

limbo

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Restless and in One Place: Santayana, July 1914-June 1919

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I attempt to give an account of Santayana's life and thought during the period of July 1914 to June 1919. The understanding that I develop is this: that what started out as a state of bewilderment and disillusion, along with a loss of confidence in the pervasiveness of reason *and* a preoccupation with Germany and German philosophy, ended up, quite inexplicably, as being a period of time that allowed Santayana to grow intellectually and emotionally. The perspective he attained throughout these fifty-nine months bred within him, I would maintain, the *breadth*, the *peace of mind*, and the *stamina*, to accomplish his subsequent lifelong *œuvre*.

Key Words: reason, egotism, German Philosophy, WWI

RESUMEN

Con este artículo, intento dar a conocer una serie de acontecimientos de la vida de Santayana y su pensamiento durante el período de julio de 1914 a junio de 1919. La fuerza de mi argumento se basa en el ambiente de confusión y desilusión a través de la pérdida de fe en la omnipresencia de la razón, y una preocupación por Alemania y la filosofía alemana, que terminó inexplicablemente como un período que permitió a Santayana crecer intelectual y emocionalmente. La perspectiva intelectual que logró de

su pensamiento durante estos cincuenta y nueve meses le dio la amplitud y fortaleza del conocimiento para culminar la obra a lo largo de su vida.

Palabras clave: razón, egotismo, filosofía alemana, Primera Guerra Mundial

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On 2 August 1914, probably while seated in his room at the Lion Hotel in Cambridge, Santayana was well aware that he *could* secure a ticket back to New York should he care to.¹ There is caution in what he writes, almost disbelief, and most certainly a degree of inconvenience. By 9 August, elements of fear and mistrust had creeped in: “It is useless to talk about the war, the subject is too vast, too absorbing, too imperfectly comprehensible....I may go back to Paris after all, to gather my things together, pack my books, and migrate Southward—very likely to Spain rather than to Italy because the emotions of the moment make me feel the need of being near *my own*, and it is in Avila, with my sister, that I have the oldest and tenderest ties of my old and untender being.” [Santayana 2002, p. 191] But this state of emotional limbo was just four days after he had written to his friend Charles Augustus Strong that for a moment the outbreak of war had stirred up the vulgar sentiment of embracing *war*; of being at ease with the eruption of nation-state hostilities: “At first this terrible situation in Europe made me quite sick and speechless, as if I had lost some dear friend; but now that the battle is well engaged my sporting blood is up, and I feel a pleasing horror at it all, and one seems to be living a greater life amid such fearful events and constant excitement.” [Santayana 2002, p. 190] What do these reactions tell us about Santayana at the beginning of WWI, of where he had been and to where he was going, if anywhere?

First of all, that after two years of tentatively groping for his bearings in Europe after leaving Harvard and the US for good in January 1912, Santayana was still for the most part quite restless and constantly indulging a nomadic listlessness.² Secondly, he was go-

ing nowhere. The outbreak of European hostilities (WWI) stranded Santayana in England, in a creative and uneventful cocoon of isolation, for a period of approximately five years, some fifty-nine months, from late July 1914 to late June 1919. The continuum of published work throughout these months ranges from pieces such as “The Logic of Fanaticism,” (Nov. 1914) and “Goethe and German Egotism” (Jan. 1915) to “Aversion from Platonism” (May 1919).³

My aim in this paper is to outline, in broad strokes, and in a year-to-year progression, the intellectual highlights and developments of this time frame. In hindsight, one can understand them as representative of a *transitional period*, between an antebellum ‘American’ portion of his life (1872-1912), with a two-year hiatus between 1912 and 1914, when he ranged and roamed from England to Paris to Madrid to Italy, back to Paris and Madrid and to Seville, from January 1912 to May 1914, and a *postwar* European phase (1919-1952), discounting his first nine years in Spain as a child.

