

limbo

Núm. 41, 2021, pp. 131-139

ISSN: 0210-1602

Santayana's Ambassador

MATTHEW CALEB FLAMM

A Life of Scholarship with Santayana: Essays and Reflections, by Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. Edited by Charles Padrón and Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński. Brill Publishing, 2021.

This collection contains a fifty-year span of the writings of Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr., including original scholarship and critical reflections on his scholarly and editorial work surrounding the thought of George Santayana. As John Lachs indicates in the book forward, by the time of Santayana's 1952 death, and for the decades to follow there was "a change of taste on the part of philosophers," a change in which "Systematic thought, literary style, and ontology went out of fashion, replaced by pseudoscientific precision." (p. ix) It is unlikely in such an environment that an eclectic philosopher like Santayana could have maintained his current reputation throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first without Saatkamp's contributions to the editing, publishing, and scholarship of Santayana's works.

Saatkamp oversaw the production of the MIT Press *Critical Edition* of *The Works of George Santayana*, founded the annual *Bulletin of the Santayana Society*, *Overheard in Seville*, helped organize the First International Conference on Santayana, held in Ávila, Spain, in 1992, and, even as he served administrative roles (including two dean positions and university president), has maintained a commitment to Santayana scholarship up to the present day.

The book is arranged into three parts, thematically distinguished, it appears, so as to attempt to frame what is a wide array of writings throughout the author's appreciable career: Part 1, "Santayana and Philosophy," Part 2, "Challenges in Editorship and Assorted Pieces," and Part 3, "Genetic Concerns and the Future of Philosophy." Helpfully these parts of the book include introductions from Saatkamp which contextualize the sections and provide the author's updated outlook on the included essays. Among the sources from which Saatkamp's essays on Santayana's thought are derived, *A Lifetime of Scholarship* includes pieces from *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, the *American Philosophical Quarterly*, and the two most important current periodicals devoted to Santayana's thought, the annual *Overheard in Seville: Bulletin of the Santayana Society*, and the bulletin containing the present review, *Limbo* (supplement to *Teorema*, a journal of philosophy based in Spain).

For the most part it appears that this volume is presented in chronological order of Saatkamp's career to date. The colorful photo cover displaying its smiling author, informative back-and-front-matter, and general presentation is admirably suited to attract a wide range of possible audience, from those with a lay interest in Santayana, to more serious scholars wanting to familiarize themselves with an essential interpreter and publisher of Santayana's works. Important to add here: the book is well edited, devoid of typos and shows care of content-presentation, including a helpful lengthy index. The catch here is that Brill's pricing of the book is regrettable (\$145/€120), prohibitive for the average consumer, so like so many publications of its kind some of its circulation will have to reach public libraries in order to be accessed.

Saatkamp reflects on the evolution of his scholarship, identifying "two turns" that permitted him to lock in to Santayana's thinking: "I began to understand that Santayana carefully chose his terminology and his sometimes humorous approach to philosophical discussion, and second, that his approach was revolutionary and turned philosophy on its head." (Introduction to Part I, p. 4) Saatkamp

emphasizes Santayana's irony and cosmopolitanism (*ibid*) and the sense in which "Santayana's [Spanish] background enabled him to see how his contemporary American colleagues were heavily influenced by the American way of life and the youthful optimism in American democracy and industrialism." (p. 6)

Part 1, "Santayana and Philosophy" contains a range of Saatkamp's reflections on core concepts and features of Santayana's thought, including skepticism and animal faith, naturalism, autobiography and fiction, Santayana's cosmopolitanism, and features of the work of English analyst P. F. Strawson (1919-2006) that intersect with Santayana's naturalism. He focuses on Santayana as "traveler," "stranger," and deployment of autobiography (in fiction and non-fiction) as reflective of the philosopher's view that "...philosophy is not a methodology, nor a metaphysics, nor an ideology; it is the expression of the values and beliefs inherent and discoverable in living and acting." (p. 66)

This well expressed characterization of Santayana's view of philosophy captures both the attraction and repulsion various readers have to his writings: those inclined to eclectic, poetic philosophers tend to find affinities with Santayana while philosopher-purists find his writings muddled and inconsistent, poetic and literary in a way that undermines rigorous logical clarity—cf., C. S. Peirce's assessment that "[Santayana's] is, in fact, an eclectic philosophy, and, like other works of that sort, is likely to have more literary than scientific value." (*The Nation*, June 8, 1905, p. 461)

What attracts Saatkamp but repels Peirce about Santayana's thinking provides a helpful basis for appreciating the need for what I think of as *ambassadors* of thinkers, as opposed, only, to critical gatekeepers. For sure, the advance of a world-important thinker like Santayana depends both on critical gatekeepers and ambassadors—both those who engage with philosophers to consider whether they can pass through the threshing machine of critical understanding of historically abiding ideas, and those who engage with them in order to enlarge and navigate life—but, to trade on the fa-

mous Kantian line, if an interpretive world without the former critics is “blind,” an interpretive world without the latter ambassadors is “empty.” This volume showcases how Saatkamp has filled this need; how he has been, and remains a worthy ambassador-interpreter of Santayana’s thinking.

