An Old Philosopher in Rome: George Santayana and his Visitors

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Rome after the Second World War presented something of an anomaly. Of all the traditional capitals of European civilization it was the least affected by the conflict. Because of the Pope's presence, it had not been bombed, and it had escaped the heavy fighting in the campaigns to the south. Indeed, so easily was it taken that one film was to show the Eternal City captured by a single jeep. Italy was also faster to recover than any of the other combatants. American money flooded into the country, and political life was quickly under way again. All this made it a good place for visitors, a relative bright spot amidst a shattered landscape. Harold Acton, the English historian who went there in 1948, remarked that "After the First World War American writers and artists had migrated to Paris: now they pitched upon Rome."[1] Among those who visited Rome or lived there for a period after the war were Edmund Wilson, Gore Vidal, Tennessee Williams, Frederic Prokosch, Daniel Cory, Alfred Kazin, Samuel Barber, Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick (slightly later), as well as Acton himself and a host of less well-known figures.[2] Many were entertained by Lawrence and Babel Roberts, under whose influence "the Roman Academy became an international rendezvous for artists and intellectuals."[3] While they were there, a large proportion of these writers made a pilgrimage to the Convent of the Blue Sisters, where since 1941

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[1] Harold Acton, *More Memoirs of an Aesthete* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 211.

[2] Others include Robert Schneider, John Grueson, Michael and Anne Rosse, T. V. Smith, and Bruno Lind. Smith (who was a philosopher in civilian life) appears from one of Santayana's letters to have visited him, but does not mention it in his memoirs. Lind's account will be mentioned briefly.

[3] Acton, p. 211.

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George Santayana had been living in a single room. And most of them, amidst the turmoil of Italy, left an account of their visit to the old philosopher, a living icon of serenity in the Eternal City and yet, it seemed, an American.[4] These accounts, which range from major poems to brief mentions in memoirs, constitute a remarkable literary remainder, a "corpus" which can be assembled around the compelling but enigmatic figure who was, in his old age, the subject of so much veneration.

Santayana had, of course, always been an important figure in American letters. His influence was founded both on his years at Harvard from 1880 to 1912, where he taught or knew, among others, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Walter Lippmann, Conrad Aiken, the essayist John Hall Wheelock, the philosopher Horace Kallen, and also on the books he began to write in the latter stages of his Harvard career, and continued to write in Europe after 1912. He has been seen by at least one writer as a crucial philosophical and aesthetic influence on modernism, though it is difficult to say how much his work was a direct influence and how much this is a matter of congruences of thought.[5] This article will be concerned, however, less with Santayana's beliefs than with the idea of Santayana, the way in which his presence as a former Harvard philosopher in Europe was perceived, and the extraordinary way in which he figures as a symbol in American literature after the war.

He had come to live in Rome in 1925, after some twelve years of peripetaic existence in England and Europe. The beginnings of the legend which came to surround him can be seen in a number of works written him in the 1930s. Of these, Cyril Clemens's belle-lettristic essay for the Mark Twain Society, *An American Philosopher in Exile* (1937), is perhaps the most unashamedly uninterested in Santayana's work.[6] It includes a little gossip about "essences" set in what is mainly an account of Santayana's domicile in Rome, a description of his "monk-like" existence and his exile from the American academies. It is the style of the man that matters, and indeed, in a number of works on Santayana both then and later it is often his merit as a stylist rather than the content of his philosophy which attracts the most enthusiasm. This, combined with his indefatigable energy, creates the image of him as a writing machine, an instrument of culture with a

[4] Santayana remained a Spanish citizen all his life, but was considered enough of an American to make it prudent for him to keep quiet in wartime Rome. His Spanish was bad enough to dissuade him from returning there in his later years.

[5] See Louis Hughson, *Thresholds of Reality: George Santayana and Modernist Poetics* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikar Press, 1977).