Two factors need to be mentioned and borne in mind if we are to frame accurately Santayana’s *immediate* understanding, his very everydayness, and, one could claim, his philosophical attitude prior to 1915: his loss of confidence in *reason*, both as it relates to an individual human being, and as a societal ideal and value, and his preoccupation with things *German*—cultural, political, but most of all with the nation-state military might that Germany was sling-around and utilizing in the intimidation, covertly if not overtly, of other nations and cultures. These two givens are framed in two distinct, separate quotes in letters Santayana wrote in the days after the outbreak of wartime hostilities, months before 1915. Writing to Mary Williams Winslow, who together with her husband Frederick Winslow, were very close to Santayana in the years preceding his permanent departure from the United States in 1912, he confesses on 16 August 1914:

Your friend Apthorp Fuller was in Paris not long ago and gave me the most dismal account of Harvard College and its philosophy....My po-

or brother is in Spain, uncertain how to get back to State Street and Duty and to Bay State Road and Happiness....All because a Servian student shot the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. And people still say that Reason governs the world. [Santayana 2002, pp. 193-194]

To his half-sister Susana, some two months later, on 11 October:

The German spirit is very anti-Christian at bottom, although in its demand for order and discipline it may find an alliance with Christianity useful for the moment. The German spirit, however, is that of "Absolute Will," as their philosopher [*sic.*] call it. It is unregenerate. It trusts, like the heathen Northmen, in strength, will, and inward instinct or illumination. [Santayana 2002, pp. 197-198]

And finally, once again to Mary Williams Winslow, some twenty days prior to the conclusion of what would eventually go down in history as a calamitous, *tragic* year:

But whatever the military result will be, there is nothing to fear from German *Kultur*....Perhaps in America you are not quite so obsessed as we are here by this War: but I shouldn't be able to shake off the consciousness merely because others were less preoccupied; on the contrary, it would become a worse thing—like a private sorrow. Here one can work it off, because everyone is thinking of nothing else. I have read and am reading all the German books I can find that throw light on their attitude, and I have begun to write about it—not particularly because I want to, but because it is impossible to think seriously or consecutively on any other subject. And the whole world puts on a new face in view of this extraordinary present reality. [Santayana 2002, pp. 206-27]

An impotent sense of bewilderment to alter the course of world events coupled with a persistent, nagging preoccupation with Germany and German philosophy, its origins, its sources, and its *im-*

port, would hue, and even predominate Santayana's *mental* activity throughout 1915-1918, and into the first months of 1919.

1915

This preoccupation manifests itself in two early letters we have from 1915. Enscorced in *The Old Ship Hotel* (which claims today to be the oldest "hotel" in Great Britain, dating back to 1559), Santayana had been living there at least since 14 December 1914. He had located a *groove* of creativity and solace, yet one focused on the material conditions surrounding him:

I have stayed on here from mere inertia, being tolerably comfortable and having a spell of article-writing. I have asked "The New Republic" to send you a copy of my inculcation of Goethe as an accessory before the fact. There are other articles on Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer—partly written, partly *in petto*—but they are too technical for the general public....You see I too am not idle.... In a week or so I mean to return to Cambridge and probably stay for the whole winter term. Then, if the coast is clear, I hope to go to Paris at last, and to stay there (circumstances permitting, *Deo Germanorum volente* [God the Germans willing] until you arrive... [Santayana 2002, p. 210]

Having revealed his nagging fixation on Germans and Germany, one month later he finds it appropriate to express once more how senseless and *unreasonable* he thinks the world has become, if it ever was:

The evidence of the principle of contradiction is merely logical: *if* a thing is one thing (or essence as I should say) it cannot be another. But in nature, as distinct from the essences illustrated there, the principle of contradiction has no certain application. Change and motion, for instance, are opposed to it, and elude expression in thought. We need

not assume that the world is rational when we see (just now, alas, better than ever) that it is not. [Santayana 2002, p. 212]

