

- KINZEL Till (2019). *Johann Georg Hamann. Zu Leben und Werk*. Wien/Leipzig, Karolinger.
- PRICE Kenneth M. (1990). *George Santayana and Germany: An Uneasy Relationship*. In: Peter FREESE (ed.): *Germany and German Thought in American Literature and Cultural Criticism*. Essen, pp. 159–169.
- SANDKAULEN Birgit (2006). *System und Systemkritik. Überlegungen zur gegenwärtigen Bedeutung eines fundamentalen Problemzusammenhangs*. In: *System und Systemkritik. Beiträge zu einem Grundproblem der klassischen deutschen Philosophie*. Ed. Birgit Sandkaulen. Würzburg.
- SANTAYANA George (1916). *Egotism in German Philosophy*. New York, Scribner's Sons.
- (1968). *Selected Critical Writings*. Vol. I. Ed. by Norman Henfrey. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- (1971). *Lotze's System of Philosophy*. Ed. by Paul Grimly Kurtz. Bloomington/London.
- (2002). *The Letters of George Santayana. Book Three, 1921–1927*. Ed. William G. Holzberger. Cambridge, Mass.
- SCHLEGEL Friedrich (1978). *Kritische und theoretische Schriften*. Stuttgart.
- WOLFF Christian (2019). *Über den Unterschied zwischen einem systematischen und einem nicht-systematischen Verstand [De differentia intellectus systematici & non systematici]*. Lateinisch–deutsch. Übersetzt, eingeleitet und hg. von Michael Albrecht. Hamburg.

Imbo

Núm. 43, 2023, pp.

ISSN: 0210-1602

On First Looking into Santayana's *Scepticism*

D. SEIPLE

ABSTRACT

Readers new to Santayana may feel puzzled by aspects of *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. A number of Santayana's early critics were puzzled as well. Some found the relation between scepticism and common sense troublesome. Others were put off by Santayana's indirect poetical style and his lack of "clarity." In this paper I reflect on these topics, as well as the relation between Santayana's poetic style and his vision of philosophical truth and sublimity. This should illuminate his "discovery" of essence, which he re-enacts in this book and which holds the key to understanding Santayana's mature project.

Keywords: Scepticism, Common Sense, Animal Faith, Essence, John Keats, the Sublime

RESUMEN

Quienes comiencen a leer a Santayana se sorprenderán por ciertos aspectos de *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. Lo mismo ocurrió con los primeros intérpretes de Santayana. Para algunos era difícil la relación entre escepticismo y sentido común. El estilo poético y elusivo de Santayana y su falta de "claridad" alejaron a otros. En este artículo reflexiono sobre esos temas, así como sobre la relación entre el estilo poético de Santayana y su visión de la verdad filosófica y la sublimidad. Esto debería iluminar el "descubri-

miento" de la esencia, que Santayana incorpora en ese libro y que aporta la clave para comprender su proyecto de madurez.

Palabras clave: escepticismo, sentido común, fe animal, esencia, John Keats, lo sublime

PRELUDE

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken...

JOHN KEATS, "On First Looking into
Chapman's Homer"

Scepticism and Animal Faith, published almost exactly a century ago, presents George Santayana's introduction to his mature philosophical project. Having become dissatisfied with his earlier approach, especially his five-volume *Life of Reason*, he announces that this new work would be "the first volume of my system of philosophy, which I have had in hand for many years."¹

Since its publication, *Scepticism* seems to have attracted a range of responses. For some, the book speaks like a profound revelation. (Matthew Flamm found it "truly liberating because it seemed to strike at the heart" of our modern intellectual temper.)² Other readers however, having puzzled over what the text appears to say, may never get very far in the book at all. And still others, on first looking into Santayana's *Scepticism*, may be impressed by the book's insights but still disconcerted by those same puzzlements. One of these puzzlements has been Santayana's penchant for indirect literary language, which has evoked complaints from critics and first-time readers alike. My aim in this paper is to address this by showing how his literary style is integral to his overall project

— particularly as it relates to his discovery of essence and his regard for the sublime.

SCEPTICISM AND/OR COMMON SENSE

The confusions felt by new readers of Santayana might seem especially surprising to those newcomers themselves, since Santayana opens his preface innocently enough: his stated intention is "simply" to avoid sophistry and to give "to everyday beliefs a more accurate and circumspect form" [SAF v]. That probably sounds like good news to first-time readers. They hear Santayana expressing sympathy "with the old prejudices and workaday opinions of mankind," as he announces that "I stand in philosophy exactly where I stand in daily life." Even decades later he would remind us of that original intention — which was emphatically not to produce a *metaphysical* "system of the universe,"³ and certainly not "a dry compilation of other men's theories and argument," but only a "revision" of common sense [RB 826-27].

