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- 1 *Three Philosophical Poets* is published as volume VIII of the Critical Edition of *The Works of George Santayana*, with the same impeccable editorial apparatus as the preceding volumes and an excellent introduction by James Seaton. This introduction is geared to shedding light on the broader philosophical context of a book that Seaton rightly considers “as perhaps the best introduction to Santayana’s work” (Seaton 2019: xi). Indeed, it is a relatively short book that touches upon some of Santayana’s central topics, such as the relationship of philosophy to poetry, of science-inspired naturalism to religious “supernaturalism,” of facts to values and of common sense to “heretic” transcendentalism, while providing, in masterful prose, critical insights on Lucretius, Dante and Goethe that, in A.O. Lovejoy’s words, “no specialist [in those authors] can afford to leave unread” (Lovejoy 1911: 245).
- 2 The material for the book stems from a course offered by Harvard’s Philosophy Department that Santayana described as “a half-course in which the conception of the world and the moral sentiment of the three [writers] should be described and compared” (Santayana 2011: 360). The course became a series of lectures delivered at Columbia University and the University of Wisconsin in 1910, also the year of publication of the book by Harvard University Press. The volume inaugurated the

Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature series, which continues to publish learned works to this day. In his Preface Santayana acknowledges, with characteristic (false?) modesty, that his book is not quite as erudite as the name of the series would lead one to expect:

Though produced under such learned auspices, my book can make no great claims to learning. It contains the impressions of an amateur, the appreciations of an ordinary reader, concerning three great writers, two of whom at least might furnish matter enough for the studies of a lifetime [...]. I am no specialist in the study of Lucretius; I am not a Dante scholar nor a Goethe scholar. I can report no facts and propose no hypotheses about these men which are not at hand in their familiar works, or in well-known commentaries upon them. My excuse for writing about them, notwithstanding, is merely the human excuse which every new poet has for writing about the spring. They have attracted me; they have moved me to reflection; they have revealed to me certain aspects of nature and of philosophy which I am prompted by mere sincerity to express, if anybody seems interested or willing to listen. What I can offer the benevolent reader, therefore, is no learned investigation. It is only a piece of literary criticism, together with a first broad lesson in the history of philosophy – and, perhaps, in philosophy itself. (TPP: xxxiii)

- 3 Although Santayana claims that “taken together [Lucretius, Dante and Goethe] sum up all European philosophy” (a debatable assertion), this supposed historical completeness is not the key to understanding Santayana’s choice of poets, which has more to do with the fact that they correspond to facets or “moments” of his own matured philosophy. Lucretius corresponds to the materialistic or naturalistic component, of which he is “the unrivalled poet”: he “sees the world to be one great edifice, one great machine, all its parts reacting upon one another, and growing into one another” (TPP: 4); he, better than any other poet, faces nature in its immensity and its alienness to all egotistic human desires; that is, in its truth. On the moral plane, this vision is completed by an allegiance to Epicurus’s values: “Allowed to look once upon the wonderful spectacle [...] we should look and admire, for to-morrow we die; we should eat, drink, and be merry, but moderately and with much art, lest we die miserably, and die to-day.” (TPP: 4). However, “Lucretius’ notion [...] of what is positively worthwhile or attainable is very meagre: freedom from superstition, with so much natural science as may secure that freedom, friendship, and a few cheap and healthful animal pleasures. No love, no patriotism, no enterprise, no religion.” (TPP: 122).
- 4 Dante’s case is the exact obverse: his conception of reality, all “beautiful stories, wonderful theories, and comforting rites” (TPP: 4-5), is constructed out of the projection of ideal values onto the realm of facts and is therefore fundamentally false: “it is a view of nature intercepted by myths and worked out by dialectic. [...] It is a mirage.” (TPP: 123). Yet he has a much clearer knowledge than Lucretius of the complexities of the human heart: “he sees the various pitfalls of life with intense distinctness; and seeing them clearly, and how fatal each is, he sees also why men fall into them, the dream that leads men astray, and the sweetness of those goods that are impossible.” In other words, Dante, however false his physics, is a great master: “the master of those who know by experience what is worth knowing by experience.” (TPP: 122).
- 5 While it is not difficult to understand how Lucretius and Dante complement each other (“if we rise from Lucretius to Dante, there is much left behind which we cannot afford to lose”) (TPP: 123), Goethe’s role in the triad is not as straightforward. Bertrand Russell, for one, after reminiscing that “many years ago [he] derived great pleasure

