

THE LAST PURITAN: GEORGE SANTAYANA'S CONCEPT OF A GENTEEL TRADITION

J. J. LANERO
Universidad de León

I

The Last Puritan merits more attention than it has received to date. Many critics of Santayana's work have paid little or no attention to the novel and particularly to Santayana's concept of American Puritanism in it. John Lachs, for instance, eliminated any discussion of the novel altogether from his study, *George Santayana*¹. John McCormick, in his comprehensive biography of Santayana, includes a chapter on the novel titled "The Life and Death of Oliver Alden" in which he discusses in detail the history of the novel's composition, including its sources². He does not deal centrally with the role of Puritanism in the novel, however. Anthony Woodward's study of Santayana concludes with "Epilogue: The Last Puritan," in which the Emersonian elements of Santayana's concept of the genteel tradition and the novel are discussed perceptively, but the element of Puritanism receives scant attention³.

It is beyond the scope of this study to trace in detail Santayana's influence on subsequent critics of the so-called genteel tradition in American culture; nonetheless, some comment about his influence on subsequent critics is an appropriate preface to study the novel.

II

Eleven years after Santayana delivered his lecture he was asked to review for the *Dial* the symposium on "Civilization in the United States," edited by Harold Stearns. The significance of Santayana's being asked to do that review is underscored by the stature of the authors who contributed to the

¹ John Lachs, *George Santayana*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988.

² John McCormick, *George Santayana: A Biography*, New York: Knopf, 1987.

³ Anthony Woodward, *Living in the Eternal: A Study of George Santayana*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1988.

symposium. They included Lewis Mumford, H.L. Mencken, Van Wyck Brooks, George Jean Nathan, George Soule, and Ring Lardner⁴. Santayana surprised those who expected his praise by suggesting that they themselves were captured by the genteel tradition. His critique of American culture remained sharp-edged, arguing that the genteel tradition had an even more pervasive influence than other critics recognized. The quality of Santayana's critique should be noted. Kenneth S. Lynn, for instance, observes that "the sons of the genteel tradition were too offended by their native land to study it with care."⁵ That is not a criticism that can be leveled at Santayana. Born in Europe, where he returned in retirement, and considering America only a temporary home, he maintained a balance between detached criticism of and direct involvement in the tradition which he chose to criticize. He knew the life of the New England establishment through his Boston relatives, with whom he lived for a period of time on Beacon Hill; he was a member of the Faculty of Harvard University, the centre of "genteel" New England culture. He was never completely at home in America, yet he was not a rebel against his adopted country, however perceptibly he viewed its faults.

Santayana's influence on the definition of the term he had created remained incisive. One of his chief heirs in defining the genteel tradition was Brooks, a member of the *Dial* symposium. Though he did not actually take a course with Santayana at Harvard, Brooks had contact with him there and reflected his influence in such works as *The Opinions of Oliver Alston*, *The Wine of the Puritans*, and *America's Coming of Age*. Wilfred M. McClay's article, "Two Versions of the Genteel Tradition: Santayana and Brooks,"⁶ is a helpful discussion of the relationship between the two critics of American culture. Although most discussion of that relationship centres on Santayana's presumed influence on Brooks, James Hoopes suggest at least one point where Brooks may have had some influence on Santayana: *The Wine of the Puritans made quite a splash in the Harvard yard that probably drew the philosopher's attention, and Santayana's famous address, "The Genteel Tradition," delivered just three years after the publication of Brook's book, contained several echoes of it. For instance: "The country was new, but the race was tired, chastened, and full of solemn memories. It was an old wine in new bottles."*⁷

⁴ Kenneth S. Lynn, "Santayana and the Genteel Tradition," *Commentary* 73 (1982), pp. 81-84.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁶ Wilfred M. McClay, "Two Versions of the Genteel Tradition: Santayana and Brooks," *New England Quarterly*, 55 (1982), pp. 368-91.

⁷ James Hoopes, *Van Wick Brooks: In Search of American Culture*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977, p. 62.

Brooks, in turn, influenced others including Malcolm Cowley, who published *After the Genteel Tradition* in 1937, just one year after the publication of *The Last Puritan*.

