

Trek Through the Poetical and Philosophical: Santayana's Philosophy of Poetry (1896-1910)

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For some are born to be beautified
By anguish, and by grievous penance done;
And some, to furnish forth the age's pride,
And some to be praised of men beneath the sun;
And some are born to stand perplexed aside
From so much sorrow—of whom I am one.

GEORGE SANTAYANA, Sonnet XI

ABSTRACT

This discussion (a study of Santayana's poetical concerns from 1896-1910) attempts to, if not convince the reader, at least to bring to her/his awareness that Santayana's lifelong involvement with the poetical (writing it himself, enjoyment of it for its own beauty and inspiration, and learning of life itself from it) is indispensable in dealing with his oeuvre. The poetic in Santayana's life is vital in comprehending his intellectual evolution, one of roughly eighty-nine years. Santayana's formal writings on poetry, aesthetics, and religion dominated his early academic output. Though after 1910 the essay and lyrical prose took precedence and became his principal creative medium, the poetical was never far from the horizon. It is my conviction that to understand Santayana's mature philosophy it behooves one to be cognizant of the poetry that underpins and nourishes it.

RESUMEN

Esta discusión trata de traer al lector el convencimiento que Santayana dedicó toda su vida a lo poético; escribiendo él mismo, el placer que sentía en su belleza e inspiración, de lo poéti-

co, y aprendiendo sobre la vida en lo poético. Lo poético en la vida de Santayana es esencial en comprender su evolución intelectual de casi ochenta y nueve años. Los escritos poéticos, estéticos, y religiosos dominarían los primeros trabajos académicos. Aunque después del 1910 la composición literaria y la prosa lírica cogieron precedente. Ese estilo se encuentra, en todos trabajos filosóficos y aunque siempre su estilo poético estaba cerca en el horizonte. Es mi propia convicción que para comprender la filosofía madura de Santayana, tenemos que conocer que su estilo poético es su base y le da vida.

The poet, essayist, philosopher, and novelist Jorge Augustín Nicolás Santayana y Borrás (George Santayana) represents a unique synthesis in the history of philosophy and poetry. Endowed with special poetical gifts and manifesting evident traits of a genuine poet, Santayana nevertheless never achieved the stature of a great poet.(1) His primary legacy is a philosophical one, notwithstanding his copious output of poetry and poetic drama throughout his life.(2) [See William Holzberger (1979), p.81]. However, neither of these two disciplines can claim him as exclusively her own. He moved quite fluently, with tremendous ease and prowess, in both realms of creation and achievement. In fact, Santayana's can best be understood as having fused the two in an unprecedented way into a philosophical understanding of the world graced by the insights and creative dynamics of the poetical.[See Maritain (1953), p. 112]. His philosophical prose elicits in the reader a sense of the wondrous, an aesthetic comprehension, the thoughts of a serious thinker who taps into his imaginative prowess. This does not imply, or correspondingly eschew any reinforcing intermingling with traditional philosophical foci, (the epistemological, the metaphysical, normativity, or logical one). There can be reinforcing undercurrents and overtones. The critic Edward L. Shaughnessy identifies this intellectual phenomenon quite poignantly:

Poetic knowledge requires both the conceptual and the experiential-nonconceptual. The two together constitute the cognitive domain. There is required not a sundering, but a merging of the Apollonian-Dionysian faculties. Poetic knowledge, not limited to expression in verse, is capable of production in all men who do not kill the power to know in the depths of their subjectivity. It is likely to be manifest in that person who lives largely in the spirit. It is the wisdom of profoundly known experience. [Shaughnessy (1975), p.316].