[6] Cyril Clemens, *An American Philosopher in Exile* (Webster Groves, Missouri: International Mark Twain Society, 1937).

relatively uniform output. Santayana was often forced to protest against those who saw no development in his career.[7]

Santayana continued to live in hotels in Rome, apart from the occasional foray to other Italian cities, until 1941. In October of that year he reported that he was in poor health – "not definitely ill, but old and delicate" – and that he was moving into the Convent of the Blue Sisters (officially "The Little Company of Mary") at Santo Stefano Rotondo.[8] It was, he commented a few days after moving in, like coming home to the simplicity of the life he remembered in Avila.[9] Shortly after this the curtain fell, and his correspondence ceased for three years. During the war he became increasingly dependent upon the sisters, partly because of the financial problems which the war had created, partly because of habituation and old age. He kept writing steadily, however: his memoirs, a book on the Bible, and the political treatise *Dominations and Powers*, which he was to complete in 1950.[10] One of his manuscripts was, through a piece of international literary cloak-and-dagger work, smuggled out via the Vatican and Ireland for publication in the USA.[11] He lived quietly in these years, but his existence was known to a number of intellectuals. The closest of these, physically at least, was Ezra Pound, and it is with Pound and Santayana that the account properly beings.

Pound met Santayana in Venice on 4 January 1940. Earlier he had tried to arrange a meeting through Santayana's friend and factotum Daniel Cory, but had been gently rebuffed by Santayana, who found Pound's work obscure and who was in any case busy in Rome.[12] Pound seemed to be distantly aware of this; writing to Eliot in April 1938 he suggested that Cory review his *Guide to Kulchur* "over a pussydonym cause Santy Yanner would sack him if he said anything good about the book."[13] But this seems partly to have been awe over a figure whom Pound associated with the masters of his youth – the poets of the 1890s whom he quotes Santayana as calling "the lost legion" in "Canto 80" – and on meeting him Pound quickly saw him as a potential hero.[14] He wrote to Eliot: "Had a lot of

[7] See Daniel Cory, *Santayana: The Later Years* (New York: Braziller, 1963), p. 301.

[8] *The Letters of George Santayana*, ed. Daniel Cory (London: Constable, 1955), p. 349; hereafter cited as *Letters*.

[9] Ibid., p. 350.

[10] George Santayana, *Dominations and Powers* (New York: Scribner's, 1951).

[11] See Cory, p. 245. The plot was assisted by Padraic Colum.

[12] Cory, p. 228; Noel Stock, *The Life of Ezra Pound* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 372–74.

[13] *The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907–1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p. 402.

[14] *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 495. Subsequent references will be included in the text, using the standard *Paideuma* notation: 80.495 for this reference.

jaw with Geo. Santayana in Venice, and like him. Never met anyone who seems to me to fake less. In fact, I give him a clean bill."[15] A certain amount of correspondence followed. A remark of Santayana's had inspired Pound to concoct a scheme to set up a curriculum – an extended *Guide* – which would inspire future generations, and represent the true tradition. "We are regarded," he wrote to Eliot, "as the three Europeans of American origins or what not, or at any rate those who got out alive."[16] Eliot in return commented that Santayana would add "just that spot of respectability that makes the book queer."[17] Here, not for the last time, Santayana was considered a kind of a token, a central philosopher who could be used conveniently to balance Europe and America.

Pound's letter to Santayana about the "Ideal University" project produced another polite refusal. But Pound continued to use Santayana's name in his radio broadcasts, usually as an example of the way in which the best in the American tradition had been forced into exile. He described his manuscripts as denied to their American audience; then, when they were spirited out, the same manuscripts became evidence of the way in which cultural links existed despite the blockade.[18] After Pound's capture, they exchanged messages through an intermediary. More importantly, Pound incorporated Santayana into the *Cantos*, using the philosopher's comments to further his own ideas. As Stock points out in his biography of Pound, detailing the sometimes comic dealings between the patient Santayana and the unstoppable Pound, Pound first saw Santayana as a source of philosophical ideas for what he called then his "Paradisio," the last and affirmative section of the *Cantos* which was to draw on the best minds of East and West.[19] The first of those concerned the new curriculum. All Santayana had said, in fact, was that it did not matter what books were read, so long as they were held in common: he defended, that is, the idea of a canon rather than a programme for a new one.[20] The second was a remark about essential powers in nature, which resulted in Pound's use of Santayana at two points in the *Cantos* as the source (and authority) for pronouncements on the intelligence latent in nature. The one most