Yet first-time readers might soon wonder: Is that really so? Having been lulled by such assurances, they might be expecting relief from tedious technical argumentation. But relief may feel hard to come by in those first chapters.

One of the book's earliest reviewers gave exasperated voice to this. After all, is it really indicative of common sense to "reassert, without any new justification, the claims of common sense in so laborious, so ingenious a manner" [Anonymous (1923), p. 135]? At the end of only his second chapter, Santayana makes a proposal that reaches a long way from where most of us "stand in daily life." He proposes to "push scepticism as far as I logically can... even at the price of intellectual suicide" [SAF 10]. This is what Santayana will soon be calling "ultimate scepticism" [SAF 33 ff], and in the very last chapter of *Realms of Being*, he acknowledges that "in regard to my intended allegiance to common sense, I confess that in several important matters I have not been able to maintain it" [RB 832]. Hear-

ing this, we might be forgiven for wondering whether this joining of scepticism and common sense might not have been a mismatched marriage to begin with.

This issue, as to the function of scepticism, appears to present one side of a worrisome tension within Santayana's book. However, readers of *Scepticism* soon learn that ultimate scepticism is a tool Santayana uses, not a conviction he seriously holds — except as he directs it towards the shibboleths of modern philosophy. Scepticism is a way of “striking at the heart” of those illusions. His key move in this strategy occurs relatively early in the book, with the “discovery” of essence [SAF ch ix], and the later portion of my discussion will address the impact of that moment in his narrative.

In the meantime, let's address the other side of this tension — the philosophical standing of “common sense,” and in particular the clarity of articulation that some have supposed to be (at least ideally) cohesive with it.

There is an immediate response to the *prima facie* contradiction between scepticism and common sense: one might suppose that this incompatibility would better be laid at the door of common sense itself. Perhaps it is not actually scepticism that stands in need of justification in the face of common sense, but quite the reverse. After all, with only the slightest sceptical nudge, our trusty everyday truths seem to dissolve into a mire of jumbled slogans and impressionistic expedients, enshrined in folk wisdom and ordinary linguistic usage — applicable on occasion, but right alongside its logical opposite [SAF 87]. If some purported fact is said to be “apparent” [SAF 43], ordinary English usage can assure us *either* that we cannot possibly doubt it (as when *x* is “really quite apparent”), *or else* that wisdom absolutely requires us to doubt it (as when *x* is “merely apparent”). In just this way, common sense spins endless fodder for light-hearted conversation — but deeper contradictions lurk as well. To take Timothy Sprigge's example: we ordinarily suppose that some colorful physical object before us is an entity whose spatial extension is uniformly solid; yet we will also typically admit that this

surface is much craggier than we are used to noticing. And this same level of incoherence is generalizable to a vast set of common sense propositions [Sprigge (1986), pp. 203, 205].

These examples themselves may not seem very telling, and admirers of common sense would insist that what's needed is not despair over common sense itself, but rather dispatch in revising its mode of expression. To that end, during the last two decades of Santayana's own life Anglo philosophy announced that common sense would save us from all manner of metaphysical mischief. We just have to be clear about what we say. In fact, very close to the time Santayana was publishing *Scepticism*, one of his more acerbic critics was making this same point in the soon-to-be famous paper “A Defense of Common Sense” [Moore (1925)]. This was not directed specifically at Santayana, apparently, but twenty years or so prior Moore had already reviewed Santayana's *Life of Reason* and complained that “this book is so wanting in clearness of thought” that it probably won't “be of much use to anyone” [Moore (1907), p. 248].

But “clearness of thought” may not be as clear as it seems. Throughout that 1925 essay Moore went to great pains to model how to “make quite clear exactly” what he meant to say. Moore's call for increased attentiveness to language soon got taken up into a rather daunting project for cleansing our language of the obstinate perplexities that simple common sense was supposed to have dissipated. And in that same article (Section IV), Moore enumerated certain very basic propositions about the world (e.g., “Here is a human hand before me now”) which he declared are all certainly true, but which, ironically, he admitted he could not analyze clearly. This means of course that he himself had to proceed without the clarity he criticized others (including Santayana) for lacking. Appeal to mere clarity, it seems, was not as cleansing as Moore may have supposed.

This is worth mentioning here because, even now, not everyone finds Santayana's choice of language very clarifying. Ordinary language philosophy may have had its day,⁴ but its demise hardly solves

those concerns over Santayana's own lack of precision. So here I aim to indicate how Santayana's frequent neglect of analytic precision is part and parcel of how he regards poetry's relation to philosophy. From there I hope to show something important about the nature and implications of the "discovery" that Santayana re-enacts in this book.