This spontaneous unity of the philosophical and the poetical is the key, I am convinced, for even beginning to make sense of Santayana's written oeuvre as a serious thinker, dating from his earliest days at Harvard as undergraduate and graduate student, to Assistant professor, to Full professor in 1907. This is a constant throughout Santayana's life, and certainly evident from 1896-1910, the period treated in this pa-

per. In the four major critical prose works of this period—*The Sense of Beauty* (1896); *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900); *The Life of Reason* (1905); and *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910)—Santayana maintains a consistency of thought and style. My goal in this paper is to delineate the subtle shifts that occurred in Santayana's philosophy of poetry, and at the same time to reinforce the claim that though variances are extent, there is an undeniable centrality of stress on what constitutes the "elements and function" of great poetry in these works.

THE SENSE OF BEAUTY (1896)

The Sense of Beauty is Santayana's first major work of prose. A product of a series of lectures given to his classes on "Aesthetics" at Harvard, the book represents his first sustained philosophical treatise.¹ Though the book itself is an expansive philosophical discussion of what constitutes the aesthetic senses in our lives, the work contains many trenchant insights into what constitutes the poetical. Santayana's mature philosophy of poetry begins with *The Sense of Beauty*.

The Sense of Beauty is divided into four parts: "The Nature of Beauty;" "The Materials of Beauty;" "Form;" and "Expression." It was not Santayana's intention to deal primarily with poetry in this study, for the work itself, taken as a whole, is on aesthetic theory.

The first mention of poetry that occurs in *The Sense of Beauty* takes place in the "Introduction." Santayana broaches the idea that the subjective, emotional, and non-rational capacities within the human psyche have not sufficiently been recognized as vital in understanding the complexities of the aesthetic *and* moral realms. He then goes on to discuss three distinct approaches that serve as a luring towards, those very aesthetic *and* moral realms. First, we have the actual act of judging, of pronouncing a preference or like/dislike, of affirming or denying, a subjective notion of "giving

¹ John McCormick, Santayana's biographer, has claimed the following regarding Santayana's own understanding of this poethood: "From the outset Santayana had doubts about his verse. Long before the publication of his first book of verse [1894, *Sonnets and Verses*], he confessed to Harry Abbot the nature of his doubt, saying that fiction and poetry were one and the same, and that his verse, like realistic fiction, was not poetry because it created nothing." [McCormick gleans this a letter from Santayana wrote to Abbot, dated 26 July 1889] He continues: "Three years later in a different mood he writes that he will try to publish more poetry, because having deteriorated and become worldly I want the world to think me a poet and philosopher; while I really had the temper of one I despised the world as it deserves. I also should like to a reputation and a resource to back me in my academic life, which is resolutely unconventional, and which people may not always put up with. But I never will be a professor unless I can be one as it were, *per accidens*." [Santayana to Abbot in a letter thirty-two months later, dated 15 February 1892]. John McCormick, *George Santayana. A Biography* (New York: Paragon, 1988), pp. 112-14.

praise, blame, precept;”² secondly, there is the “historical” approach of attempting to rationalize these realms through “various types of character, forms of polity, conceptions of justice, and schools of criticism and art;” (*Ibid.*, p.7) and thirdly, a psychological approximation to these realms that taps into their *openness*. With this optional intellectual opening, Santayana affirms:

Such an inquiry, if pursued successfully, would yield an understanding of the reason why we think anything right or beautiful, wrong or ugly; it would thus reveal the roots of conscience and taste in human nature and enable us to distinguish transitory preferences and ideals, which rest on peculiar conditions, from those which, springing from those elements of mind which all men share, are comparatively permanent and universal. [Santayana (1988), pp.7-8].

Santayana’s preoccupation with the “permanent and universal” is a salient obligation for any authentic individual when engrossed with aesthetic phenomena and its intellectual involvement. Concurrent with this is Santayana’s conviction that the medium (the genre) of poetry is a transforming activity—an access to the universal. Santayana writes:

To feel beauty is a better thing than to understand how we come to feel it. To have imagination and taste, to love the best, to be carried by the contemplation of nature to an avid faith in the ideal, all this is more, a great deal more, than any science can hope to be. The poets and philosophers who express this aesthetic experience and stimulate the same function in us by their example, do a greater service to mankind and deserve higher honour than the discoverers of historical truth. [Santayana (1988), p.11].

