nurture the emotion of piety, “Man’s reverent attachment to the sources of his being and the steadying of his life by that attachment.” Santayana was the enemy of religion considered as dogma, as a repository of moral commandments or “literal” truth. (Santayana had little time, probably too little time, for what he dismissed as “literal truth.” “My matured conclusion,” he wrote, “is that no system is to be trusted, not even science in any literal or pictorial sense.”)

But he also saw in religion an irreplaceable friend of human yearning. Its disappearance, hailed as an emancipation, actually brought forth new forms of bondage. “The absence of a positive religion,” he wrote in the “General Confession,” “was very far from liberating the spirit for higher flights: on the contrary, it opened the door to the pervasive tyranny of the world over the soul.” When he looked around at the increasing secularization of the modern world, Santayana saw that the degradation of religion went hand-in-hand with the diminishment of culture. In “The Intellectual Temper of the Age” (1911), Santayana forlornly describes the dissolution of Christianity and the rise of “an emancipated, atheistic, international democracy.”

In vain do we deprecate it; it has possession of us already through our propensities, fashions, and language. Our very plutocrats and monarchs are at ease only when they are vulgar. Even prelates and missionaries are hardly sincere or conscious of an honest function, save as they devote themselves to social work.

It goes without saying that he did not regard this development as a sign of spiritual health. Santayana seems to have had an ingrained suspicion of almost everything beginning with “pro”: “professors,” as we’ve seen, but also “Protestantism,” “protégés,” “prophets,” and,
above all, perhaps, “progress.” “Those who speak most of progress,” he wrote, “measure it by quantity and not by quality; how many people read and write, or how many people there are, or what is the annual value of their trade; whereas true progress would rather lie in reading or writing fewer and better things, and being fewer and better men, and enjoying life more.” At a time when nearly everyone—conservative as well as liberal—has difficulty dissociating the ideas of “more” and “better,” Santayana’s unorthodox remarks are worth pondering.

The philosopher Frederick Olafson noted that there exists in Santayana’s thinking “a pervasive animus against democracy and liberalism.” This is true. And it must be said that about some political matters, Santayana was naïve if not obtuse. In a letter of 1920, for example, he wrote to a former Harvard colleague that “I think to be born under Bolshevism would not be worse than to be born in Boston.” (Moscow, where Stalins speak only to Lenins, and the Lenins speak only to Marx?) But in other respects, Santayana’s traditionalist temperament and passion for individual liberty made him an astute social critic. He was especially penetrating about the contradictions of liberalism. In “The Intellectual Temper of the Age,” he noted that

Liberalism had been supposed to advocate liberty; but what the advanced parties that still call themselves liberal now advocate is control, control over property, trade, wages, hours of work, meat and drink, amusements, and in a truly advanced country like France control over education and religion; and it is only on the subject of marriage … that liberalism is growing more and more liberal.

In an important essay called “The Irony of Liberalism,” Santayana dilates on the element of social presumption that stands behind the liberal’s habit of coercion:

No man … can really or ultimately desire anything but what the best people desire. This is the principle of the higher snobbery; and in fact, all earnest liberals are higher snobs. If you refuse to move in the prescribed direction, you are not simply different, you are arrested and perverse. The savage must not remain a savage, nor the nun a nun, and China must not keep its wall. If the animals remain animals it is somehow through a failure of the will in them, and very sad. Classic liberty, though only a name for stubborn independence, and obedience to one’s own nature, was too free, in one way, for the modern liberal.

Liberalism in the modern sense is deeply hostile not only to tradition—tradition is by definition an impediment to “progress”—but also to “the wilder instincts of man”: “the love of foraging, of hunting, of fighting, of plotting, of carousing, or of doing penance.” (The inclusion of penance is a characteristic Santayana touch.) The perfect liberal society is one that excludes initiative.