This distinct, traditional demarcation between the ideational philosophical sphere and a vibrant, dynamic, ever-shifting, if not ominously menacing material setting that enwrapped his physical being, would characterize the fifty-nine months that are dealt with in this essay. Santayana never had been before, nor would he subsequently ever be, an entirely *disembodied* thinker. In fact, any serious reading of his personal letters and publications during these months cannot help but reveal an incredible degree of *embodied* immediacy, a heightened sensibility and tactile absorption in the present, yet one marked by an increasing isolation and preserved in a solitude that was growing by the day—a presentness that apparently followed closely every new ‘newsy’ development. Santayana was an astute observer and interpreter of the social and political changes that he witnessed, despite his detached and aloof airs. 1915 also was replete with what, from our perspective today, can only be understood as delusional wishful thinking, with regard to the *real* prospects of being able to leave England while armed conflict raged on the European continent. Santayana even flirted with the idea of returning to the US.⁴

By August 1915 he was fully engaged in the writing of *Egotism in German Philosophy*, and had temporarily put on hold his work on “The Realms of Being.” But perhaps more telling than anything else was the deliberate, gradational disengagement away from unmediated physical and social contact with other people and institutions of any stripe. He was becoming an exemplar of *philosophy as a way of life*, incarnate—a fusion of the above-mentioned demarcation. As he wrote to Fuller, in a letter dated 4 August 2015: “You may say, ‘why less lately, when things have been going from bad to worse?’ Because I am weary of it all, my feelings blunted, and my mind resigned.” [Santayana 2002, p. 223] Nevertheless, within a month he was radiating a kind of composed, measured stoicism, even meet-

ing with Henry James for the first time ever.⁵ This vacillating mood swing, between a resigned peace of mind and a resigned irritation, punctuated Santayana's outlook for the months under discussion here.

And what was Santayana writing about the Germans and Germany? Aside from both alternating in his personal letters between an evident displeasure in the disruption of normal international travel, commerce, and communications that its aggression had caused, and at times a respect (even fear) begrudged to them, in his published work he was philosophically dissecting the "Character of German Philosophy," "German Genius," and individual German poets and thinkers. Philosophy itself, in its German version according to Santayana, is *sui generis*, intensely unique, and distinguishable from other sources nourishing philosophical contemplation.⁶ Santayana dispassionately claims: "For an original and profound philosophy has arisen in Germany, as distinct in genius and method from Greek and Catholic philosophy as this is from the Indian systems. The great characteristic of German philosophy is that it is deliberately subjective and limits itself to the articulation of self-consciousness." [Santayana 1916, pp. 11-12] No major German thinker is spared indictment for partaking in this egocentric enterprise, consciously or unconsciously, including Goethe.⁷ And though he always kept a healthy distance from embracing any of the principal tenets developed by any major German philosopher ("I write frankly as an outsider"), his first choice for a subject of a Ph.D. dissertation was Schopenhauer, eventually settling on Rudolf Hermann Lotze (*Lotze's System of Philosophy*, 1889).⁸

Santayana also, during 1915, began publishing the first of his impressionistic, lyrical pieces that would eventually be collected together and published as a book (*Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*) in 1922.⁹ By the end of 1915 Santayana had, after much indecisiveness and moving between London, Cambridge, and Oxford, finally settled in Oxford. Here, where he would find what modicum of peace he could secure during these years,

he hunkered down and began to write in earnest: “The war has made me very unhappy, and incidentally has upset all my plans. I have found nice lodgings in Oxford (where I have always liked to live) and am waiting for the storm to blow over.” [Santayana 2002, p. 236]