Poetry, without this aesthetic hue, can range from transhistorical oral tradition (Homer), to the rhymes of schoolchildren. The poetical is an intrinsic, for Santayana, element of his sentient, psychic, and *philosophical* engagement with the surrounding lifeworld.

The sections of *The Sense of Beauty* which address specifically the poetical are “Part III: Form:” and “Part IV: Expression.” In these sections Santayana produces insights into individual poets, poetry, and the poetical sense. He weaves these insights into the larger fabric of his aesthetic experience, for, as mentioned earlier, poetry is not his primary concern in this work.

² As late as June 1952, months before died, Santayana was considering spending the “summer translating a long poem by Lorenzo de Medici that he had lately been reading and found particularly moving. *Ombra and Ambra* was his last literary and remained unfinished at his death.” William Holzberger, ed., *The Complete Poems of George Santayana* (Lewistown, PA.: Bucknell Press, 1979), p. 81.

In Part: “Form” Santayana claims that “the most remarkable and characteristic problem of aesthetics is that of form.” The expression of beauty is implanted in the very ‘form’ which contains it. Applying (the medium of the poetical) Santayana then goes on to tie together the verbal, form, and expression. He writes:

The main effect of language consists in its meaning, in the idea which it expresses. But no expression is possible without a presentation, and this presentation must have a form. [Santayana (1988), p. 106].

Poetry itself is a presentation of a form. The words of the poet must (should) contain an internal cohesion and symmetry; this is what endows those words with a capacity to produce a desired effect. For what distinguishes poetry from ordinary language if not the potential for producing a desired subjective effect, a mental-emotional stirring in the reader or listener? Santayana captures the uniqueness and novelty of what a poet does with language in the following:

Nevertheless, language is primarily a sort of music, and the beautiful effects which it produces are due to its own structure, giving, as it crystallizes in a new fashion, an unforeseen form to experience. [Santayana (1988), p. 107.

Santayana divides all poets into two distinct categories: musicians and psychologists. The former, he states, are basically rhapsodists of a higher order, utilizing language in order to compose a symphony of “sounds and images”; the latter in contradistinction, employ language in such a way as to mirror the actual material world, the “adoption of it to things.”

Another important characteristic of the poetical that Santayana points out in *The Sense of Beauty* is that of syntax. It is also the combinatory unity that impacts with a *power*, like sound and description. Our current vernacular languages have lost much of this prepotency. The ancient tongues of Latin and Greek were much more inclined towards such immediacy. However, that does not preclude the attainment of the beautiful by modern Indo-European languages. Santayana writes:

The beauty given to the ancients by the syntax of their language, the moderns can attain only by their rhymes. It is a bad substitute perhaps, but better than the total absence of form, favoured by the atomic character of our words, and the flat juxtaposition of our clauses. The art which was capable of making a gem of every prose sentence—the art which, carried, perhaps, to a pitch at which it becomes too conscious, made the phrases of Tacitus a series of cameos,—that is inapplicable to our looser medium; we cannot give clay the finish and nicety of marble. Our poetry and speech in general, therefore start out upon a lower level; the same effort will not, with this instrument, attain the same beauty. If equal beauty is ever attained, it comes from the

wealth of suggestion, or the refinement of sentiment. The art of words remains hopelessly inferior. [Santayana (1988), pp. 109-110].