[15] *Letters of Ezra Pound*, p. 432.
[16] Ibid., p. 436.
[17] Eliot as quoted by Pound in his letter of 6 Feb. 1940 to Santayana, Ibid., p. 436.
[18] *"Ezra Pound Speaking": Radio Speeches of World War II*, ed. L. W. Doob (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), pp. 114, 374.
[19] Stock, pp. 372, 376.
[20] Stock, p. 374.

often discussed, as a more or less creative misunderstanding, is in "Canto 95":

'O World!'
said Mr Beddoes.
'Something *there.*'
sd/Santayana [95.646]

Less overt is Santayana's earlier appearance as one of the defenders of the hidden tradition in "Canto 87":

In nature are signatures
needing no verbal tradition,
oak leaf never met plane leaf. John Heydon.
Σελλοί sleep there on the ground
And old Jarge held there was a tradition,
that was not mere epistemology.
[87.573]

Santayana here is one of a sweeping survey in which Mencius, the English Platonist Heydon, and "Mohamedans," are all enlisted as subscribers to what is essentially the "ideogramic method." The third of Santayana's comments which Pound took up was an anecdote about Henry Adams. Santayana's version of the story was that Adams had said to him that he doubted the teachability of history in general.[21] Pound pounced upon the remark, repeated it to his correspondents, and made it an attack on Harvard in particular; and thus on the narrow American learning which he detested, at its source:

Said Mr Adams, of the education,
Teach? at Harvard?
Teach? It cannot be done.
[74.433]

Santayana represents an alternative learning, one which retains its European roots. It is thus important for Pound not only that Santayana should have left his American university to return to Europe, but that he should have taken to America, and kept from the age of eight, the accents and mark of Europe, never to be lost:

George Santayana arriving in the port of Boston
and kept to the end of his life that faint *thethear*
of the Spaniard
as a grace quasi imperceptable
[81.519]

[21] Santayana's letter to Pound, 7 March 1939; quoted by Stock, p. 374 (not collected in *Letters*). Santayana's version of the story can also be found in his *Persons and Places: The Background of My Life* (New York: Scribner's, 1944), p. 234.

In a final reference in the *Cantos*, Santayana provides an obscure remark on the grand affairs of twentieth century Europe: "'More' said Santayana 'for Rome than three Napoleons."' [100.717]. Santayana is thus assimilated into the *Cantos* as an American writer and critic of the 1890s, as a critic of Harvard, as a philosopher, and as a European who returned to his origins; in total a parallel or a reflection of Pound's own development. This status is achieved at the cost of some distortion of the philosopher's real words and beliefs. It is ironical that one of Santayana's disagreements with Pound in his letters was over the latter's yoking together of particulars without any "latent genetic connection" (that he could discern).[22] In objecting to Pound's tendency to turn things and people into the building-blocks of his argument, into tokens, Santayana was anticipating his own fate in the hands of the poet.

The American forces entered Rome on 4 June 1944. Almost immediately, Santayana began to receive a flood of visits from reporters and servicemen, including a grand-nephew, various academics in uniform, and the merely curious. An article in *Life* on 7 August 1944, had the arresting caption "SANTAYANA: The US Army in Rome discovers the last puritan aloof, serene," and carried an almost full-page photograph of Santayana reading in a park. In the text, Santayana's credentials as an American are established (without mention of the fact that he is a Spanish national), but the main emphasis of the article is on the fact that this man "discovered" in the heart of the conflict is not *of* it:

> The man furtherest removed from the war in unquestionably the old gentleman below, whom the US Army found in Rome June 11 in an island of pure meditation. He is George Santayana, 80, the world-famous philosopher who left his professor's chair at Harvard in 1911 and has not returned to the US since...Reporters found him thin and well, disturbed by failing memory and hearing. Of communism and fascism, he said, "Doubtless there are good things in both." Of war, he knew nothing. Said he: "I live in the eternal."[23]