As unlikely an heir to Santayana's thought as Norman Mailer observed: *The class which wielded the power which ran America, and the class which most admired that class, banded together instinctively to approve a genteel literature which had little to do with power or the secrets of power. They encouraged a literature about courtship and marriage and love and play and devotion and piety and style, a literature which had to do finally with the excellence of belonging to their own genteel tradition.*⁸

Mailer, one suspects, would likely have placed *The Last Puritan* in the category of literature celebrating "the excellence of belonging to their own genteel tradition," though in fact Santayana's novel more indicts the failure of that tradition than celebrates its excellence.

Santayana posited in his 1911 lecture that what he called the genteel tradition was itself one of the two key mentalities in the American experience, "one a survival of the beliefs and standards of the fathers, the other an expression of the instincts, practice, and discoveries of the younger generation."⁹ In the higher things of the mind, Santayana said, the old spirit prevailed: "It has floated gently in the backwater, while, alongside, in invention and industry and social organization the other half of the mind was leaping down a sort of Niagara Rapids."¹⁰ This division could be symbolised in American architecture: *A neat reproduction of the colonial mansion—with some modern comforts introduced surreptitiously—stands beside the skyscraper; the American Intellect inhabits the colonial mansion. The one is the sphere of the American man; the other, at least predominantly, of the American woman. The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition.*¹¹

There is much in this statement to stimulate debate, including the characterization of the two aspects of the American experience as masculine or feminine. Pursuing in particular Santayana's discussion of the genteel tradition relative to *The Last Puritan*, however, one notes a subdivision of that element itself into two philosophies, Calvinism and Transcendentalism. Serious poetry and profound religion, including Calvinism, Santayana suggests, "are the joys of an unhappiness that confesses itself," whereas the

⁸ Norman Mailer, *Cannibals and Christians*, New York: Dial, 1966, p. 95.

⁹ George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

element of the genteel tradition embodied in Transcendentalism, “forbids people to confess that they are unhappy.”¹²

The Last Puritan emphasizes the Calvinist element of the genteel tradition. It touches also on the Transcendental dimension that, in Santayana’s view, “was a sign of having been brought up in the genteel tradition, of feeling it weak, and of wishing to save it.”¹³ Santayana believed that Transcendentalism did not succeed in that rescue, however, though he considered it “the chief contribution made in modern times to speculation.”¹⁴ Three major American writers whom Santayana admired—Poe, Hawthorne and Emerson—were among those who tried to reappropriate the genteel tradition, he believed, but failed: “They could not retail the genteel tradition: they were too keen, too perceptive, and too abstract for that.”¹⁵

In defining the Calvinist element of the genteel tradition, Santayana posits that Calvinism asserted “that sin exists, that sin is punished, and that it is beautiful that sin should exist to be punished.” “To be a Calvinist philosophically,” Santayana asserted, “is to feel a fierce pleasure in the existence of misery, especially of one’s own.”¹⁶ In a nation which so quickly flourished, he continues, it is no wonder that this spirit did not thrive.

Oliver Alden, the protagonist of *The Last Puritan*, is unable either to live effectively in the modern world or to reappropriate the Calvinism of his forebears. Shortly after Santayana published *The Last Puritan*, he described to William Lyon Phelps the predicament of his protagonist: “Faith, as you say, is needed; but faith is an assurance inwardly prompted, springing from the irrepressible impulse to do, to fight, to triumph. Here is where the third sloppy wash in the family tea-pot is insufficient.”¹⁷

The nostalgia of Oliver’s “third sloppy wash” is, indeed, insufficient to motivate him. A critical key to the work is Santayana’s view that Oliver, the “last” Puritan, has lost the precarious balance—“the doubleness,” to use Santayana’s own word from the novel’s preface¹⁸—once maintained by American Puritans between divine purpose and human effort. The loss of that balance is at the heart of the novel and is crucial to understanding Santayana’s last Puritan.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁷ George Santayana, *Santayana on America: Essays, Notes, and Letters on American Life, Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Colton Lyon, New York: Harcourt, 1968, p. 306.

¹⁸ George Santayana, *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*, New York: Scribner’s, 1940.