Before this passage, Santayana writes that the “sonnet, the *non plus ultra* of rhyme, is the most classic of modern poetical forms: much more classic in spirit than blank verse, which lacks almost entirely the power of sensitising the phrase, and making the unexpected seem the inevitable.” This statement seems to provide a warrant for Santayana’s own use of the sonnet as *his* principal *form* in poetry. It partakes of the classical. It is involved in an ideal, a literary embodiment that places itself in a perceived exalted tradition—a continuity and reference hinge for one’s own life. It would not, I claim, infer that this is the key to Santayana’s early philosophy of poetry. Great poetry is *not* a random projection or creation by an individual who transcribes words onto a scroll, a piece of paper, or into a computer without an underpinning lived-out experience in the world. This is a telling requisite. For Santayana, it is in this sense of being located in an understood ideal, of a classical expression embodied in a form that drives the reception of the poem. In short, it is a disciplined weaving together of isolate elements that have as their end result poetry that cannot be appropriated by one individual, any school, or any nation. The work stands alone, without necessary explanation or *apologia*. The fashioning of universal, timeless meanings and bestowing on them form lie at the very core of Santayana’s philosophy of poetry as gleaned from numerous passages in *The Sense of Beauty*. The poet’s imagination must be powerful and extensive enough to recreate the world through and by its own subjective, harmonious dynamics. Santayana maintains:

If this inward vision is clear and steady, we have an aesthetic inspiration, a vocation to create; and if we also command the technique of an appropriate art, we shall hasten to embody that inspiration, and realize an ideal. [Santayana (1988), p. 114].

In the final part of *The Sense of Beauty*, “Expression,” Santayana achieves a startling synthesis. Imagination, “vision,” the beautiful, and the good are fused together as constituents of the ideal—that which all meaningful poetry (and great poetry is included under this rubric) should possess. The actual inspiration of great poetry comes from moments of an intense visionary (let us conceive of this inspired insight); the composition (the work) is achieved only with labor and. He writes:

That man is happy indeed, who in all his life has had no glimpse of perfection, who in the ecstasy of love, or in the delight of contemplation, has never been able to say: It is attained. Such moments of inspiration are the source of the arts, which have no higher function than to renew them. A work of art is indeed a monument to such a moment, the memorial to such a vision; and its charm varies with its power of recalling us from the distractions of common life to the joy a more natural and perfect beauty. [Santayana (1988), p. 163].

The Sense of Beauty, taken as a whole, does not contain any mature and well thought-out doctrine of poetry. Many passages treat the poetical, but these are subsumed under an attempt to psychologically expound on the very dynamics of aesthetic perception. But, *The Sense of Beauty* is the starting-point of Santayana's early philosophy of poetry between the years 1896-1910; this would be developed and worked out in the subsequent works of *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, *The Life of Reason*, and what is without a doubt (at least to this reader) the most expressive and revealing text of his mature thoughts on poetry, *Three Philosophical Poets*.

INTERPRETATIONS OF POETRY AND RELIGION

Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (1900) contains Santayana's most in-depth assessment of the poetical apart from *Three Philosophical Poets*. Published four years after *The Sense of Beauty*, it was his third book, and consisted of ten essays written over a period of years prior to publication. The work, in contrast to *The Sense of Beauty*, deals specifically with poetic matters. Above all, it elaborates on, with a bolder assertiveness, many ideas set down in his previous book. The central thesis of the entire work is the conceptual fusion of the religious and the poetical. Religion, as an exhibitory approach to life itself in touch (or spiritually believing so) with an ideal is a manifestation of the poetical; conversely, the most meaningful achievements in poetry attain the status of the religious. This claim is the guiding criterion of his analyses (that occur in the ten essays) of individual poets and poetry as a whole. He writes in the "Preface":

The following volume is composed of a number of papers written at various times and already partially printed; they are now revised and gathered together in the hope that they may lead the reader, from somewhat different points of approach, to a single idea. This idea is that religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry. [Santayana (1989), p. 3].

Again, and this I think is the crowning philosophical move of the entire book of essays:

It also follows from our general conception that poetry has a universal and moral function. Its rudimentary essays in the region of fancy and pleasant sound, as well as its idealization of episodes of human existence, are only partial exercises in an art that has all time and all experience for its natural subject matter and all the possibilities for its ultimate theme. As religion is deflected from its course when it is confused with a record of facts or of natural laws, so poetry is arrested in its development if it

remains an unmeaning play of fancy, without relevance to the ideals and purposes of life. In that relevance lies its highest power. [Santayana (1989), p. 3].