A POET'S PHILOSOPHER

G. E. Moore's complaint about Santayana's writing — that it is "so wanting in clearness of thought" that it probably won't "be of much use to anyone" — was followed by a dollop of the faintest praise. Fortunately, Moore observed, "confusion of thought does not seem to be inconsistent with very high literary merit" [Moore (1907), p. 248], and as a literary writer Santayana succeeds. But given Moore's own prejudices, this allowance seems little more than concession to the good manners of academic combat. For his review seems to be a mainly a warning for his readers to keep their distance from Santayana's philosophical project, which seems to offer not analysis but "mere suggestion" [Moore (1907), p. 253].

The question of Santayana's standing as a philosopher followed him throughout his career, and even afterwards. Bertrand Russell's take on this was friendlier than many, as he mildly noted "a fixed practice with Santayana to avoid everything that cannot be discussed in literary form" [Russell, (1940), p. 456]. Like Moore however, Somerset Maugham was more explicit, complaining that Santayana's "fine phrases" too often obscured his meaning: "It was a loss to American literature when Santayana decided to become a philosopher rather than a novelist" [Maugham (1967), pp. 308-09]. Others were even less charitable. Take the case of Richard Butler (O. P.), who insisted that Santayana "was a philosophical poet, not a poetic philosopher" and found it difficult to fathom how Santayana deserved the philosophical reputation he enjoyed — though "perhaps this was because he brought his poetry into his philosophy, charming the reader with a musical style that delightfully distracted from

the content of his composition" [Butler (1960), pp. 99-100]. Soon after Santayana died, Butler's last judgment on him damned without the faintest praise: Santayana's philosophy "belonged to him and should die with him" [Butler (1955), p. 194].

I hope to deal with the case of Richard Butler in a later discussion, since for Santayana it would offer an excellent example of the dangers of dialectical overreach. In the meantime, we can refer instead to the article "A Poet's Philosopher" by Vincent Colapietro (2009), because it nicely drives home the point that (*pace* Butler) Santayana should indeed be regarded as a poetic *philosopher*, which might help us to see how "delightful poetic distractions" may not be alien to the content of the philosopher's composition after all.

As Colapietro points out, during his early Harvard days the young Santayana was known better as a poet than as a philosopher, and probably felt himself *more* a poet than a philosopher [Colapietro (2009), pp. 555ff].⁵ But he came to see that what he had to say "could be said better without the traditional poetic form, that is, in prose" [Schilpp (1940), p. 598]. Colapietro suggests that this was at least partly because poetry depends so much on the play of sounds, and Santayana's instinct for the diction of the English language was impaired by his late learning of it.⁶ But no doubt this was also because Santayana wanted to convey more than just the "memorable nonsense" that comprises the spontaneous acts of sonorous primitive poetry [LR4 57], and in his own mind at least, this does not necessarily separate what Santayana did from what poets do, even after he stopped writing poetry himself. Even in versified language, "the real poetry of the poem" lies not in the sounds of it syllables, but in "its subject matter, as seen in a vision" [Schilpp (1940) p. 599].

So perhaps it was not the travail of poetic articulation that shifted him towards more expository efforts; perhaps it was what poetry and philosophical prose actually share in common. He could turn to philosophy because "the vision of philosophy is sublime" — something that "every poet, on a small or on a large scale, is always trying to catch." But at the same time Santayana never lost his scept-

ticism over the dialectical net that Philosophy is always attempting to disentangle; and so in *Three Philosophical Poets*, as he characterizes Philosophy's history, Philosophy's most lasting expositors turn out to be the poets [Santayana (2019), p. 6].

"*The vision of philosophy is sublime.*" This reference to sublimity appears to place Santayana within the very tradition he takes some pains to renounce — romanticism. Or at least, here and there he *seems* to renounce it, especially as he singles out a remarkable congeries of disfavored historical examples: the barbarous Teutonic races, the Protestants, Emerson,⁷ the German philosophers, and (importantly for us here) "English poetry" [Santayana (2019), p. 5].⁸ In particular I shall be considering a poem by John Keats, and this will lead us towards what, if I'm right, readers of *Scepticism* should be prepared to look for in Santayana's work.

THE ROMANTIC'S DISCOVERY OF ESSENCE

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
 Round many western islands have I been
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
 That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He star'd at the Pacific — and all his men
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

JOHN KEATS, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816; emphasis added)

I.