The homogenizing imperative of liberalism has a psychological correlative in abstract moralism. Santayana memorably captures this in a vignette in Persons and Places. Under the rubric “A lesson in morals,” he recalls an episode after lunch one day when he was a young boy. A single piece of cake remained on a plate. He asked his mother whether he might have it. “No,” she said. “It is for the little birds.”
Though it was by no means a fixed habit of hers, she opened the window and spread the crumbs out for the sparrows. She did not care for sparrows, she never watched them or tried to tame them; and that day, having performed her act of zoological benevolence, she closed the window at once, and went upstairs to sit as usual in her own room… . I am sure that in her silence she felt that she had given me a lesson in justice and in universal love. She had kept the cake from her son and given it to the sparrows. She was a liberal in politics.

One is tempted to add, after the fashion of his beloved Spinoza, Q.E.D.

Sanitayana was a curious hybrid. In one way, he was every bit as radical a thinker as Schopenhauer (whom he greatly admired) or Nietzsche (whom he did not). Ultimately, though, he was the cheerful, affirmative figure that Nietzsche pretended to be but wasn’t. (No one, I think, ever accused Schopenhauer of being cheerful.) What Santayana described as his “scepticism” ran very deep indeed. “The truth is a terrible thing,” he has the vicar of Iffley say in The Last Puritan. “It is much darker, much sadder, much more ignoble, much more inhuman and ironical than most of us are willing to admit, or even able to suspect.” That is just the sort of thing one might expect to find in Nietzsche (“Truth is ugly,” he declared in The Will to Power). But where Nietzsche engaged in unending histrionics, Santayana behaved like a gentleman. Nietzsche described himself as “the Antichrist,” said he was “dynamite,” and presumed to instruct us about “how to philosophize with a hammer.” Santayana was much calmer. He sought no detonations. He wished to smash no idols. He came much closer, in fact, to being the disabused spiritual aristocrat that Nietzsche admired but sweated too much to resemble. “Criticism,” Santayana said, “must first be invited to do its worst.” But only for the indelicate, he thought, did thoroughgoing criticism lead to nihilism or madness. Out of scepticism came faith, but it was an animal faith, modest, grateful, thoroughly materialistic: disillusioned but also at peace.

There were two interrelated sources of Santayana’s calm. One was his aestheticism. Santayana strove to regard the entire world as a thing of beauty, which is to say a source of pleasure. (In his early book The Sense of Beauty [1896] he defined beauty as “pleasure objectified”: inadequate as a definition, no doubt, but useful as a barometer of temperament.) “I can draw no distinction,” he wrote in a mature summing-up, “—save for academic programmes—between moral and aesthetic values: beauty being a good, is a moral good; and the practice and enjoyment of art, like all practice and all enjoyment, fall within the sphere of morals—at least if by morals we understand moral economy and not moral superstition.” Santayana attempted to provide a philosophical justification for this thoroughgoing aestheticism with what he called his doctrine of “essences.” How do we know that what we believe is true is true? what we find beautiful is in fact beautiful? Are we not everywhere besieged by error and illusion? Yes, but Santayana proposes to entertain the illusion without succumbing to it, accepting it openly as an illusion, and forbidding it to claim any sort of being but that which it obviously has; and then … it will not deceive me. What will remain of this non-deceptive illusion will then be a truth, and a truth the being of which requires no explanation, since it is utterly impossible that it should be otherwise.
How convincing is this? Not very. The fact that we embrace an illusion as an illusion does not automatically grant it the patent of truth. But it is worth noting that Santayana’s criterion of trustworthiness is a quality often accorded to aesthetic and religious experience, namely the conviction that contingency, if but momentarily, had been defeated. It is also worth noting that it is not an attitude peculiar to Santayana. Wallace Stevens, for example, advocated something similar when he wrote that “The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and you believe in it willingly.”

There are many problems with Santayana’s (and Stevens’s) aestheticism. The chief problem is its subjectivity. By locating the criterion of morality and truth in a species of pleasurable sensation, Santayana in effect denies them any public measure. This means that—I won’t call it the validity, but the attractiveness of Santayana’s ideal depends largely on the quality of the individual espousing it. In the delicate hands of a Santayana this doctrine might provide a workable philosophy of life. Not everyone has the sensibility, the discipline, the restraint to make “all practice and all enjoyment fall within the sphere of morals.”