Such sentiments must have seemed quixotic to most of *Life's* readers, especially those in the forces, but they reinforce the idea of "aloofness" which made Santayana so unique a point of reference. He had, the writer adds, been working on various books throughout the war. By December, Santayana reported that he had been "photographed and interviewed to

[22] Santayana's letter to Pound, 20 January 1940; quoted by Stock, p. 373 (not collected in *Letters*). Santayana's wariness of Pound continued in subsequent exchanges: see *Letters*, p. 393; and Santayana's response to a Pound letter in 1951 as reported by Bruno Lind in his *Vagabond Scholar: A Venture into the Privacy of George Santayana* (New York: Bridgehead Books, 1962), pp. 65–66.

[23] *Life*, 7 Aug. 1944, p. 30.

exhaustion."[24] The visits continued. A year later he commented that "People, strangers, now flock to look at me as if I were the oldest inhabitant of the village."[25] It was to be that way for the rest of his life.

One of the servicemen who visited Santayana was an unidentified officer who seems to have insisted that he sign a number of copies of his most recent work with inscriptions to various notables. They included Edmund Wilson, who eventually received it in New York with "surprise and pleasure."[26] He wrote a review of the book – the second volume of Santayana's memoirs, *The Middle Span* (1945) – which appeared in *The New Yorker* on 5 May 1945.[27] Wilson describes Santayana in the review as a "unique witness" of American and European culture: unique because of his "intellectual vitality" in old age, and because he shows "the advantage of being uprooted." His life is Socratic in its purity: "*Persons and Places* is an autobiography with a metaphysical plot." Wilson concludes by placing Santayana in the context of the times: "he has furnished one of the highest of flexible international intelligence in a period that needs it badly."

As it happened, Wilson was about to embark on a tour of Europe for *The New Yorker* even as he wrote this. He visited England briefly, finding it depressing and war-weary, and was glad to move on to an Italy which seemed surprisingly buoyant, despite the devastation. Soon after he arrived he went to see Santayana, with the idea of writing an article on him. The interview began in considerable confusion over the provenance of the book that had been sent to Wilson, but as his account unfolds it becomes clear that Santayana's isolation – the fact that he had not heard of the famous Edmund Wilson – is a part of his attraction. The old man is like an embodied book: "All he felt he had to know about me in order to talk of himself was that I was one of his readers."[28] Or rather, he is like

[24] *Letters*, p. 352.

[25] Ibid., p. 357.

[26] Edmund Wilson, *Europe Without Baedeker: Sketches Among the Ruins of Italy, Greece, and England* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1948), p. 28. Wilson's account of his visit to Santayana exists in three published versions. The first is that in his notebooks, published as *The Forties*, ed. Leon Edel (New York; Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1983), pp. 55–62. Much of the material there was incorporated into the article he subsequently wrote, entitled "A Reporter at Large: Santayana at the Convent of the Blue Nuns," *The New Yorker*, 6 April 1946, pp. 55–62. The article was subsequently republished as Chapter 2 of *Europe Without Baedeker*, with a short introductory section but otherwise almost unaltered. I will quote from this last, more accessible source.

[27] Edmund Wilson, "Indian Summer of George Santayana," *The New Yorker*, 5 May 1945, pp. 83–85. Wilson had also reviewed *Persons and Places* for *The New Yorker*, on 4 Jan. 1944.