Anthony Woodward, commenting briefly on Santayana's concept of Puritanism, suggests that "Puritanism, having begun as a doctrine of perfect dependence on other-worldly grace, had become a worldliness incarnate—but a turbid, griping worldliness."¹⁹ Even before its decline in America, however, there was more of the "doubleness" perceived by Santayana than many have recognised. Whatever their doctrine stated about total dependence upon God, Puritans in practice balanced that dependence against a strong sense of responsibility for their own actions, acting much of the time as through God's grace were, after all, dependent on their behaviour. We have labeled that outlook "the ability of the unable" to emphasise the tenuous balance involved.

One is reminded of Perry Miller's conception of the American Puritan experience when reading Santayana's definition of the Calvinist element in the genteel tradition in America. Miller's insight remains helpful. Santayana, as noted already, spoke in his 1911 lecture about the Calvinist's conviction "that sin exists, that sin should exist to be punished."²⁰ Miller insisted that the Puritan's concern with human sin was held in careful tension with a "cosmic optimism." That ultimate optimism redeemed their outlook from unrelieved gloom. As Miller writes, "Puritan thought incarnates a double-edged paradox: the abasement of man points to a supreme ideal of perfection, and the sense of a possible perfection makes man appear by contrast immeasurably abased."²¹

A corollary of the outlooks of both Santayana and Miller is that the Puritans dared to hold in tension two logically contradictory propositions: that God is in control totally of human destiny, and that humans are responsible fully for the consequences of their actions. This paradox was crucial to the Puritan experiment. At the heart of the tension was faith in the absolute sovereignty of God. Yet that faith was no excuse for failure to take full responsibility for one's actions. The Puritans, therefore, struggled to avoid the extremes of either Antinomianism or Arminianism by maintaining a creative tension between divine prerogative and human responsibility. The ultimate threat to their experiment, Oliver Alden's ancestors believed, was to step outside that central tension which was the key motive force of their experience. In dramatising the loss of this tension in the life of his last Puritan, Santayana illustrates perceptively the decline of American

¹⁹ Anthony Woodward, *opus cit.*, p. 135.

²⁰ See note 16.

²¹ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, Boston: Beacon, 1939, p. 45. We have discovered no link that would suggest that Santayana had a direct influence on Miller, yet the two outlooks are strikingly similar.

Puritanism. Michael T. Gilmore²², Richard Reinitz²³, Chard Powers Smith²⁴, and James W. Jones²⁵ are useful sources for the concept of tension and balance in Puritanism. Jones writes: *The Puritanism that was reverently carried across the ocean in the bulky volumes of divinity was a balance of the objectivity of the head and the subjectivity of the heart, of divine predestination and human activity. That balance was lost in the course of the seventeenth century; it was never regained. From then the American religious history has been, among other things, a warfare between those who proclaim the presence of God and those who insist on the morality of man as the essence of what it means to be religious.*²⁶

III

Santayana spends considerable space in the novel illustrating how in Oliver's family the Puritan tradition is nearly bankrupt before Oliver appears on the scene. Oliver's uncle, Nathaniel, is a caricature of the shrewed Yankee who has taken the Puritan insistence on hard work to an extreme never intended by his ancestors. Material prosperity was not the ultimate goal of the Puritan, nor was it an absolute proof of God's blessing, though it might be interpreted, cautiously, as one sign of the latter. For Nathaniel, however, the vitality of the Puritan dynamic has been lost, and he is reduced to the absurd insistence that "whatever he had and was must be right, whatever he hadn't and wasn't must be wrong: else how should he face the universe?"²⁷

Nathaniel is intellectually and morally dead even as a young man. He goes through the motions of church attendance, but the Unitarianism of King's Chapel is a long way from the Puritanism of his ancestors: "In those high-walled pews, with their locked doors, every worshipper might pray in secret, as in his own closet; and he took care that his [the minister's] own words should never intrude rudely into the privacy of their sacred convictions."²⁸

²² Michael T. Gilmore, *The Middle Way: Puritanism and Ideology in American Romantic Fiction*, Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 1977.

²³ Richard Reinitz, ed., *Tensions in American Puritanism*, New York: Wiley, 1970.