The relation between enjoyment and restraint brings us to the other source of Santayana’s calm, his Epicureanism. Colloquially, “epicurean” is often used to mean “devoted to sensuous pleasure.” In fact, though, Epicureanism is a deeply ascetic philosophy. It is devoted to pleasure, but pleasure understood as the absence of pain. The goal is ataraxia: privative tranquillity: at peace because not disturbed by emotional tumult. Not so much happiness as invulnerability. In The Last Puritan (a model for which was Walter Pater’s Marius the Epicurean), Santayana has his alter-ego Oliver Alden remark that “I have the Epicurean contentment, which is not far removed from asceticism.” Santayana early on learned to regard the world as a threat that could be best countered by holding it at bay. The phrase “a detached observer” recurs frequently in his writings. It names not simply an intellectual ideal but an emotional imperative. “The moral pageantry of this world,” Santayana wrote, “is calculated wonderfully to strengthen and refine the philosophy of abstention suggested to Epicurus by the flux of material things and by the illusions of vulgar passions.”

Which passions were not vulgar? Those that did not collude to involve us emotionally—the dispassionate passions of observation, retrospection, and amused noninvolvement. In the 1890s, one of Santayana’s colleagues at Harvard noted that “Santayana impressed us as an onlooker in the world more than a sharer in its struggle.” It was an impression that Santayana was careful to cultivate, and it nurtured the reputation he had (despite his conspicuous financial generosity) for emotional chilliness. Daniel Cory reports that in 1931 when he told Santayana about the death of his old friend Frank Russell, the philosopher “reacted not at all.” Taken aback, Cory asked: “Mr. Santayana, if I dropped dead in front of you at this moment, would you be emotionally moved at all?” To which Santayana replied: “You should not ask me personal questions.” Santayana later added that he had known Russell “long ago,” etc., but the impression of glacial noli me tangere
persisted.

Santayana’s distance from involvement was a leitmotif of his character. By disposition, he was homosexual, though it is not clear that he was ever sexually involved with anyone. Reflecting on a meeting he had with A. E. Housman, Santayana mused to Cory that “I think I must have been that way in my Harvard days—although I was unconscious of it at the time.” McCormick regarded that as deliberately coy, but supplied no evidence to gainsay it. Santayana regarded sex the way he regarded emotional entanglements generally, as temptations to be avoided. “Carnal pleasures,” he wrote, “are but welcome pains, [they] draw the spirit inwards into primal darkness and indistinction.” Perhaps it was fortunate that Santayana was, or made himself, unsusceptible to such pleasures. “Love has never made me long unhappy, nor sexual impulse uncomfortable,” he wrote in a letter of 1924. Burdens, responsibilities, emotional ties: these sutures of ordinary life are among the chief evils in the Epicurean’s lexicon. Disturbing tranquility, they remind us of our essential poverty, our lack of self-sufficiency. But of course such entanglements are also our most reliable sources of joy. I suspect that this is something that Santayana understood, even if he refrained from indulging it. “It takes patience to appreciate domestic bliss,” he wrote in The Life of Reason; “volatile spirits prefer unhappiness.” Santayana did not at all prefer unhappiness. But he was reluctant to wager on a bliss burdened with the imperfections of the domestic. In a letter of 1924, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., put his finger on something essential about Santayana. “In a general way,” Holmes wrote, “his thinking more than that of other philosophers coincides with mine. But he has a patronizing tone—as of one who saw through himself but didn’t expect others to.” Such is the fate of those who aspire to be “The one invulnerable man among/ Crude captains.”

Notes
Go to the top of the document.


2. In addition to Persons and Places, editions of The Sense of Beauty (first published in 1896), Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (1900), and The Last Puritan have appeared in the Critical Edition as of this writing. Another volume of letters, covering the period 1910–1920, is due out imminently. Go back to the text.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of The New Criterion and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest book is The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia (St. Augustine’s Press).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 20 Number 6, on page 18
Copyright © 2019 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com
https://newcriterion.com/issues/2002/2/george-santayana