[28] Wilson, *Europe Without Baedeker*, p. 30.

a whole library. Here, as with so many of the other writers who dealt with Santayana in this period, it is his international status that is emphasised. Wilson had just written a controversial essay on the English (which derived topicality from war-time rivalries), and he could see Santayana as part of an American tradition set against "Anglo-Saxon domination": "he was perhaps the most international – or, better, the most super-national – personality I had ever met."[29] Hidden in the convent, in the heart of Europe, Santayana has escaped the turmoil around him and maintained the values which others have lost: "I was struck by the sensitive feeling in his relations with other people and by the contrasting or compensating detachment with which he seemed to have passed the cities in review and chosen the one that fitted him him best."[30] Santayana has a unique perspective on the dark mysteries of history which surround him; he seems, in an extended passage, almost to be History itself, or the perspective of History:

> It was at the same time respect-inspiring and disturbing to one's wartime preoccupations to find this little husk of a man, at once so ascetic and so cheerful, sustaining at eighty-one so steady an intellectual energy, inhabiting a convent cell, among the layers of historical debris that composed the substance of Rome, intact and unmoved by the tides of invasion and revolution that had been brawling back and forth around him; and when he talked about these outside occurrences, it was as if he attached them to history: the war was an event like another which would presently belong to the past.[31]

It is interesting to speculate whether Wallace Stevens read this article, so closely does it approximate to the themes of "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" at this and other points. Wilson, however, was well aware of the suggestive nature of Santayana's willingness to speak to all without seemingly involving himself or losing his edge of irony. He refers to Santayana as acting "a classic role: that of the sage," and suggested that the reason for this is a self-containment like that of the work of art: the philosopher has created his "system" and rests within it. Santayana does not need to embroil himself in Rome because he is at the fount of wisdom already. In an extraordinarily virtuoso final paragraph, Wilson describes the old philosopher (or poet, since he suggests that Santayana has finally

[29] Ibid., p. 30. The essay, "Notes on London at the End of the War," forms the first chapter of the book, pp. 1–25.

[30] Ibid., p. 31.

[31] Ibid., p. 32. It is hard not to see in this passage and the one quoted subsequently echoes of Pater's description of Rome in chapter 11, "The Most Religious City in the World," of *Marius the Epicurean* (London: Macmillan, 1885).

become that) in terms of that archetypal Romantic image, the sea-shell. He is

> an iridescent integument, the manners of all the societies in which he had sojourned awhile supplying him with pictures and phrases; a shell of faded skin and frail bone, in which the power of intellect, the colours of imagination, still burned and gave out, through his books and his gentle-voiced conversation, their steady pulsations and rays, of which the intensity seems ever to increase as the generator is more worn by use... While others, in these years of the war, have been shaken by the downfall of moralities or have shuddered under the impact of disaster while they have been following the conflict with excitement, his glass has scarcely clouded or brightened; but the intelligence which has persisted in him has been that of the civilized human race...[32]

Wilson admired Santayana greatly, though he knew him as an essayist and writer of memoirs rather than as a philosopher. He sees him, however, as a distant phenomenon: the source of an article, a perspective on the world, but not closely related to the living moment (his letters from Rome are full of excitement about the work of Marxist writer Ignazio Silone, but do not mention the visit to Santayana). His article suggests that the old philosopher was there to signify, to stand for a confluence of traditions (he is described both as a blank and a transparency), rather than existing in any real sense.

After Wilson's departure, Santayana continued to receive a steady trickle of visitors. Europe was still difficult for travellers – books did not get through to Santayana regularly until early 1946, and Daniel Cory could not get to Rome until late 1947 – so it was not until 1948 that the American colony mentioned in the opening paragraphs began to establish itself. It consisted in particular of a number of young artists shaking off the shadows of war: Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Frederic Prokosch, the composer Samuel Barber and others mixed with visiting academics and the Italian cultural figures of the time, from Visconti to Mario Praz. The streets were lively, free of traffic – apart from the sexual kind, which was abundant – and as Williams (who achieved a certain notoriety in Rome) remarked, "in those days an Americano could get away with a whole lot."[33] Williams was taken to see Santayana by Vidal. He had never heard of the philosopher before, but he was much impressed by the dignity and wisdom of the old man, and later wrote that he had been reminded of his

[32] Ibid., p. 37.