²⁴ Chard Powers Smith, *Yankees and God*, New York: Hermitage, 1954.

²⁵ James W. Jones, *The Shattered Synthesis: New England Puritanism before the Great Awakening*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. x.

²⁷ George Santayana, *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*, ed. cit., p. 45.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

The active interplay of individual and community which was essential to the Puritans has disappeared from Nathaniel's world. Now one worshipper is isolated from another in protection of the "sacred convictions" that their forebears, by contrast, would have subjected to not only the individual but also communal scrutiny.

Nathaniel illustrates the situation which Miller describes in his essay "From Edwards to Emerson": *Consequently, although young men and women in Boston might be, like Waldo and Margaret, the children of rationalists, all about them society still bore the impress of Calvinism, the theological break had come, but not the cultural. In a thousand ways the forms of society were still those determined by the ancient orthodoxy, piously observed by persons who no longer believed in the creed.*²⁹

Nathaniel can go through the motions of the "forms of society" with some degree of satisfaction; by the time Oliver inherits those forms, however, they have grown completely lifeless, cut off from the roots which once nurtured them.

Oliver's father, Peter, is more likable than his brother Nathaniel, yet he is pathetic. He has gone through the motions of loyalty to his station in life, marrying a socially acceptable woman and fathering a male heir. However, he has abandoned all social responsibilities in order to live on an exotic yacht, lulled into complacency by frequent use of drugs.

The rigour of form without substance –of moralism without piety as Joseph Haroutunian³⁰ expresses the degeneration of Puritanism– is the model set for Peter by his brother Nathaniel. In response, Peter disengages himself from the world of which his brother insists on remaining a part. Jim Darnley observes to Oliver: "Your father has never asserted himself enough: he has a despairing way of being patient, when there's no need of being patient."³¹ Oliver can no more emulate this pathetic shadow of the moral rigour of his forebears than he can copy the lifeless forms of behaviour modeled in his Uncle Nathaniel.

Oliver's mother is selfish and smug, entirely sure of her position in life. No faithful Puritan would have tolerated the sort of unquestioning security into which she has settled. Tension between present effort and ultimate sanction has disappeared entirely from her world: "Mrs. Alden's happiest days were those on which she had no engagements and could devote her

²⁹ Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, New York: Harper, 1956, p. 200.

³⁰ Joseph Haroutunian, *From Piety to Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology*, New York: Holt, 1932.

³¹ George Santayana, *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*, ed. cit., p. 157.

leisure to judicious self-congratulation on her past actions and her present position."³²

As the last of his line, Oliver is a throwback to remote ancestors in his attempt to "[keep] revising himself," as his cousin Mario observes at the end of the novel.³³ Oliver is in search of a dynamic which was lost before his birth. Oliver's parents, as well as his uncle, have sunk into bleak existences that are vital neither physically nor spiritually. By contrast, two pairs of characters in the novel—Mario Van de Weyer and Jim Darnley, and Cousin Caleb Wetherbee and the Vicar of Iffley—offer more attractive role models to Oliver, though finally he cannot emulate any of them.

Mario, Oliver's cousin, and Jim, the captain of Oliver's father's yacht, present to Oliver the possibility of immersion in the physical side of existence without concern for spiritual context. They represent the "modern American" noted by Santayana in his discussion of part of the American mind that functions apart from the genteel tradition. They have rejected the genteel tradition for which Oliver continues to yearn, seeing no need for it whatsoever. Mario and Jim illustrate Santayana's words in his 1911 address: "If you told the modern American that he is totally depraved, he would think you were joking, as he himself usually is. He is convinced that he always has been, and always will be, victorious and blameless."³⁴

Both Mario and Jim indulge their appetites with little concern for spiritual sanction. Yet in that very indulgence there is vitality to be admired, it appears, by both novelist and the protagonist whom he confronts with that option. Santayana wrote in *The Realm of the Spirit* that "honest lust in its crudity" might be preferable to some of the ways in which the flesh tried at times to disguise and repress its own nature.³⁵

Mario and Jim are unconcerned with the future as they revel in the here-and-now. The Puritan, by contrast, kept one foot poised on the edge of the world to come, however deeply the other might be implanted on this side of eternity. The precariousness of that posture was effectual in maintaining creative tension between the two realms. For Jim and Mario, however, there is no such tension.