1916

The storm did not blow over anytime soon however, but would progressively worsen and get more severe. Santayana continued to work diligently on *Egotism and German Philosophy*. As a portent of the tension on the way, Santayana dispatched a *highly* critical letter to the “editor of *The New Republic*” on 5 January 1916. His insights into the international political arena and contemporary goings-on reveal a mind profoundly cognizant of current events and developments, and not just in a cursory, simplistic, matter-of-fact manner. He grasped the daily grind of international politics. There is a trenchant analysis of the motives driving individual world leaders and nations as a whole, of their wartime strategies and tactics (especially the Germans), including insights into the nature of nation-state war itself. In the course of a letter in which Santayana spelled out his quite candid thoughts as to what would constitute an honorable and equitable ceasefire, in short, an end to the hostilities, he wrote: “Militarism does not consist in having an army, but in the systematic abuse of an army and a people for the settled purpose of aggression; so that, for instance, it can be put forth as a marvel of forbearance (and of preparation) that after three successful wars fought in rapid succession, forty-three years should have been allowed to elapse before delivering the next blow. To renounce this hereditary policy would be for official Germany to be ‘crushed’; for the official politics, philosophy, patriotism and glory of the last hundred years to be entirely renounced and transformed.” [Santayana 2002, p. 237] Couple this insight with a passage lifted from *Egotism and German Philosophy*, in which German thought is described as “rebellious to

external authority, conscious of inward light and of absolute duties. It is full of faith, if by faith we understand not definite beliefs held on adequate evidence, but a deep trust in instinct and destiny,” [Santayana 1916, p. 13] and one has a volatile mixture active in the international sphere. Curiously enough, another major American thinker, John Dewey, was heavily invested in thinking through the German ‘question’ around the same time. In his own *Germany Philosophy and Politics* (1915), he had written: “The cosmopolitanism of the French Enlightenment was transformed by German thinkers into a self-conscious assertion of nationalism. The abstract Rights of Man of the French Revolution were set in antithesis to the principle of the rights of the citizen secured to him solely by the power of the politically organized nation.” [Dewey 1915, pp. 91-92]¹⁰ There is a certain convergence of thought with regard to Santayana and Dewey concerning Germany and the Germans. What is more, both were aware of what the other had written. Each wrote a review of the other’s book.

For the rest of 1916 Santayana continued to cocoon in Oxford—writing, thinking, and struggling for peace of mind and solitude. *Egotism and German Philosophy* was published in October. He spent time with Robert Bridges, the poet, who had been made “Poet Laureate” in 1913. Bridges had a home, *Chilswell*, near Oxford, and Santayana enjoyed many moments there. In the last extant letter from 1916, he wrote to Bridges about the *ambiguity* surrounding the word “reason,” and how in the context of a wartime situation with uncertainty spreading over everything, he was even more amusedly confused than ever: “When we speak of reason governing an animal or governing the world, do we mean simply that the good is being realized somehow, or that abstract terms and discourse are running meantime through somebody’s head, or do we mean something further? It seems to me all a chaos of conventional phrases and verbal psychology, by which we describe variously the same undisputed facts.” [Santayana 2001, p. 257] One cannot help but detect a weariness and argumentative numbness in his words.

1917

Santayana spent the first three months of 1917 in the southwestern part of England, at first in an attempt to get relief from the winds, chill, and the rain of the typical British winter, primarily in the seaside town of Torquay. In a letter of 15 March he mentions his psychological state “as if we were suffering from great bereavement.” [Santayana 2002. p. 263] Time for Santayana seemed to be coming to a halt, slowing down to the point of each day being lived out in expectation of the next. Four days later he wrote to Robert Bridges: “Events are so thick and so overwhelming of late, that I live in a sort of continual suspense, waiting for the next morning’s paper. Ought we, who are mere spectators, to be glad or sorry that we live at such a time?” He concluded this line of thought in writing that “on the whole I am glad, although I wish I could be younger, so as to have borne some part in the struggle...” [Santayana 2002. p. 265] Back in Oxford in April, Santayana worked on various philosophical papers (“Literal and Symbolic Knowledge” and “Three Proofs of Realism”) and helped prepare a French translation of *Egotism*. By September he had caught a glimpse for the first time of American soldiers on British soil, training in an “aviation camp.” Philosophically speaking, he was simplifying, maturing, downsizing. He wrote to the young Roy Wood Sellars on 30 October, who was then only thirty-seven: “Personally, I also feel some doubts about the advisability of making so much of abstracted philosophical disciplines—psychology, epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, etc. What a man thinks he thinks, and if it is true of its object, I can’t believe it makes much difference which ‘ology’ we put it under.” [Santayana 2002. p. 296] By mid-November he had three “soliloquies” finished. Before 1917 came to a conclusion he had penned a somber, almost nonchalant letter to Bertrand Russell stating that, by and large, the war had really not changed *humanity* all that much. Was Santayana being honest here? He wrote in December:

People are not intelligent. It is very unreasonable to expect them to be so, and that is a fate my philosophy reconciled me to long ago. How else could I have lived for forty years in America? [Santayana 2002. p. 303]

1918

Santayana was headquartered throughout the entirety of 1918 in Oxford. It would be his last full year in England, ever. The oppressive fog of war was lifting for Santayana, and he had “fallen back on a sort of grey leaden sea of philosophy, where I find all human purposes and ambitions, all likes and dislikes, benevolently neutralized by the hidden forces that at once create and defeat them.” [Santayana 2002. p. 315] Two serious, separate philosophical pieces were published in this year: “Philosophical Opinion in America,” in the *British Academy Proceedings*, vol. 8 (later republished in *Character and Opinion in the United States: With Reminiscences of William James and Josiah Royce and Academic Life in America*, 1920), and “Literal and Symbolic Knowledge,” in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, vol. 15, no. 16 (later republished in *Obiter Scripta*, 1936). Yet quite possibly it is in a short summation of his five-volume *Life of Reason* (1905-6), written inside a copy of a book on 18 April 1907 itself, on sale in The Brick Row Book and Print Shop in New Haven, CT, yet published in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, vol. 15, no. 3 on 31 January 1918, that Santayana contributes most meaningfully to the clarification of his thought. The world can read for the first time what he thinks his first major work in philosophy actually is. *Life of Reason* (the second major work would be *Realms of Being*), resulted from a synthesis of *criticism* and *imagination*, guided by modesty and a recognition of human limitations:

This is not, therefore, a work of metaphysics, nor of history, nor even of psychology. It is a work of criticism. Its object is not to trace the connection or define the nature of all things, but merely to estimate

the value of some of them—those that chiefly concern civilization.... The work of criticism has consequently become, in method, a work of imagination. It is as such only that, in its turn, it ought to be judged. [Santayana 1918, pp. 82-83]

Sensing that peace was inevitable and only a matter of time, Santayana was by December internally debating whether to try to leave for either Spain or Italy. He confessed to Strong, with whom he had maintained a robust correspondence throughout 1914-1918: “What a year this has been for wonderful events! I have often wished we might have been able to talk them over as they occurred, although for my own part I am hardly able to take them in, and all my attention seems to be absorbed by the passing moment, or the immediate future.” [Santayana 2002, p. 233]

1919

Santayana continued to reside in Oxford until late April. His own “immediate future” remained on hold until the Paris Peace Conference negotiations, which had begun on 18 January, ended with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June. Between January and 9 May, Santayana published “Materialism and Idealism In America,” along with seven shorter pieces that would eventually be incorporated into *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* (1922). In one of these lyrical passages, “Grisaille,” though addressing the *geography* and natural texture of England as an environment, Santayana captures what perhaps was the general cultural and intellectual mood of the Oxford he was living in, but would soon be leaving once and for all, although he would return to England later in life. The restless conflict was finally resolving itself, both within Santayana’s own mind, and on the European continent:

In England the classic spectacle of thunderbolts and rainbows appears but seldom; such contrasts are too violent and definite for these ten-

der skies. Here the conflict between light and darkness, like all other conflicts, ends in a compromise; cataclysms are rare, but revolution is perpetual. Everything lingers on and is modified; all is luminous and all is grey. [Santayana 1922, p. 14]

Santayana lingered on in England for some fifty days more after this was published in *The Athenaeum* on 9 May. He arrived in Paris in late June, after writing to Monica Waterhouse Bridges, Robert's wife, that "I assure you I shall cast many a look in the direction of Oxford and of Chilswell and I doubt very much if it will be possible for me now to be as happy anywhere else as I have been here." [Santayana 2002, p. 358] What had started out as an unintended exile and an occurrence of uncertain extension, had ended in a resolution of maturation and wisdom acquired. England had nurtured and kept Santayana safe for these fifty-nine months.