If we are to appreciate Santayana's aim in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, we need to grasp the essence of his watershed discovery of essence [SAF ch. ix, xi], and Phillip Beard suggests that Santayana's engagement with sublimity may well be our key [Beard (2022), p. 101]. I think Beard is right, though here I cannot give his rich and provocative essay the discussion it deserves. What I shall do however is follow up on his suggestion that Santayana's engagement with the sublime involves "evolving uses" of terminology, as well as on Santayana's suggestion that "cleaning the windows of one's soul" — the stated intention of *Scepticism and Animal Faith* [SAF vi-vii] — may not require a refracted vision identical in every way to Santayana's own⁹. Accordingly I shall attempt to characterize that discovery with reference to John Keats' familiar poem from the year 1816. This may seem odd, given Santayana's stated antipathy to romanticism and to English poetry in particular [Santayana (2019), p. 5], but it should not surprise us that Santayana's work has a decidedly "romantic" aspect, given his own preoccupation with the sublime. So let's not bear down too hard on this overworked term "romanticism."

It remains nevertheless true that Santayana is no generous friend to a whole hoard of romantic "barbarians" (Walt Whitman, for example) who have simply caved into their feelings in a rush "to reveal and express the elemental as opposed to the conventional" [IRP 108]. Yet it is worth keeping in mind that (in Santayana's telling of it) Whitman's basking in the sunlight of his own perception and his "wallowing" in the stream of his own sensibility [IRP 110] are abuses of a genuinely admirable practice — "the art of intensifying emotions" [IRP 157] — which romanticism helped usher into literary culture. For Santayana, this actually represents a step up from "the poetry of mere sound and virtuosity" [IRP 162], which itself is perhaps half a step up from the poetic vitality of the later Iron Age, rife with raw evocations of God in the whirlwind and the burning

bush. This archaic vitality “asserts itself magnificently; images, like thunder-clouds, seem to cover half the firmament at once.” But — Santayana hastens to add — this shows its gaping poetic limitation: “*its lurid firmament is poor in stars*” [LR4 56-57, emphasis added].

This then brings us to the celestial imagery of Keats’ poem, where the poet, having intuited the true essence of Homer, feels “like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken.” The simile begs to be unpacked, and at one level this is not difficult. We could see Keats as doing exactly what Santayana indicates the poet should be doing, which is “intensifying emotions”¹⁰ through crafting a “medium of communication” that evokes the reader’s intensity of response [LR4 56]. And of course we should not overlook the impact of infinite essence upon sublime sensibility: “The homelessness or even terror which sometimes assaults the mind at the thought of so many stars and planets... is redoubled when we consider the truly remorseless infinity of essence” [RB 143].

But if we prod him further, what did Keats “really” see on first looking into Chapman’s Homer? Not the stars, obviously. But do we have a better answer? If Santayana is right in what he claims — that this would have to be the sublime vision of philosophy that “every poet, on a small or on a large scale, is always trying to catch” [Santayana (2019), p. 7] — then we have the beginnings of an answer. Moreover, I think that ultimately this is what we should be looking for on first looking into *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. This is what we will be exploring as we proceed further on.

As far as the Keats poem is concerned though, it helps to know some context. Any cultivated British schoolboy at the turn of that century would have been acquainted with “the English Homer” — the neoclassical translation by Alexander Pope [Homer (2004)]. But any self-declared romantic of that same era would likely scoff at what Pope accomplished with his translation, which was to “transform Homer into an elegant 18th century gentleman in neat couplets” [Cox (2021)]. The romantics of that day much preferred Chapman’s Renaissance-era translation [Homer (1984)] because it

resisted anything like the “tart and frigid sophism,” the “pyrotechnics of the intellect” that “chills the pleasure we might have taken in the grace of expression.” This latter is a quote not from those romantics but from Santayana himself, indicating just why “Pope is hardly poetical to us” [Santayana (1990), p. 155], and his romantic forerunners would have agreed.

Now an important side comment may be in order here as well. It’s not just simpler articulation itself that would animate both Keats and Santayana. Among the romantics of the day Chapman’s version was felt to be “more natural,” both in its greater affinity to the biological environment and in its reflection of authentic human nature. Leigh Hunt, Keats’ original champion and publisher of the poem, wrote of this in terms of Keats’ “evident aspiration after real nature and original fancy,” inspiring a “closer attention to things as opposed to the seduction of words” [Hunt (1816), p. 761]. And right here with Keats we reach a tricky watershed in our own discussion, which threatens to distract us from our main point, because right here Santayana might be hesitant, suspicious of the “hopelessly foreign quality of the English sort of imagination, and the northern respect for the inner man instead of the southern respect for the great world, for fate, for history, for matter” [Schilpp (1940), p. 598]. From Santayana’s point of view, the early romantics were typically naive in their confidence (no doubt engendered by lavish publicists like Hunt) that a burgeoning consensus of appreciation must have been a sign — a sign that a common object to appreciate had been discovered, that beauty itself was indeed a truth for all to see and perhaps a cause for revolutionary bliss and utopian progress towards a common cause. “If we say that other men should see the beauties we see, it is because we think those beauties are in the object”; but no, insists Santayana in 1896, beauty is a value objectified, not an objectivity apprehended [Santayana (1988), pp. 30-31]. Though by 1904 Santayana’s views on aesthetics change, his usual scepticism about subjective images as natural objectivities will remain [cf. Santayana (1904)].¹¹