Part 2, “Challenges in Editorship and Assorted Pieces” provides elucidation of the methods and standards of comprehensive critical edition publishing, the challenges such editors face due to historical circumstances and the status of extant works of the author. Of particular interest in this section, Saatkamp discusses the demanding editorial responsibility of negotiating the necessary limitations imposed by private textual rights with the ethical question of when and how to answer “Public Needs.” Saatkamp asks: “If an author explicitly indicates certain material is never to be published, what is the editor’s appropriate response?... If the editor knows about this material but records no evidence of it, then is the editor not violating his or her obligations to the scholarly community?” (p. 181) Two fascinating examples Saatkamp highlights in relation to Santayana’s writings, not precisely instances where Santayana “explicitly indicated” objections to publication, but examples regarding which posthumous editors might have opted to take liberties, include the excision of references to Spinoza in Santayana’s autobiography, and on the personal side, certain “uncharacteristic” letters to William Morton Fullerton.

Saatkamp cites one of these letters to Fullerton in a long footnote and it contains Santayana’s wickedly humorous description, undoubtedly also offensive to many readers, of the use he made of the Bible his mother gave him to solve a toilet paper shortage. (pp. 186-87) Saatkamp is making an important point with the example. These are the kinds of delicate “private-intended” examples of writing that all general editors of famous writers face. Such glimpses into Santayana the person might seem to some readers degrading or undermining of the “public dignity” of an author like Santayana; and indeed, as Saatkamp points out, there are multiple good reasons for editors to think seriously about the “right” a public

has to such examples of private correspondence. But, as Saatkamp observes, as time passes following the death of an important author, and public understanding of the person behind the words becomes more obscure, the need for every, perhaps even private morsel of evidence becomes more precious: “without [certain information] our knowledge of major figures, of major historical events, would be considerably less than it is.” (p. 193)

The admirable overall position Saatkamp takes on the matter involves recognition that, although in most cases exclusive deference to authorial intent is for pragmatic reasons obligatory, that deference is in select cases subject to alteration due to the *prima facie* (i.e., conditional) character of the author’s right to privacy (especially as time passes beyond an author’s death, and the deaths of those with whom he or she associated).

To bolster this position Saatkamp discusses among other things copy-text theory, the “Greg-Bowers-Tanselle Approach,” which privileges the rights of the author in a way that contrasts somewhat with the “socialized” approach of Jerome McGann. Not perceiving these approaches as mutually exclusive, Saatkamp leans towards McGann’s emphasis on the historical and currently changing social context as of equal importance to considerations of the rights of the author.

Saatkamp’s meticulous, detailed discussion of editorial standards and challenges in this part of his book is no doubt afield of the interests of those engaged with Santayana’s thought, but it offers appreciation of the thoughtful seriousness and professionalism behind his work editing Santayana’s writings. The value of Saatkamp’s contributions to the editing of Santayana’s works is seen in the balance he strikes between remaining “sympathetic” to the author’s outlook/intentions, but also his willingness to take into account the larger historical context which raises questions of “public need” as time progresses past the deaths of significant authors.

Part 3, “Genetic Concerns and the Future of Philosophy” completes the picture of Saatkamp’s career-to-date, providing a sense of

his scholarly work in its most recent phase, and appropriately includes future-projected discussion of the prospects of Santayana's thought, moving into the twenty-first century (and beyond). There is in this final part of the book an interesting section of essays devoted to Richard Rorty, a tribute to his long-time mentor and friend, John Lachs (author of the book's foreword), and a moving final section titled "We Walk Back in Time to Go Forward" in which Saatkamp recalls a 2013 tour led by Stockton University's Holocaust Center. This last inclusion is moving and most fully displays Saatkamp's personal philosophic center of focus, which to my thinking is without need of supplemental support of abstract theoretical categories such as are emphasized in Santayana's ontological system.