Mario lacks the moral earnestness from which his cousin can never get free: *Oliver, whom somehow felt responsible for everything or at least linked to everything by natural bonds, couldn't see anything delightful in chowder*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 592.

³⁴ George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana*, ed. cit., p. 43.

³⁵ George Santayana, *The Realm of the Spirit: Book Fourth of Realms of Being*, New York: Scribner's, 1940, pp. 134-5.

or in shop-girls or in tobacco (...) chewing keepers of livery-stables: nor did the cordiality of the genteel world give him any particular pleasure.³⁶

Mario carries no burdens for either this world or the next. Speaking to Mario in the epilogue, the author, having written the novel, presumably at Mario's urging, notes that "in this classic Italy, you have little need of tradition or torches. You have blood within and sunlight above, and are true enough to the past in being true to yourselves."³⁷ Oliver, by contrast, cannot conceive of being true to himself unless true to his Puritan past—a past which, at the same time, appears to have little relevance to his present life.

Jim Darnley lacks the urbane social graces of the more affluent and educated Mario, yet he shares with Mario a sense of delight in the here-and-now that is undisturbed by a sense of responsibility for either past or future. "Jim Darnley," writes Santayana, "was one of those affectionate and fatalistic creatures who are not sensitive to justice and injustice."³⁸ Oliver, shocked though he is by the revelation of such episodes as Jim's fathering a child outside marriage, finds himself drawn to the freedom he sees in Jim but cannot emulate. Robert Davidoff notes "the clearly sexual excitement of the relation between Oliver Alden and his father's ship captain, Lord Jim."³⁹ Anthony Woodward has concluded that Santayana was latently homosexual,⁴⁰ and John McCormick, discusses what he considers to be Santayana's "prolonged sexual conflict."⁴¹ This issue is not directly relevant to our study of Puritanism as reflected in the novel, but it should be noted as a relatively recent development in scholarship about Santayana that draws on *The Last Puritan* for supporting evidence.

Jim advises Oliver to accept life totally as it comes rather than to attempt reconciling the actual with the ideal, a reconciliation essential to Oliver's Puritan tradition. "In this world," counsels Jim, "you have to take people as you find them."⁴² The Puritan may have been realistic about taking people as he found them initially, but he felt impelled by divine mandate to call them to amendment of any faults which might come to light. That impulse remains

³⁶ George Santayana, *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*, ed. cit., pp. 402-3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 600.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

³⁹ Robert Davidoff, *The Genteel Tradition and the Sacred Rage: High Culture Versus Democracy in Adams, James, and Santayana*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p. 146.

⁴⁰ Anthony Woodward, *opus cit.*, pp. 132-33.

⁴¹ John McCormick, *opus cit.*, pp. 132-33.

⁴² George Santayana, *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*, ed. cit., p. 167.

Oliver's, even when he sees in Mario and Jim the advantages of living without such tension. Oliver has less and less reason to drive either himself or others to amendment; yet the motive force behind that amendment remains strong, however the purpose for the impulse may have faded.

Another pair of characters offer Oliver the alternative of renouncing the search for worldly pleasure in the quest for spiritual happiness. The first of these, Cousin Caleb Wetherbee, inheritor of great wealth from Puritan forebears, has attempted to build a model medieval community. His faith flourishes apart from a world tainted with crass materialism. To Oliver, however, Cousin Caleb has inverted the natural order: *He [Cousin Caleb] wanted the whole world to be sick, in order that he might pretend to be well (...). People were cowards. They were so frightened at the truth that they shut their eyes and kept saying their prayers, as if the truth could be changed because they didn't see it.*⁴³

Oliver senses that Cousin Caleb has attempted to escape a tension absolutely central to the Puritan tradition: a life lived fully in the world even though devoted to a vision beyond it. Cousin Caleb's withdrawal from the world is not a model Oliver can accept, for the "last Puritan" insists on a continued attempt to engage actively, if with increasing futility, with the world around him.