[33] Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. 146. See also Dakin Williams and Shepherd Mead, *Tennessee Williams: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Arbour House, 1983), pp. 155–57.

beloved grandfather.[34] Vidal has written a number of acute sketches of life in Rome in 1948 (all part of articles on other subjects), and in each of them he mentions the vivid impression his visits to Santayana made on him. Like so many of the others, he managed to find in them some unique quality which Santayana seemingly shared with him. The older man is characterised as sharp and quick, and speaking very much in the manner of a Vidal:

"Have you met my young *new* friend Robert Lowell?" I said no. "He will have a difficult life. To be a Lowell. From Boston. A Catholic *convert*." The black eyes shone with lively malice. "And a poet, too! Oh dear. Now tell me who is a Mr Edmund Wilson?"[35]

Vidal also recalls Williams commenting on Santayana's reference to the young men whom he used to have as secretaries in earlier life. Implicitly, the batchelor Santayana is present as a lively old homosexual, tossing his copy of Toynbee into the rubbish with a comment that "the footnotes are not entirely worthless," and ending with a glance with which the compact is sealed:

Santayana signed a copy of *The Middle Span* for me; he wrote "from" before his name. "I almost never do that," he said. An appraising look. "You look younger than you are because your head is somewhat small in proportion to your body." That was in 1948...[36]

Frederic Prokosch also visited the cell at Santo Stefano Rotondo, and left in his recent *Voices: A Memoir* a more straightforwardly adulatory account of Santayana, describing him as one of the three most intelligent men he ever met (the other prize winners were Malraux and Thomas Mann). His interview seems to reveal more of Santayana than any of the others, perhaps only because there is more recorded speech (Prokosch claims to have near-perfect recall), but the reader can sense Santayana almost acting it up for his aesthetic interviewer, becoming vatic and apocalytpic in his musings on dreams, history, and the future of European civilization. He suggests that "the life of the artist is subsidary to his art," and exemplifies that in his behaviour so that Prokosch too seems to feel that he is talking to a living work of art, impressed by the philosopher's

[34] Williams, pp. 146–47.

[35] Gore Vidal, *Matters of Fact and of Fiction: Essays 1973–1976* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 40. This essay, "Calvino's Novels," and the other dealing with Santayana, "Some Memories of the Glorious Bird," both originally appeared in *The New York Review of Books*.

[36] Ibid., p. 40.

"elegant impersonality."[37] But again, the topics (dreams, Europe) are those which the context shows to be the visitor's, and in Santayana Prokosch seems to have found a personality – watchful, impenetrable – suspiciously like his own.

Vidal, in fact, noticed the difference between his memory of Santayana and Prokosch's in an extended review of *Voices* in *The New York Review of Books*. Although he is fascinated by the fact that he and Prokosch were, unknown to each other, visiting Santayana turn and turn about, the difference between Prokosch's apocalyptic seer and his own brisk ironist seems unbelievable to him. "I fear that Santayana was a stoic like me, and I could not imagine him cold with terror at the thought of civilization's end. Even at eighty-five, the clear black eyes shone as bright and as hard as obsidian."[38] Prokosch heard a different "Santayana voice," he suggests, as though they had been listening to the Delphic oracle; and it is perhaps significant that here as elsewhere the writer makes no attempt to refer to Santayana's own late writings in order to establish what he was really like. A final touch in this piece is Vidal's recollection of Santayana's reply to his comment on "the speed with which literary reputations were lost in Amnesia": "'It would be insufferable,' he said swiftly, 'if they were not.'"[39] It is almost as if Santayana were condoning the openness of his own reputation, its infection with the germs of amnesia.

Prokosch noticed two books on Santayana's table. One of them was a volume of poetry by Robert Lowell, whose accomplishments included that of being the historian, in prose and poetry, of the New England literary tradition. It seems almost inevitable that the two should meet, and it was to be a meeting which aroused strong feelings on the part of both men. Lowell knew Santayana's works, of course, and he had in fact compared Wallace Stevens to Santayana in a review in *The Nation* on 5 April 1947 (linking both writers rather disparagingly to elitist notions of art).[40] On 26 July of the same year Santayana wrote to a correspondent that a copy of Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) had arrived, and that he found it remarkable.[41] He was under the impression that its author was in Istanbul, as it had (mysteriously) come from the US Embassy there. Lowell was at the time accepting the Library of Congress job that had been offered to him after his wartime struggle with the draft, but Santayana's letter of