This ascribing to poetry and religion a shared reality and similarity in their respective roles that each *could* play in the life of a human being is a bold and novel interpretation. The linking of both to a longing (and consummation) in an ideal, or a transcendental world coupled with a teleological moral purpose, highlights Santayana's claim. Both are human efforts to conceive and create a more meaningful life than the material givens of everyday existence, with all its overwhelming doubts, perplexities, sufferings, disappointments, and at times, its utter meaninglessness. Poetry and religion are open avenues to engage in an activity more protean in personal enrichment.

To treat every essay of *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (and each merits critical discussion) is beyond the scope of this paper. This being the case, I would like to survey the tenth and final essay of the book, "The Elements and Function of Poetry," and glean from its pages some of Santayana's early philosophy of poetry *par excellence*.

Santayana is convinced that poetry is capable of being separated into four distinct strata, or levels, or in a more competitive, comparative vein, an order of rank. The first he calls "euphony," which is when a poet stresses the primacy of sound through a melodious concatenation of words. The apogee achievable by the euphonic is when poetry combines with music to produce song. As historical time has evolved, this euphony, Santayana maintains, was lost and replaced by a more pragmatic and "abstract" tone to human speech. The spontaneous feeling that first gave birth to song as an attribute of human communication went underground, for good. (It lives on in opera).

The second level he calls, using his own neologism "euphuism," which can be understood as the artificial elegance of language. He explains:

This quality, which is that almost exclusively exploited by the Symbolist, we may euphuism—the choice of coloured words and rare elliptical phrases. If great poets are like architects and sculptures, the euphuists are like goldsmiths and jewellers; their work is filligree in precious metals, encrusted with glowing stones. [Rice (1940), p. 462].

In this realm poetry is a techné, the workings of a craftsman. Inspiration and a comprehensive view of the world are absent, and the poet indulges in mere verbal recreation and sophistry. Poetical creation is produced haphazardly and without any serious thought or ideas fueling it.

The third level of poetry that Santayana identifies is best paraphrased (as far as I have been able to locate) by what Philip Blair Rice conceives as "what we may call experiential immediacy." This is the poet's celebration of his or her own momentary inspiration in a transcription of verbal profluence. Walt Whitman and Robert Browning were prime examples of this; both come under heavy attack in the essay "The Poetry of Barbarism." This form of poetry glorifies transient and temperamen-

tal moods, unfettered individual passions, and intensely subjective feelings. The third level, like the previous two, falls short of great poetry for Santayana.

The fourth level of poetical achievement (the qualities that Santayana will later find in Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe, in *Three Philosophical Poets*) is reserved in Santayana's view, for the rarest of poetical beings. The poets who attain this realm of artistic excellence are those who surpass the previous three levels and arrive at a synthesized understanding of the world, in a philosophical sense, and transform their mental prism through which the world is viewed, into a holistic comprehension. They attain a religious and philosophical state of being that transfigures human life in its actual immediacy. This understanding varies from poet to poet, for uniformity of outlook is neither an evident nor necessary attribute. Great poets are like isolated fixtures in the firmament of human experience and potential. The poets understand poetry as the most compelling of callings, and with utmost seriousness they engage in the art of poetry very much like a religious seer engages in prophecy: as a visionary experience. Nevertheless, the great poet is also a *rational* being. He possesses what Jacques Maritain has coined "poetic knowledge." This characteristic defies categorization and classification. It is the fusion of heart and head, rationality and irrationality, reason and religion. Two passages of Santayana's own words help us here:

The highest example of this kind of poetry is religion; and although disfigured and misunderstood by the simplicity of men who believe in it without being capable of that imaginative interpretation of life in which its truth consists, yet this religion then is often beneficent, because it covers life harmoniously with the idea. [Santayana (1989), p. 169].