Somewhat more appealing to Oliver is the Vicar of Iffley, Jim Darnley's father. Oliver visits the Darnleys several times and is drawn to the Vicar for a variety of reasons. The Vicar, however, agonizes over a conflict that Oliver, with the impulse of his Puritan ancestors, will not accept as valid. The Vicar laments, "for just as the merely natural man ends tragically, because the spirit in him is strangled, so the spiritual man lives tragically, because his flesh and his pride and his hopes have withered early under the rays of revelation."⁴⁴ The Vicar is just such a "spiritual man" whose hopes have withered. The keynote to his outlook on life is what must be given up, not what can be affirmed. He observes to Oliver: "Nobody can unite all the virtues. Our Lord himself could not be a soldier, nor an athlete, nor a lover of women, nor a husband, nor a father: and those are the principal virtues of the natural man. We must choose what we will sacrifice."⁴⁵

Oliver, however, cannot accept the negativity of the Vicar in believing that both the natural and the spiritual person are doomed to frustration. At the same time, he cannot discover a positive dynamic between the two elements as an alternative to the Vicar's hopelessness. His Puritan ancestors accepted

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

no such distinction between the two realms, even though they were well aware of the ability of flesh to interfere with spirit. Oliver remains their heir in theory, even though he is unable to relate his own flesh and spirit effectively in practice.

Fräulein Irma, Oliver's nurse, in the midst of considerable romantic foolishness, has an insight close to Darnley's, expressed with surprising clarity: *But will he ever have the spiritual clearness, the spiritual courage to be himself? And if not, being suppressed and hopeless and morally confused, will he have the physical stamina to live on? Could he, like so many good people in this merciless country, survive his true self and go on living after becoming a sort of person that he hated to be? My vision answers that question for me. My oracle says: No! He would die young and unhappy. And this obscure modern martyrdom would be sadder in its way than that of Golgotha. It would not save any world. It would not even save any soul.*⁴⁶

In an anguished attempt to declare for his wife, Edith, a passion that he believes he ought to have but cannot actually feel, Oliver declares, "I am trying to save my soul."⁴⁷ Without the tension between human effort and divine grace that is so central to Oliver's tradition, however, that is a hopeless task. A true Puritan believed that one could not, in fact, save his own soul; such prerogative was God's alone. Yet secure in the faith that God did have that ultimate prerogative, one could have considerable confidence in the final congruence of human effort with divine intent.

Sacvan Bercovitch's insight into Puritan psychology is helpful here. Noting that the heart of that psychology lies in a contrast between personal responsibility and individualism, Bercovitch observes that the Puritan was finally able to get out of himself by virtue, in considerable degree, of his very obsession with the state of his own soul: *The way of the soul, they maintained, starts "with a holy despair in ourselves" and proceeds "with a holy kind of violence" back to Christ; it means acknowledging the primacy of that which is Another's and receiving the ability to respond. Hence the advantage of self-knowledge; the terror it brings may exorcise our individuality. It may drive us to "desire to be found, not in ourselves."*⁴⁸

Oliver, however, cannot use his Puritan heritage in order to get out of himself. He is captive to two sorts of self: a vision of universal spirit to which he has no effective linkage, and a particular identity which gives no sense of fulfilment: *There seemed to be two selves or two natures within him [:] one,*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

⁴⁸ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975, p. 18.

*pure spirit, that might play any game and lodge in any animal, the other, this particular human, American twentieth[-]century male person called Oliver Alden.*⁴⁹

The world into which Oliver has been born respects neither the piety of his Puritan ancestors nor the moralism of their descendant Oliver. He is, thus, twice estranged—from both past and present. While he seeks to recapture the Puritan tension between responsible action and divine sanction, the world around him does not value that effort and provides no resources to empower it. In this context Robert Davidoff suggests cynically that Oliver “wasted away because his morals corrupted his enjoyments.”⁵⁰