[37] Frederic Prokosch, *Voices: A Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), pp. 183–84.
[38] Gore Vidal, "The Collector," *The New York Review of Books*, 12 May 1983, p. 18.
[39] Ibid., p. 20.
[40] Robert Lowell, "Imagination and Reality," *The Nation*, 5 April 1947, pp. 400–02.
[41] Santayana, *Letters*, p. 366.

thanks finally reached him, and he wrote back to the former Bostonian that his praise had brought "tears of joy" to him.[42] He also explained more fully who he was. Santayana did indeed admire his work, both because it mediated between the Catholicism and New England Puritanism which had been the range of Santayana's own experience; and perhaps more fundamentally because it reminded him, he said, of his childhood in Boston. He mentioned Lowell frequently in his letters, as well as to his visitors, characteristically modifying his description to suit the tastes of each: to Bruno Lind he described Lowell as "another Rimbaud", and in letters to his friend Daniel Cory he expressed ambivalence about what he could expect from this obviously rather wild young poet.[43] He invited Lowell to visit him as early as 1949 and seems to have been expecting his arrival that year, though it was not until 1950 that Lowell finally left the USA on what was supposed to be "a frugal year abroad," to arrive in Italy on 10 October with his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick. The Lowells visited Rome briefly in October (where the first meeting of the two famous Bostonians took place) before taking up semi-permanent residence in Florence. Lowell visited the convent cell often when in Rome, and his devotion to Santayana was, according to Cory, "genuine and touching."[44] Santayana left few clues about how he responded to Lowell in person, though he did go on to memorize some of the poetry. In mid-1951 the Lowells moved off, to settle eventually in Amsterdam, and it was only in October 1952, after one of Lowell's mental breakdowns in Salzburg, that they finally arrived back in Rome. Santayana had died some three weeks earlier.

Lowell, recuperating and now writing again after a long barren period, and in a "new style," seems to have begun a poem on Santayana almost immediately. He also made a somewhat erratic transcription of "Ombron and Ambra," the poem on which Santayana had been working at the time of his death.[45] In the poem as he wrote it then, the main focus is on Santayana's relationship to the Church:

> The spirit giveth life; will letters kill
> The calm eccentric, if by heaven's will

[42] Lowell as quoted by Santayana in a letter to Cory, *The Later Years*, p. 282. Santayana's letter to Lowell, dated 25 July 1947, is in the Houghton Library, and is quoted by Ian Hamilton in *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p. 171.

[43] Lind, *Vagabond Scholar*, p. 41.

[44] Cory, p. 307.

[45] See *The Complete Poems of George Santayana: A Critical Edition*, ed. William G. Holzberger (London: Associated University Presses, 1979), p. 657. Santayana's holograph was extremely difficult to read in his last few months.

He found the Church too good to be believed?
"You'll die," the Sisters answer, "as you lived."[46]

Two versions of this poem were published in 1953. Both are relatively short, and cast partly as soliliquies in which Santayana reflects on his rejection of the Church, and then is described as briding the gap between a dry empiricism and unsupportable faith by a leap into his doctrine of essences – a modern Curtius. He reconciles the extremes of Puritan fanaticism and a clarity of intellect which Lowell associated with Europe, avoiding the sterile dogmatism of Paul but fending off the "rash Texan Thomist, sent to task/Your old Franciscan wrapper's mogul mask..."[47] In this, it seems to reinforce Lowell's own new direction, away from a tight, well-organized verse towards his looser later style. Even the nuns are "too pragmatical/To nurse illusion," as if they represented the Catholic Church accepting Lowell's own swerve away from its canons, and from the metaphysical tradition in poetry.

