

Comment on Nancy Ogle's "Santayana and Voice"

Nancy Ogle's engaging essay on voice in the works of George Santayana gives us a close reading of *The Last Puritan* as a demonstration of the significance of utterance and vocal tone in Santayana's thought. The essay traces an interesting expression of the relation of spirit, essence, and matter. As such it reveals concrete details of human experience that underlie Santayana's system—his ontology and method. As a way to appreciate and extend the insights of Ogle's essay I want to relate it to the work Morris Grossman, the Santayana scholar and musician, who, in his essay "Drama and Dialectic" also remarked upon voice in the thought of Santayana—especially the variety of voices that Santayana's method was committed to preserving in the face of sometimes stiflingly authoritative reason.

According to Ogle, voice is pervasive but often overlooked—like essence for Santayana. But voice also is akin to matter. Ogle refers to Santayana's assertion that voice gives form to essence. And through their voices the characters of *The Last Puritan* show their relations as spirits to matter. Voice seems to be an ontological nexus. And this could explain the philosophical import Grossman finds in voice because the spiritual activity of philosophy cannot ignore the variety of essence and the force of material flux.

Grossman was concerned with how to regard all of the voices we notice after we become aware of them. He discussed two broad ways: drama and dialectic. Drama is the more or less deliberately controlled presentation of contrary viewpoints. Dialectic is the logical elaboration of viewpoint and consideration of statements entailed with respect to consistency (Grossman 216–17). Dialectic is concerned with the elimination of contradictions by surprising them when they arise. Drama is concerned with the domestication of contraries to allow for their co-existence.

Grossman thought the best philosophers chose wisely between drama and dialectic in their philosophical expression. Like Ogle, Grossman thought Santayana followed an example set by Plato; in this case, in the use of drama and dialectic. Grossman cited an essay by Santayana called "The Search for the True Plato" (Santayana, *The Idler and His Works* 54–73), in which Santayana observed that it is not difficult conceiving that Plato, instead of moving definitely and finally from one style (drama or dialectic) to another, "should have tapped his various interests at various times," adapting expression to theme. Plato, according to Santayana, "knew the limitations of art and the often ambiguous complexities of dialectic" (quoted in Grossman 213). Grossman thought the same of Santayana. Santayana recognized that dialectic can silence contrary viewpoints, while excessive drama in trying to make room for every voice can lead to confusion.

Ogle seems to sense the same tension when she writes of the different voices heard in *The Last Puritan* that "the assertions of the various characters are intended to express points of view which may not be philosophically arguable" (Ogle 36). This seems to disqualify the attempt to preserve various voices as philosophical. But if voice gives form to essence, then voice, by leading us into the realm of discourse and contradiction, also ushers us into the realm of essence, which is, of course, the

realm of dialectic. Ogle's response is to attend to each voice for what it reveals about experience, in this case, about experience as Santayana articulated it in his philosophy.

So Ogle's essay is, I think, an example of what Grossman had in mind when he described philosophical method inspired by Santayana as "openness and a continued retention of the several strains of achievement that make up the tradition" (Grossman 227).

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References

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