Writing to Mrs. George Sturgis from Rome in 1936, shortly after the publication of *The Last Puritan*, Santayana summarised the dilemma into which he had placed Oliver: *He ought to have been a saint. But here comes the deepest tragedy in his lot: that he lives in a spiritual vacuum. American breeding can be perfect in form, but it is woefully thin in substance; so that if a man is born a poet or mystic in America he simply starves, because what social life offers and presses on him is offensive to him, and there is nothing else. He evaporates, he peters out.—That is my intention, or rather perception, in Oliver. The trouble wasn't that he wouldn't be commonplace: the trouble was that he couldn't be exceptional, and yet be positive. There was no tradition worthy of him to join on to.*⁵¹

Twice estranged and trapped into isolation, Oliver is “inclined to ruminate on his own experience, thoroughly to digest and disenchant it, with a sort of cruel sentimentality.”⁵²

Unable to appropriate the Puritan tradition effectively, Oliver is drawn at one point to Transcendentalism, the second major element in Santayana's conception of a “genteel tradition” in America. Santayana does not probe that dimension of the American experience as extensively as Puritanism, but he includes enough of it to illustrate his conviction that America suffered from lack of sufficient nurture from both its Puritan and Transcendentalist heritages. The author houses Oliver at Harvard in the room at Divinity Hall once occupied by Ralph Waldo Emerson; he calls Oliver at one point “our budding transcendentalist.”⁵³ However, Oliver concludes that Transcendentalism

⁴⁹ George Santayana, *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*, ed. cit., p. 351.

⁵⁰ Robert Davidoff, *opus cit.*, p. 165.

⁵¹ George Santayana, *Santayana on America: Essays, Notes, and Letters on American Life, Literature, and Philosophy*, ed. cit., p. 307.

⁵² George Santayana, *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*, ed. cit., p. 519.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

distorts reality by ignoring a significant part of it. He is convinced that "the human world was so horrible to the human mind, that it could be made to look at all decent and interesting only by ignoring one half the facts, and putting a false front on the other half. Hence all that brood of fables."⁵⁴

Oliver insists on the rigour of Puritanism in spite of the fact that he has lost a sense of the ultimate purpose of such rigour. One could argue that he has regressed toward the Covenant of Works which was superseded in the Puritan interpretation of history by the Covenant of Grace. The insistence that human kind is not saved by works but that grace is a free gift of God—whenever and however the Almighty chooses to give it—is precarious footing on which to build both individual action and corporate order. For then one must act out of gratitude for a gift given, not concern for gifts to be earned or punishment to be avoided. Nonetheless, the Covenant of Grace was crucial to the Puritan perspective. As Cotton Mather wrote in *Bonifacious: An Essay upon the Good, our own exactness in doing of good works, is not now the condition of our entering into life. Woe unto us if it were! But still, the Covenant of Grace holds us to it, as our duty: and if we are in the Covenant of Grace, we shall make it our study, to do those good works which once were the terms of our entering into life.*⁵⁵

Whatever the hazards of this outlook, the Puritans insisted that good works followed logically from faithfulness to God in the Covenant of Grace—a response to a gift given already, not a condition of a gift yet to be bestowed. Oliver Alden, however, is trapped between the two covenants, compelled by inner conviction to lead a righteous and useful life, but without the sanctions of either covenant to give purpose to his actions. He acts neither out of a sense of grace given already nor grace yet to be bestowed; he has lost faith in the ability of any power external to himself to bestow spiritual gifts. As Santayana explains in the prologue to the novel, Oliver "thought it is clear duty to give puritanism up, but couldn't."⁵⁶ One might amend that statement to read: Oliver "thought it his clear duty to give *what was left of puritanism up, but couldn't.*"

Oliver is all the more pathetic, as the novel moves toward its bleak conclusion, in having some insight into the impasse to which he has come. He understands the futility of the injunction that one "ought" to do something without sanction for such morality—sanction either within one's

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵⁵ Cotton Mather, *Bonifacious: An Essay upon the Good*, ed. David Levin, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966, pp. 28-29.