Besides, the truth which Chapman's Homer reveals cannot be "beauty" — not largely so, anyway. For would we really say that, apart from skilled versification, the death of Hector or the sorrow of Priam is, in any recognizable sense, "beautiful?" A Nazi or a sadist might, but would we? If not, then what is this sublime truth that Keats is seeing? It may not be easy to say very clearly, but this is why both Santayana and Keats are poetic writers: what they need to say has no other vehicle than indirection, and if the clerics of clarity would pass negative judgment for just that reason, then something of great importance would remain forever unspoken.

Keats (even at the age of twenty-one) understands this, and (he says) Coleridge did not. Coleridge lacked "negative capability" — that is: "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."¹² Coleridge was intent on encompassing a "philosophy in its highest sense as the science of ultimate truths," as long as "we did not bewilder ourselves" with a "mechanical system" that denied the truth of "invisible things" [Coleridge (2004), ch. xii, v]. What this means for Keats is that Coleridge was missing much that a poet should catch just because he was "incapable of remaining content with half knowledge." For a truly great poet "the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" [Keats (1986)]. Later Keats would advise poets to be "passive and receptive" rather than "buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at,"¹³ because otherwise poets would be missing what is awesome about their own experience.

Here I set aside whatever distaste the young Keats might have had over the trajectory of scientific advancement — noting, however, that he was a medically licensed apothecary — and focus instead upon the implications of "negative capability." This points towards an aspect of the sublime that appends Phillip Beard's intricate developmental account of Santayana's sublimity of the realms of being. The aspect I have in mind is not so much about the realms of being as it is about our lives as humans. Santayana addresses this as

well, though this aspect does not feature as prominently as it might. With this, we arrive at the final section of our discussion here.

II.

So then, again, what sublime vision should a reader look for in Santayana's *Scepticism*? Santayana begins his chapter "The Discovery of Essence" [SAF ch ix] with an effusively florid pronouncement: "since doubt arises on reflection, it tends to keep the imagination on the stretch, and lends to the whole spectacle of things a certain immediacy, suavity, and humour. All that is sordid or tragic falls away, and everything acquires a lyric purity, as if the die had not yet been cast and the ominous choice of creation had not been made" [SAF 66]. Here one can almost breathe the dancing daffodils [Wordsworth (2010), pp 265-66]. But have we reached sublimity? Not until we can truly "breathe its pure serene" (Keats on Chapman) and that will take some affective shaping as the book — and Santayana's later work — proceeds. From a narrative point of view, what we have reached is a "watershed" [ch ix] — a "vehicular" turn that will carry us to open spaces further on.

But first: for this we do need to be on board with the narrative itself, and we are poor travelers if we cannot leave the captain to do his own job. Further puzzlements might impede this, and now with his discovery of essence we have reached perhaps the most gnarling puzzlement of Santayana's entire project. So before moving full speed ahead into that realm, we may need to put aside any fears of eventual shipwreck, and not be lured in by the foggy ghost of Richard Butler, beckoning us away from this "most anti-intellectual and most despairing" of doctrines [Butler (1955), p. 51]. What Butler no doubt really meant is that he felt despair over attempting to intellectualize Santayana's thought — and since we won't be intellectualizing it, we need not despair.

Perhaps what we need to do instead is to be satisfied with not getting what we should not be asking for. From one angle, there

does indeed seem to be a mystery about Santayana's ontology — for many seasoned students of Santayana as well as for first-timers — and it concerns the relation of essence to existence. Once we have been brought along with Santayana's ultimate sceptic, we will have admitted that “ideas” do not have existence. And in that regard, essences are infinitely less spatiotemporally fixed than existent substances. But the same essences are infinitely more definite as ontological categories. Essences are self-identical, they are what they are — “eternally,” so to speak.¹⁴ The proof of this (insofar as there is one) is suggested by our use of the grammatical past tense: we have no problem admitting that it would remain true that it rained yesterday (if it did) and this will always be so. But at just this point, perhaps we need to resist the impulse to track “where” these eternal essences can possibly be or “how” they ever got there. Instead perhaps we would do better to acknowledge, with Santayana (and with a certain levity), that the eternity of truth “is but the wake of the ship of time, a furrow which matter must plough upon the face of essence” [SAF 227]. This would of course bring out the indirection of Santayana's prose, to stress that asking for clarity may be asking too much. We might as well ask why anything exists at all (“Existence itself is a surd” [RB 109]), and the fact that there is no ready answer to this does not keep us from undertaking philosophical projects. Nor should it keep us from grasping what Santayana is trying to do in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*.