And: But when the poet enlarges his theatre and puts into his rhapsodies the true visions of his people and of his soul, his poetry is the consecration of his deepest convictions, and contains the whole truth of his religion....This higher plane is the sphere of significant imagination, of relevant fiction, of idealism become the interpretation of the reality it leaves behind. Poetry raised to its highest power is then identical with religion grasped in its inmost truth.; at their point of union both reach their utmost purity and beneficence, for then poetry loses its frivolity and ceases to demoralize, while religion surrenders its illusions and ceases to deceive. [Santayana (1989), p. 172].

These passages reveal the core of Santayana's philosophy of poetry in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*. These would be substantiated in *The Life of Reason* and *Three Philosophical Poets*. The concentration and emphasis on the ideal, on a world view emanating forth from the poet's mind, and on the cohesion of the poetical, religious, and philosophical, all serve to exemplify a rigorous poetical doctrine, exacting and unique. Santayana emphatically affirms an elevated function for the highest type of poet. Perhaps this was the reason for his own abandonment (as a calling and activity) of poetry in favor of philosophy a year later. His standards were too high even for himself.

THE LIFE OF REASON

The notion of the ideal again dominates Santayana's treatment of the poetical in *The Life of Reason*. The book itself consists of five parts, each originally published as a separate work: "Reason in Common Sense;" "Reason in Society;" "Reason in Religion;" "Reason in Art;" and "Reason in Science." What binds them together as a unified whole is the quest for, and affirmation of, the rational grounding subtending each of these spheres of human activity. References to the poetical are scattered throughout the five sections, but it is in Chapter Six of "Reason in Art" that the poetical is specifically expounded on. On the whole, it appears that a marked change had transpired in Santayana's understanding of the poetical. This is, I am convinced, attributable to his evolving philosophical maturation process. Whereas in *The Sense of Beauty* the critical tone is one of praise and even glorification, the tone changes in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*. It metamorphoses even more noticeably in *The Life of Reason*. Instead of one of praise and celebration, his writing betrays a mind becoming more critical and detached. Or, at least a philosophical conscience trying to distance itself from the poetical. Santayana's prose in this work reflects an Apollonian approach, sober and calm. The prose is terse and translucent.

The philosophical distancing of himself from what the majority of poetry (superfluous verbalism) is, underscores the passages that mention the poetical. The chapter entitled "Poetry and Prose" is replete with instances of a hardened philosophical approach to poetry in general, reflecting Santayana's revaluation and reassessment. His reflections read as if he was preparing the stage for a work in which his mature philosophy of poetry would reach its decisive embodiment: *Three Philosophical Poets*. A volitional and conscious philosophical drive towards establishing the *rational* as the crucial attribute of great poetry is clearly established in *The Life of Reason*. This adumbrates the synthetic fusion of the philosophical and poetical that he accomplishes in *Three Philosophical Poets*. Santayana writes:

A rational poet's vision would still have the same moral functions which myth was asked to fulfill, and fulfilled so treacherously. Such a poet would doubtless need a robust genius. If he possessed, and in transmuting all existence falsified nothing, giving that picture of everything which human experience in the end would have drawn, he would achieve an ideal result. In prompting mankind to imagine, he would be helping them to live. His poetry, without ceasing to be a fiction in its method and ideality, would be an ultimate truth in its practical scope. It would present in graphic images the total efficacy of surrounding things. Such a poetry would be more deeply rooted in human nature than in any casual fancy, and therefore more appealing to the heart. [Santayana (1953), pp. 434-344].