⁵⁶ George Santayana, *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*, ed. cit., p. 6.

community or within one's faith (ideally both). Still, critical as he is of the perversion's of Puritanism in the past, he remains unaware of just how perverse is his own version of that tradition in the present. He believes that his forebears sacrificed fact to sentiment. He, by contrast, has sacrificed sentiment to presumed fact: *If the facts are before a man, he will know well enough how to feel about them. If you come to him with a religion or a system of ethics, and tell him what he ought to feel before he really feels anything, you merely make a sham and a hypocrite of him. That's the way I was brought up, and it's criminal. You've got to spew the whole thing out and begin afresh on the basis of reality.*⁵⁷

Oliver, however, does not "spew the whole thing out." He believes that the failure of Puritanism is its lack of sufficient honesty to face the implications of its own outlook: that life is bleak and ultimately without hope. He cannot see, however, that this is not an accurate assessment of the Puritan vision. His criticism of his forebears becomes more a revelation of his own "moral cramp" than he realises: *Your hard-boiled moralists were idolators, worshipping their own fancies, and hypnotized by their own words. They had perched at a certain height on the tree of knowledge, had stuck fast at a certain point up the greased pole of virtue. They would climb no farther, and from there they had pecked ferociously at everybody above, invoking their hard, dry reason to discredit all that lay beyond their own meagre and cruel morality. But this reason of theirs was just their reason, their effort to enrich themselves in their limitations.*⁵⁸

IV

Having lost the Puritans's ultimate frame of reference, Oliver Alden is nonetheless intense in his desire to have his actions sanctioned by a purpose larger than self-expression. As Santayana defines the dilemma, "He demanded some absolute and special sanction for his natural preferences."⁵⁹ Frederick W. Connor suggests that Oliver is like Lucifer, the fallen angel, in being a victim of what Santayana considers "moralism": *Moralism is the demand that the universe or God must conform to a private moral standard—the impious sin of Lucifer— or, conversely, the demand that a private moral standard must have a universal sanction—the need of Oliver.*⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 520.

⁶⁰ Frederick W. Connor, "Lucifer and *The Last Puritan*," *American Literature*, 33 (1961), pp. 1-19; pp. 18-19.

Instead of the creative tension inherent in Puritanism in its first generations in America, when there was an attempt to keep human effort and divine purpose dynamically in balance, Oliver feels the demoralising tension of an impulse to act in ways for which he can find neither purpose in this world nor sanction from beyond it. The “logical end” of Puritanism in Oliver Alden, as Santayana views it, is that Oliver convinces himself on Puritan grounds –that is, as the consequence of rigorous thought and self-examination and sense of duty– that he should not be a Puritan. Yet he fails to find an alternative to the tradition so totally bankrupt for him. The bankruptcy of that tradition, yet its dogged persistence, is a key Santayana describes.

After Oliver's death his cousin Mario pronounces a judgement only partially accurate: “A moral nature burdened and over-strung, and a critical faculty fearless but helplessly subjective –isn't that the true tragedy of your ultimate Puritan?”⁶¹ To call him at this point the ultimate or even last Puritan, however, is somewhat misleading. Like his forebears Oliver lives “with that unremitting tension of virtue, or of possible sin, always in the background.”⁶² However, part of the background that made that unremitting tension possible was another, overriding dynamic: that of the relationship of human effort to divine will. Overarching all human effort was the ultimate confidence, for the Puritan, that God was finally in control and that His will would ultimately be done. Oliver has lost that confidence yet cannot simply affirm the validity of his own effort without ultimate sanction –what Timothy L. S. Sprigge, in labelling Santayana's own outlook, has called “spiritual aspiration in a void”.⁶³

The genteel tradition has lost its relevance even to one who wants to be its heir. Returning to Santayana's 1911 lecture, the reader notes Santayana's suggestion that in the Puritan aspect of American experience serious poetry and religion “are the joys of an unhappiness that confesses itself.”⁶⁴ For Oliver Alden, however, there is no joy in that confession. Oliver is finally not the “last” Puritan at all. His forebears have long since lost the “unremitting tension” central to the Puritan vision. The dregs of “the third sloppy wash in the family tea-pot” yields a weak brew, after all.

⁶¹ George Santayana, *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*, ed. cit., p. 602.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁶³ Timothy L. S. Sprigge, *Santayana: An Examination of His Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1974, p. 25.

⁶⁴ George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana*, ed. cit., p. 51.