So then, finally, what is he attempting to do? The poetic philosopher Santayana is not attempting to do epistemology, despite what some commentators may have thought.¹⁵ He tells us [SAF 187] that any philosophy that refuses to base itself on animal faith is not “serious.”¹⁶ The animal faith that *Scepticism* reveals — the second discovery of the book, especially in [SAF ch xi ff] — presupposes rather than proves the existence of an external world, because primal practical intelligence arises prior to any philosophical argument and thus *stands in no need of justification*. Instead it may be best to think of *Scepticism* as something like “a book of [spiritual] exercis-

es” [Levinson (1992), p. 207]. Here we should be cautious, since pressing the analogy with religious meditation practice, as Levinson does, could suggest a didactic structure designed to convert disciples (which seems quite out of keeping). Nonetheless Santayana's *Scepticism* does provide a narrative of spiritual discovery, constructing a Cartesianesque literary fiction that calls on the reader, in imagination, to embark on the sceptical journey. But its dramatic resonance requires engagement from the inside, so to speak — not merely a spectatorial research project. If the exercise has done its job, we thereby gain a more vivid sense of the awakening shocks of the outside world, which reconnects us to our material vitality and restores our “sense of life-at-first-hand” [Levinson (1992), p. 207].

This emphasis on “life-at-first-hand” is crucial. With this in mind, as we look to Santayana's sublime as a key to *Scepticism*, we would be wise to move carefully. As Beard recounts, Santayana over his career has not always been single-minded in his use of “sublime” terminology. “Sublime” is a family-resemblance term, as is “romanticism.” Even as late as *Life of Reason*, Santayana uses “sublimity” to suggest nothing more than the intensity of feeling in a poem — despite that poem's “inchoate phrases.”¹⁷ I do think it is right to view these variations as Beard does — as “prefigurations” of his later work, especially as this intensity is so often linked with “the infinity of essence” [Beard (2022), p. 101, 103].

However, someone less sophisticated than Phillip Beard might be distracted here: Santayana's later work applies the vocabulary of the sublime to contemplation of pure essence itself, performed “under the form of eternity” [SAF 276] and said (by the Indian mystics) to avail “union or ecstasy.”¹⁸ And even though adepts may visit that far land, and though this move might seem a natural advance in festive exploration, the most dedicated and extreme of those practices tend toward self-sacrificial severance from matter altogether [RB 61]. This, as Santayana himself admits, is an improbable full-time career for any human, for it involves a “material lethargy” that eats away at the vital energies of living itself [SAF 273]. (One can well

imagine why bodhisattvas, almost cleverly, delay entry into nirvana until they have helped eradicate *all* human suffering!) Even the spiritual intuition that discriminates essence is a symptom “not of spirit but of [material] substance, of fact, of force, of an unfathomable mystery.”

But then — where does that materiality occur but in our own psyche?

At this point we have reached another watershed. Levinson rightly warns us (on Santayana’s behalf) against turning inward and then projecting what we intuit onto an egotistic agenda: “Romanticism, too, carries its own iniquities. On Santayana’s reading, at any rate, its promise is vitiated by the cults of personality and power it introduces into the West” [Levinson (1992), p. 106]. But the question now is: Are these cults an inevitable consequence of turning more towards our own materiality, rather than lingering in the infinity of essence? Closer to “life-at-first-hand,” what are those inward intuitions but the symptoms of who we, individually, happen to be? It may be that the intuitions themselves are mostly opaque to us. But the essences we intuit do register — however “slightly” [SAF 257] — the subterranean undercurrent of our psychic life. Here “symptoms” [SAF 184, 256] may be symbols of the “inner readjustments in the psyche, not open to gross external observation,” and these we describe both psychologically and poetically in terms of human character. Or they may be symbols of objects “to which the [one’s own] animal is tentatively addressed,” or events “through which he has just labored, or which he is preparing to meet” [SAF 276]. These essences, rendered artfully in classical dramatic form at its most expansive, evoke the “enlightenment by which tragedy is made sublime,” rendering “a glimpse into the ultimate destinies of our will” [Santayana (1990), p. 167, emphasis added].