from *Three Philosophical Poets*” (Russell 1940: 474), hedges his assessment by adding: “at any rate from the discussion of the two who were Italians.” What is it that mars Russell’s pleasure in regard to Santayana’s treatment of Goethe? It’s the thought that were it not for “authority,” Santayana wouldn’t “force himself” to express so much respect for the author of *Faust* (Russell 1940: 474). Thus, for Russell, the inclusion of Goethe in Santayana’s canon of great philosophical poets results from... literary conformism. In his reply, Santayana concedes that “[he] feel[s] no such affinity to Goethe as [he] feel[s] to Lucretius and Dante.” Yet, “[his] effort to overcome this private bias was not due to deference to current opinion” (Santayana 1940: 582) but, as we will presently see, to his perception of the profound significance of the cultural movements embodied in *Faust*.

- 6 Lovejoy, also, is convinced that Santayana’s ranking of Goethe is the lowest of the three poets. He contends that “[his] lecture on Goethe is [...] an incident in the assault upon romanticism now going briskly forward in many quarters” (Lovejoy 1911: 246). According to Lovejoy, Santayana missed the dominant, yet latent, idea in *Faust*, an idea that is more difficult to retrieve from this work than Lucretius’ or Dante’s teachings are from their more directly didactical poems. What is this central idea “to which Mr. Santayana seemingly remains irreconcilable” (Lovejoy 1911: 246)? It consists, says Lovejoy, “of an apotheosis of the notion of becoming, of a conviction that the ultimate values of existence lie not in the goal but in the process and in the inner experiences which accompany it” (Lovejoy 1911: 246). Now, if Lovejoy is probably right about the Heraclitean and romantic doctrine implicit in Goethe’s *Faust*, he is almost certainly wrong in arguing that Santayana failed to appreciate the importance of that central idea. On the contrary, Santayana states emphatically that “Goethe gives us what is most fundamental – the turbid flux of sense, the cry of the heart, the first tentative notions of art and science” (Lovejoy 1911: 246); in other words, Goethe gives us “human life in its immediacy.” He also gives the “transfiguration of the immediate” that Lovejoy suspects Santayana of having missed:

What ought to be imperfect in time is, because of its very imperfection there, perfect when viewed under the form of eternity. To live, to live just as we do, that – if we could only realize it – is the purpose and the crown of living. We must seek improvement; we must be dissatisfied with ourselves; that is the appointed attitude, the histrionic pose, that is to keep the ball rolling. But while we feel this dissatisfaction we are perfectly satisfactory, and while we play our game and constantly lose it, we are winning the game for God. (TPP: 113)

- 7 Such is the moral that Santayana discerns in *Faust*. It is derived from the romantic attitude in poetry and the transcendental method in philosophy. This attitude and this method, contrary to what Lovejoy apparently believes, has “great merit” in Santayana’s eyes: they are “purgative and liberating,” “they put us back at the beginning of our experience,” “they disintegrate convention” and “restore us to ourselves” (TPP: 115), all of which can hardly be deemed menial philosophical accomplishments, even though, naturally, romanticism and transcendentalism have well-known limitations, just as Lucretius’ naturalism and Dante’s supernaturalism do.
- 8 Santayana concludes the book with an almost messianic invocation of a future poet who would merge and update the philosophical-poetical virtues of Goethe (the poet of immediacy), Lucretius (the poet of nature) and Dante (the poet of salvation). Although this supreme philosophical poet is “still in limbo,” the hypothetical poem he could write would be yet another instance of the *rational poetry* that Santayana extols in TPP.