THREE PHILOSOPHICAL POETS

Three Philosophical Poets is a product of a philosophically mature Santayana treating the poetical [See Rice (1940), pp. 288]. Originally conceived as six lectures given at Columbia University and the Univ. of Wisconsin in 1910, the work contains his most revealing claims concerning poetry. With its publication, the piecemeal development of Santayana's philosophy of poetry, which began with *The Sense of Beauty* (one could even say that commenced with his attraction to poetry in his Boston Latin School days) reaches a lucidity and loftiness of tone that is truly outstanding. Not only his philosophy of poetry, but also his voice as an independent philosopher whose understanding of the world is hued by the poetical, is expressed. I am convinced that the work itself, considered as a whole, highlights Santayana as a philosophical-literary individual for the rest of his life. The philosopher, Santayana affirms, must (should) incorporate a poetical component; conversely, the great poet must (should) entertain a philosophical understanding of the world. Poetry and philosophy are joined in a matrimony that heightens and elevates both. For Santayana, the prime exemplars of this union are Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe. These three poets are profound thinkers who express their ideas and insights through the poetical medium. They achieve, for Santayana, the grandest mental synthesis possible: a philosophical voice tinged and graced by the sublimity of poetical language. Furthermore, "taken together they sum up all European philosophy." [Santayana (1927), p.4].

The philosophies of naturalism, supernaturalism, and romanticism distinguish Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe. Each expresses a philosophical understanding of the world with accompanying historical background knowledge and its relevance to their *present*. In Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (c. 50 B.C.E.), an ancient and comprehensive philosophy is given poetical form. The materialist, atomistic teachings of Democritus (460-370 B.C.E.) and Epicurus (341-270 BCE) are solidified in poetical expression. Naturalism weds poetry and the resulting offspring is an original synthesis of thought and expression. Santayana tells us: "This is one complete system of philosophy,—materialism in natural science, humanism in ethics.... The system is called naturalism; and of this Lucretius is the unrivalled poet." [Santayana (1927), p.5].

Dante, at the opposing end of the philosophical spectrum, conceives of a life-world permeated by the given of humankind's transient and fragile estate. Terrestrial existence, the worldly swing and sway of life's rhythms are merely a way station prior to every individual's ultimate destination: Hell, Purgatory, or Paradise. Human joy and felicitous engagement in *this* world is disparaged, even disdained. Santayana writes: "This is supernaturalism, a system represented in Christendom chiefly by the Catholic Church, but adopted also by the later pagans, and widespread in Asia from remote antiquity down to the present time... The unmatched poet of this supernaturalism is Dante." [Santayana (1927), p. 7.

The third piece of the trinity of European philosophy is to be found in romanticism. The most prominent example of this outlook, as Santayana understands it, is Goethe's *Faust* (1808-c.1832). Distinct from Lucretius' rationality and from Dante's spirituality, the understanding of adherents/proponents of romanticism is ever led on by incessant striving in a tempestuous and vacillating world of feelings and aspirations. It is a yearning for an Absolute, but ultimately winding up perennially unsatisfied and empty. Santayana writes:

It is their insatiable will, their radical courage. Nay, though this be a hard saying to the uninitiated, their will summons all opportunities and dangers out of nothing to feed its appetite for action; and in that ideal function lies their sole reality. Once attained, things are transcended. Like the episodes of a spent dream, they are to be smiled at and forgotten: the spirit that feigned and discarded them remains always strong and undefiled; it aches for new conquests over new fictions. This is romanticism. [Santayana (1927), p. 7].

These distinct, isolate avenues of choice serve (still today) as viable options for an individual to embrace a philosophy of the world and of existence. Each is a self-enclosed world outlook, a personal comprehension of the flow of life, of how things hang together or how they should. Yet, taken individually, each falls short of being the protean *l'altissimo poeta*, the as-yet-to-be creative individual. For Santayana, the *l'altissimo poeta* is a composite of all three.

Santayana maintained in the "Introduction" an intrinsic compatibility between poetry and philosophy. What traditionally (historically, and in the universities) goes by the designation of philosophy (logic, proofs, reasoned arguments, validity and cogency, carefully articulated problems and rational responses) is temporally suspended. The desired end, for Santayana, is that philosophical musings are (can be) similar to what the poet feels and thinks when he is *moved*, or inspired. It is like an epiphany that is timeless, with indeterminate duration:

Such contemplation is imaginative. No one can reach it who has not enlarged his mind and tamed his heart. A philosopher who attains it is, for the moment, a poet; and a poet who turns his practiced and passionate imagination of the order of all things, or on anything in the light of the whole, is for a moment a philosopher. [Santayana (1927), p. 11].