CONCLUSION

Santayana was fifty-five years of age when he returned to Paris in late June, 1919. Another stage of his life would begin once he found himself at 9, Ave. de l'Observatoire, among his "books and papers." Historically speaking, Europe had fought itself into a critical state of hemorrhaging, and needed healing and recovery. Santayana had in his own way healed personally from the wounds of his own separation from Harvard and the USA, and in many ways, from the hustle and bustle of the world. He had established a way of life in England that he would loyally follow for the rest of his life.

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NOTES

¹ Santayana writes that he knew that both American and British steamers were still sailing towards New York. Yet his guiding sentiment was to play it safe and remain in England. See Santayana 2002, p. 187-88.

² See my “Santayana’s Gliding Towards Disengagement: 1912-1914,” *Overheard in Seville*, 32 (Fall, 2014) for a discussion of these two years.

³ These publications can be broken down into thirty-two separate pieces in journals and magazines (*The New Republic*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, *Psychology*, and *Scientific Methods*, *British Academy Proceedings*, *The Landmark*, *The Athenaeum*), one book, *Egotism and German Philosophy* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1916), and two published sonnets.

⁴ In letters of 28 March 1915 to his half-sister Susana, and 4 August 1915 to Benjamin Gould Fuller, he toys with the thought of returning one day in the future.

⁵ He writes on 26 September to Susana: “Another person I have lately seen (for the first time) is Henry James. He is seventy three, and not very well in health; but he was entertaining and greeted me in particular very effusively and even affectionately, giving me the delicious sensation of being a young man whom one’s respectable and distinguished elders wish to pat on the head.” Santayana 2002, p. 230.

⁶ Santayana was not a newcomer to things German. He had studied in Germany during the 1987-88 academic year as a graduate student. He never was, nor ever had been, categorically anti-German. More than anything else, he took issue with German ego-driven ambition, and hyper-authoritative expansion, or rather “metaphysical conceit.” He had always respected their artistic, scientific, and cultural achievements, as when he wrote in July 1887 from Ávila, prior to arriving in Berlin in November: “Now if it is true that you are coming abroad, let me advise you on the strength of recent experience at Berlin, at Oxford, and at Cambridge, as well as on various accounts coming from Paris, to choose Berlin as the seat of your labors. The lectures there are incalculably the best, and although the students are not so charming as the English nor the city so gay as Paris, yet this sacrifice of pleasure is well compensated by the delight of the sincerity, strength, soundness, and maturity characteristic of German scholarship. They have an independence there enjoyed nowhere else—not even at Harvard.” [Santayana 2001, p. 84].

⁷ Though Santayana was quick to qualify Goethe as something of an anomaly: “There are hints of egotism in Goethe, but in Goethe there are hints of

everything, and it would be easy to gather an imposing mass of evidence to the effect that he was not like the transcendentalists, but far superior to them.” [Santayana 1916, p. 45].

⁸ Paul Kuntz has pointed out that it was perhaps the element of intellectual courtesy that Santayana found in Lotze that made a lasting impression on Santayana’s educational formation, more than anything else: “But in contrast to the barbaric customs of the schools of philosophy in dismissing each other as worthless, Lotze is always unfailingly courteous. His courtesy springs not from having no position of his own, but from knowing the limitation of any position, particularly one’s own.” [Kuntz 1971, p. 7]

⁹ The first two of these, “Classic Liberty” and “Liberalism and Culture,” appeared in *The New Republic* in August and September, respectively.

¹⁰ Santayana wrote a short book review of it, “German Philosophy and Politics,” in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* (November 25, 1915).

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