This then finally suggests our end point here — a sublimity whose form is rather different from the “voluminousness” of infinity *per se*. If sublimity suggests awe, surely the vision of one’s entire life made significantly apparent must count — even perhaps as a

negative exemplar suggesting terror. The romantics of course tended to see these matters from the angle of spiritual metaphysics, as if poetry were a tool to reveal some higher reality. Yet for all their limitations, they did manage to do what Santayana recommended: to attach their “volume of feeling to what is momentous in human life” [LR4 52]. Moreover, even *poetic* philosophers are seeking the truth: “truth must have a subject-matter, it must be the truth about something” [SAF 227-28]. Here I am suggesting that such a truthful vision will have to be a *symbolic* truth, though not so much about essence, and certainly not literally about some projected humanistic drama of our moral intuitions (since these are symbols as well). Rather, the philosophical vision is a symbol of the material life of the individual human person — the dark story about the career of the psyche itself. It will not tell us anything clearly. But it may track something obviously important to us, and it may even indicate something a bit more precise about *what* may be important. And if such a truth seems unacceptably transparent or certain, perhaps we should cultivate a little negative capability of our own.

City University of New York
Academic Literacy and Linguistics, Retired
E-mail: dseipleonline@gmail.com

ABBREVIATIONS

LR4 *The Life of Reason. Book four, Reason in Art*
RB *Realms of Being*
SAF *Scepticism and Animal Faith*

NOTES

¹ Letter to Constable and Co. Ltd., 17 September 1922 [Santayana (2002), p. 86].

² Personal Correspondence, 06-30-2023.

³ Though for a very plausible reading of Santayana's project as Strawsonian descriptive metaphysics, see [Faerna (2014)].

⁴ This is not to say that Moore and his disciples have had no lasting influence. See [Baz (2016)].

⁵ See Santayana (1979).

⁶ Santayana first arrived in Boston as a child of nine, knowing "not one word of English" [Schilpp (1940), p. 5].

⁷ Emerson may be a special case. See [Beard (2019)].

⁸ Santayana is most virulent during the Great War, when he writes (from his safe exile in Britain) that German romantic philosophy exhibits "a deep trust in instinct and destiny... [and] accepts passionately the aims suggested to it by sentiment or impulse. It despises prudence and flouts the understanding." The romantic egotist "turns everything it touches into a part of its own life, personal, spontaneous, sincere, original" [Santayana (1916), pp. 13, 155, 107]. But he also allows for "stages" in romanticism, as perhaps we should when it comes to Santayana's own characterizations of it. (To imagine how Santayana might reply to Howgate -- "Santayana finds himself at odds with the whole body of romantic poetry" [Howgate (1938), p. 143] -- see [Schilpp (1940), pp. 599-600].)

⁹ "I do not ask any one to think in my terms if he prefers others. Let him clean better, if he can, the windows of his soul, that the variety and beauty of the prospect may spread more brightly before him" [SAF, pp vi-vii].

¹⁰ "The poet's art is to a great extent the art of intensifying emotions by assembling the scattered objects that naturally arouse them" [Santayana (1990), p. 157].

¹¹ However, for Santayana's perhaps surprising affinity with Shelley, see [Beard (2022), p. 108].

¹² Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 (?) December 1817 [Keats (1986), pp. 60-61].

¹³ Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 19 February 1818 [Keats (1986), p. 93].

¹⁴ On this, see [RB 505-07] and for a more meticulous argument, see [Sprigge (1983), pp. 30-33].

¹⁵ Richard Butler was hardly alone in thinking such a thing. We've already noted Marten Ten Hoor's comment: "This brilliant volume of Santayana's is his contribution to the solution of the knowledge problem" [Ten Hoor (1923b), p. 653]. On Ten Hoor's claim that Santayana's realism is "gratuitous" and his theory really some kind of "idealistic empiricism," see [Ten Hoor (1923a), pp. 201, 210]. But see also [Cairl (1971)].

¹⁶ What might or might not qualify as philosophical "seriousness" is an interesting question which I cannot take up here. For an earlier discussion of seriousness, see [Seiple (2020)].

¹⁷ "... for sublime poetry what is required is to tap some reservoir of feeling... For this reason again primitive poetry may be sublime: in its inchoate phrases there is affinity to raw passion and their very blindness may serve to bring that passion back" [LR4 61].

¹⁸ For an intriguing response to this temptation based on a distinction between "spirituality" and "spiritual life," see [Brodrick (2015), ch. 6]. For a different view, see [Chastain (2018)].