This (obviously untimely) preference for rational poetry, as Seaton reminds us in his introduction, was targeted by proponents of the “New Criticism,” as exemplifying the limitations of a literary approach “that is less interested in literature than in ‘the separable content of literature’” (Seaton 2019: xv). But Santayana anticipated to a great extent this sort of objection, by arguing that “scope” and “depth” are not inimical to poetry, as long as the form of poetry is not simply thrown over the substance of prose:

If a short passage is poetical because it is pregnant with suggestion of a few things [...] how much more poetical ought a vision to be which was pregnant with all we care for? Focus a little experience, give some scope and depth to your feeling, and it grows imaginative; give it more scope and more depth, focus all experience within it, make it a philosopher’s vision of the world, and it will grow imaginative in a superlative degree, and be supremely poetical. The difficulty, after having the experience to symbolize, lies only in having enough imagination to hold and suspend it in a thought; and further to give this thought such verbal expression that others may be able to decipher it, and to be stirred by it as by a wind of suggestion sweeping the whole forest of their memories. (*TPP*: 9)

- 9 This, of course, presupposes the conceptual separability of thought and imagination from their verbal expressions. But that is as it should be: Santayana’s naturalistic approach to thought and language entails a sound resistance to the inference that is supposed to take one from the uncontested fact that language mediates our cognitive contact with the world to the questionable conclusion that the only way to gain access to reality is through its articulation in speech.

- 10 One way of approaching the idea of “rational poetry” is by contrast to what Santayana called, ten years before *TPP*, in an eponymous essay, “the poetry of barbarism”:

We find our contemporary poets incapable of any high wisdom, incapable of any imaginative rendering of human life and its meaning. Our poets are things of shreds and patches; they give us episodes and studies, a sketch of this curiosity, a glimpse of that romance; they have no total vision, no grasp of the whole reality, and consequently no capacity for a sane and steady idealization. The comparatively barbarous ages had a poetry of the ideal; they had visions of beauty, order, and perfection. This age of material elaboration has no sense for those things. Its fancy is retrospective, whimsical, and flickering; its ideals, when it has any, are negative and partial; its moral strength is a blind and miscellaneous vehemence. Its poetry, in a word, is the poetry of barbarism. (Santayana 1989: 104)

- 11 Whitman is the paramount example of a poet that Santayana considers “barbaric,” an epithet that misleadingly suggest wholesale rejection; for Santayana’s criticism is mitigated by a perceptive assessment of Whitman’s value as a poet:

Full of sympathy and receptivity, with a wonderful gift of graphic characterization and an occasional rare grandeur of diction, [Whitman] fills us with a sense of the individuality and the universality of what he describes – it is a drop in itself yet a drop in the ocean. The absence of any principle of selection or of a sustained style enables him to render aspects of things and of emotion which would have eluded a trained writer. He is, therefore, interesting even where he is grotesque or perverse. He has accomplished, by the sacrifice of almost every other good quality, something never so well done before. He has approached common life without bringing in his mind any higher standard by which to criticise it; he has seen it, not in contrast with an ideal, but as the expression of forces more indeterminate and elementary than itself; and the vulgar, in this cosmic setting, has appeared to him sublime. (Santayana 1989: 111)

- 12 Yet, whatever charm and value Santayana detects in Whitman's poems, they obviously don't amount to the "steady contemplation of all things in their order and worth" (*TPP*: 7) that defines both "rational poetry" and philosophical vision.
- 13 *De Natura Rerum*, *La Divina Commedia* and *Faust* are the works of philosophical – and highly civilized – poets. Santayana, for his part, was, unashamedly, a literary philosopher (and a minor poet, a one-shot novelist, and a wonderful autobiographer). Still, he had no disdain for science; he understood how painstaking and constrained the scientific acquisition of truth is and that it cannot become the *exclusive* model for philosophy without stifling its human functions and aspirations. This new scholarly edition of *TPP* provides a very welcome opportunity to confirm anew that the book is not only a "piece of literary criticism, together with a broad first lesson in the history of philosophy," but also a lesson in philosophical wisdom itself, not only in its general arguments, but in the way it tries to answer particular traditional riddles such as why Lucretius' arguments about the fear of death ultimately fail or what makes the lovers Paolo and Francesca di Rimini so wretched in Hell, even though they are eternally together, as they so ardently wished.

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