The above quote succinctly sums up, I think, the unprecedented intellectual move of equating the philosopher and the poet. The individual capable of achieving this fusional synthesis is indeed rare. Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe all possessed this talent to varying degrees. However, in the final analysis, each fails to live up to and fulfill Santayana's firm criteria of what characterizes the greatest poet. Given this claim,

one can strongly criticize Santayana for being too demanding and unrealistic, even out of touch with reality. How can naturalism, supernaturalism, and romanticism ever be reconciled? The concepts are precise and self-contained definitions. But this is precisely Santayana's thesis and the *challenge* of his mature philosophy of poetry. The paragon of what a philosophical poet can be dismissed of never having existed, and the overwhelming probability the s/he never will. Such a poet would need to be an exceptional human repository of learning, experience, and genius. Yet Santayana is confident that such an individual is realizable:

Obviously, what would be desirable, what would constitute a truly philosophical or comprehensive poet, would be the union of the insights and gifts which our three poets have possessed. This union is not impossible. The insights may be superposed one on the other. [Santayana (1927), p. 211.]

We can smile inwardly in wry disbelief at such a claim. We live in a world nearly a century after Santayana wrote this. How can one individual mind grasp the objective world in all its totality? How can such a poet exist? Santayana's *l'altissimo poeta* is definitely still "in limbo" and given our human condition, fragile and vulnerable to dozens of contingencies, human created and nature induced, will probably always remain so. [See Irving Singer (2000), pp. 163-64].

CONCLUSION

Interpreting Santayana's philosophy of poetry beginning with his first major work (*The Sense of Beauty*) to his fourth (*Three Philosophical Poets*) has been my intention in this paper. An undeniable consistency weaves its way through the works I have discussed. However, it is interesting to contrast what Santayana writes about poets and poetry in his major prose works, with certain comments about his personal relationship with poetry that appear in his letters. Santayana was most definitely an individual attempting to reconcile poetry and philosophy. Despite this apparent intellectual chasm, by 1910 he seems to have reached a tentative truce. *Three Philosophical Poets* is a testimony to their union. I cannot imagine a more comprehensive, coherent coupling.

Santayana's letters reveal a deeper understanding of the man. It is evident that by early 1904 Santayana had resolved that his own poethood was no longer authentic. In a letter to Jessie B. Rittenhouse, a literary and poetry anthologist, Santayana confesses: "I am not an American and hardly a poet; may I not be eliminated from your gallery. I am sure I should not be missed. But I pray you to reconsider your intentions and regulate me to the camp of the wingless philosophers, where I belong." [Santayana (2001), p:1: 261].

By 1905 Santayana had divorced himself completely from any aspiration of devoting his creative life to poetry. In another letter, to Robert C. Trevelyan dated 25 June 1905, Santayana makes it clear that his estrangement from the poetical art is permanent: "The truth is that I have fallen out of love with poetry and feel a kind of incompetence in speaking of it as one might in the case of sweetheart that has jilted one. I seem to see in what I read the author's intention rather than his achievement." [Santayana (2001), p:1:308-09].

These two quotes are revealing. Though Santayana never lost a compassion for and interest in the poetical, it is warranted to claim that by 1905 his own poetical aspirations had dissipated. This coincides with the publication of *The Life of Reason*, a philosophical work that affixes human life in the rational sphere.

Santayana never completely abandoned poetry, despite his periodic protestations. The question can be posed here: Who was Santayana during this fourteen-year period (1896-1910)? Neither strictly a philosopher, nor a committed poet. He was a philosopher-poet whose mature philosophy of poetry found its resounding voice in *Three Philosophical Poets*, an unprecedented merger of the poetical and philosophical.

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