REFERENCES

- ANONYMOUS. (1923). "Review of George Santayana, Scepticism and Animal Faith." *The North American Review*, 218(812), 135-137.
- BAZ, A. (2016). "Ordinary Language Philosophy." In H. Cappelen, T. S. Gendler, & J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology*. Oxford University Press.
- BEARD, P. (2019). "Grammars of Understanding in Emerson, Santayana, and Cavell." *Overheard in Seville: Bulletin of the Santayana Society*, 37, 105-118.
- (2022). "Santayana's Sublime: The Empyrean of Essence and the Contemplation of Pure Being." *Overheard in Seville: Bulletin of the Santayana Society*, 40, 101-121.
- BRODRICK, M. (2015). *The Ethics of Detachment in Santayana's Philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- BUTLER, R. (1955). *The Mind of Santayana*. Greenwood Press.
- (1960). *The Life and World of George Santayana*. Henry Regnery Company.
- (1986). "George Santayana: Catholic Atheist." *Spirituality Today*, 38(Winter), 319-336.
- CAIRL, D. (1971). *Marten Ten Hoor's Criticism of Santayana's theory of Knowledge* (Dissertation). Southern Illinois University.
- CHASTAIN, D. (2017). "Gifts without Givers: Secular Spirituality and Metaphorical Cognition." *Sophia*, 631-647.

- COLAPIETRO, V. (2009). "A Poet's Philosopher." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 45(4), 551-578.
- COLERIDGE, S. T. (2004). *Biographia Literaria* (T. Riikonen & D. Widger, Eds.; eBook). Project Gutenberg.
- COX, O. (2021). John Keats On First Looking into Chapman's Homer analysis. Youtube.
- FAERNA, Á. M. (2014). "Santayana's Descriptive Metaphysics and 'the Implied Being of Truth'." *Limbo*, 24, 47-60.
- HOMER. (1984). Chapman's Homer: *The Iliad* (N. Allardyce, Ed.; G. Chapman, Trans.). Princeton University Press.
- (2004). *The Iliad of Homer* (A. Pope, Trans.). Pennsylvania State University.
- HOWGATE, G. W. (1935). "Santayana and Humanism." *The Sewanee Review*, 43(1), 49-57. JSTOR.
- HUNT, L. (1816). "Young Poets." *The Examiner*, 466, 761-762.
- KEATS, J. (1986). *Selected Letters of John Keats* (Revised Edition). Harvard University Press.
- LEVINSON, H. S. (1992). *Santayana, Pragmatism, and the Spiritual Life*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- MAUGHAM, W. S. (1967). *A Writer's Notebook*. Penguin Books.
- MOORE, G. E. (1907). "Review of George Santayana, *The Life of Reason, or the Phases of Human Progress*." *International Journal of Ethics*, 17(2), 248-253.
- (1925). "A Defence of Common Sense." In J. H. Muirhead (Ed.), *Contemporary British Philosophy*.
- RUSSELL, B. (1940). "The Philosophy of Santayana." In P. A. Schilpp (Ed.), *The Philosophy of George Santayana* (pp. 451-474). Northwestern University.
- SANTAYANA, G. (1904). "What is Aesthetics?" *The Philosophical Review*, 13(3), 320-327.
- (1916). *Egotism in German Philosophy*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- (1942). *Realms of Being*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- (1955). *Scepticism and Animal Faith: Introduction to a System of Philosophy*. Dover Publications.

- (1979). *The Complete Poems of George Santayana: A Critical Edition* (W. G. Holzberger, Ed.). Associated University Presses.
- (1988). *The Sense of Beauty* (W. G. Holzberger & H. J. Saatkamp Jr, Eds.). The MIT Press.
- (1990). *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (W. G. Holzberger & H. J. Saatkamp Jr, Eds.; Critical Edition). The MIT Press.
- (2002). *The Letters of George Santayana, Book 3: 1921-1927* (W. G. Holzberger, Ed.; Critical Edition). The MIT Press.
- (2015). *The Life of Reason or The Phases of Human Progress. Book four, Reason in Art* (M. S. Wokeck & M. A. Coleman, Eds.; Critical Edition). The MIT Press.
- (2019). *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe* (K. Dawson & D. E. Spiech, Eds.; Critical Edition). The MIT Press.
- SEIPLE, D. (2020). "Moral Seriousness: Socratic Virtue as a Way of Life." *Metaphilosophy*, 51(5), 727-746.
- TEN-HOOR, M. (1923a). "George Santayana's Theory of Knowledge." *The Journal of Philosophy*, 20(8), 197-211.
- (1923b). "Review of George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*." *The Journal of Philosophy*, 20(24), 653-665.
- WORDSWORTH, W. (2010). *William Wordsworth* (S. Gill, Ed.). Oxford University Press.