To amplify this point, Saatkamp is particularly adept at "thinking with" Santayana in the context of what has today become a world—more than ever now with the global pandemic—obliged to place its trust in science and medicine as a source of authority and direction. The virtue of this interpretive approach of "thinking with Santayana," as opposed to following the approach of many scholarly advocates of thinkers who "think *through*" the categories and concepts of their select champions, is that Saatkamp fills in what for me is a gap in Santayana's own interpretive understanding. Santayana never shows empathetic attention to community, or to be more cautious, rarely shows anything but a distanced appreciation for its significance in human life; the human need, in particular, for a shared sense of meaning in the present that communities face, together, cumulatively, as the debris of traumas of the past pile up. This sense of community-belonging goes unrecognized in Santayana's thought, and Saatkamp provides welcome opportunity to think with-and-beyond Santayana in this relation.

Invoking his remembrance of a 2013 tour of the Stockton Holocaust center, Saatkamp recalls his impression of that shared moment, which included family member relatives of survivors. He recalls how they shared a sense of facing the ruins of history, and, standing bewildered at the task of reconciling a ghostly past with

an uncertain, undefinable future: "What did we expect? Not this. Sounds without sound, thoughts without thought, sights without sight. All surrounded by the comfort of everyday life: good food, comfortable hotels, expert travel arrangements, expert guides, great care and attention to detail. Dachau with modern residences around it (how can one live there?), buildings going up, restaurants, bars, clubs, symphony, opera all continue as if deaf to the fallen, to our backward walk in time. Then the realization: we are out of step. All around us are going forward. Like Janus we have another face, one with a future, one with choice." (p. 292) This is Saatkamp's filling out of what is a silent space in Santayana's philosophic writings: the "we" reality that shared trauma offers up for human consideration, and for the possibility, if not necessarily of healing and consolation, for solemn moments of solidarity with fellow humans.

Related, a unique virtue of this collection is that it includes much that is illuminating to readers interested in gaining a sense of Saatkamp the person, including a 1994 personal interview conducted by Richard DeTar, a graduate student that year at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, the institutional source for the journal *Kinesis* in which the interview was originally printed. Having myself the privilege of personal connection with Professor Saatkamp, it is wonderful to see in printed profile his serene, open-handed, wide-ranging outlook on Santayana's thinking. Saatkamp persistently grounds his observations of Santayana's key ideas in the philosopher's life, letters, and travels and this serves the purpose of reminding interpreters (as Santayana himself wrote) *not to squint and overlook half the facts and half the difficulties in their eagerness to find in some detail the key to the whole*. (Paraphrase of the famous opening line from Santayana's *Skepticism and Animal Faith*).

The book's appendix contains a lively critical essay from co-editor Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński, "Multiculturalism as Plurality of Perfections: Saatkamp's Interpretation of Santayana." Immediately following Skowroński's contribution is Saatkamp's "Response," "Santayana's Delight in Living." The two seem to differ, in a friend-

ly way, on the meaning and importance of what Skowroński terms Santayana's "multicultural," or as Saatkamp prefers, "cosmopolitan" sensibility, yet their exchange exemplifies the deeper significance of cross-cultural interchanges on Santayana's thought. The two demonstrate how the international character of the past thirty or so years of Santayana scholarship is apropos of Santayana's generous philosophic "cosmopolitanism."

In total, this book illustrates how, not in small part due to the life-work of Saatkamp, Santayana's thinking continues to attract a global, diverse reputation. Saatkamp's scholarly interpretations are important because they consistently and persuasively make a case for the attractiveness of Santayana's thinking, even though (as alluded) Santayana was and remains an "outsider" thinker among philosophy scholars.

Saatkamp has said to the publishers of this book that he wants it to be "a punctuation to my career," "an exclamation point or a dash, but not a period." The community of Santayana scholars certainly count on this, and meantime, along with the Spanish-American philosopher's diverse readership, owe to Herman Saatkamp an expression of gratitude for his long, multi-faceted, devoted career.

To end with my own personal note—full disclosure, I have long known Herman Saatkamp and indeed first met him as a *very green* undergraduate student in 1997 at Texas A&M University—I could not say enough in praise of the value of Saatkamp's ambassadorial role in promoting Santayana's thought and writing. Over the years his congenial, cheerful presence at every major and minor Santayana-themed conference and symposium, his generous support and encouragement of graduate students such as myself, and the constant vigil he continues to keep over the funding status of the Santayana Edition where it is currently housed with the Institute for American Thought at Indiana University, Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI); all of this has everything to do with, not only the continued world-important status of Santayana's writings, but the increasingly diverse expanse of scholars interested in his thought.

Herman himself is cosmopolitan in demeanor and this has surely created the opportunity for various linkages with scholars around the world who continue to generate Santayana-related conferences and journals, such as the one currently featuring this review.

*Philosophy Department
Rockford University,
5050 East State St,
Rockford, IL 61108-2393 (USA)
Email: mflamm@rockford.edu*