If the first version is suggestive in terms of the turning point in Lowell's career in 1953, the later version published in *Life Studies* (1959) can be read in the elegaic mood of that volume. Santayana now appears as a New England sage, and in particular as an example of the *ars moriendi*, described in a way that anticipates the end of Lowell's own career. The poem has been almost entirely rewritten, and cast as an elegy. Its title has been altered from the local "Santayana's Farewell to His Nurses" to the more formal "For George Santayana, 1863–1952." It opens with Santayana located in a historical perspective rather than soliloquising, and treated both more distantly and with more authorial control in the first two stanzas. His ideas are mentioned only in passing on to his death. The second stanza is, apart from its final line, entirely new material:

Lying outside the consecrated ground
forever now, you smile
like Ser Brunetto running for the green
cloth at Verona – not like one
who loses, but like one who'd won...
as if your long pursuit of Socrates'
demon, main-slaying Alcibiades,

[46] Robert Lowell, "Santayana's Farewell to His Nurses," *Perspective*, **3** (Spring 1953), 67; reprinted in Robert Lowell, *Poesie 1943–1952*, A cura di Rolando Anzilotti (Florence: Edizioni Fussi, 1955), p. 72. A different version of the poem, possibly predating this one since it is longer and less polished, was included as part of the poetic sequence "Beyond the Alps," *Kenyon Review*, **15** (1953), 398–401. It was to this version that Lowell returned when rewriting the poem for *Life Studies*.

[47] "Beyond the Alps," p. 400.

the demon of philosophy, at last had changed
those fleeting virgins into friendly laurel trees
at *Santo Stefano Rotondo*, when you died
near ninety,
still unbelieving, unconfessed and unreceived,
true to your boyish shyness of the Bride.[48]

The emphasis here is on the idealized consummation of the old poet; his faithfulness to his ideals (though ironically Santayana had said that he would accept the Catholic rites if the nuns insisted).[49] The final stanza is reworked from the beginning of the more diffuse of the earlier versions, now made the poem's climax, and uses the legend of St. Jerome to present a picture of Santayana working his way to the end, a secular saint who sheds the blood of the artist's *via dolorosa*:

Old trooper. I see your child's red crayon pass,
bleeding deletions on the galleys you hold
under your throbbing magnifying glass,
that worn arena, where the whirling sand
and broken-hearted lions lick your hand
refined by bile as yellow as a lump of gold.

This is a description of Santayana revising *The Life of Reason* (5 vols., 1905–06) for Scribner's, a task which took a good part of his last few years. But it is also a remarkable portrait of the poet who defines himself in his work, and fights a constant battle with the materials of his craft, even at the expense of his life. As such, it anticipates Lowell's own last years: his constant revisions, his seeming martyrdom to his craft, his attempts to refine the often stomach-wrenching contents of his life into a purer substance. Santayana, alone in his cell, reconciles the demands of a vocation with the turbulence of ordinary life, and his *askesis* is thus a version of the ideal poetic state. And the poem as a whole allows Lowell to resolve for a moment the tension between the struggle for form and the pressure of life itself. In that pursuit of the ideal in which Lowell seemed constantly to be falling behind, Santayana achieves the legendary metamorphic power of the alchemist, and for a moment he has won a victory over life, even if it is the qualified victory of "as if."

Elizabeth Hardwick also wrote an essay based on her time with Lowell in Italy. The article is on Bernard Berenson rather than on Santayana as the representative American in exile, but her view of Berenson is half damning: he is presented almost as a version of James' Gilbert Osmond,

[48] Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), pp. 65–66.
[49] Cory, pp. 304–05.

"a sort of foreign prince" leading a "rich and elaborate social life" as well as pursuing his artistic aims (Santayana's opinion of Berenson was rather similar: he disliked his "social and intellectual ambition").[50] Running throughout the article is a comparison of Berenson with his former school-mate at the Boston Latin School. The contrast between the two seemed inevitable for Americans in Italy at the time. Alfred Kazin was one of the few who preferred Berenson, having somehow gained the impression that Santayana was anti-semitic and illiberal.[51] This is Hardwick's version:

> A man may exile himself for isolation – Santayana in his convent in Rome – for the freedom of solitude, the purity of the release from useless obligations and conventions, or he may exile himself from America, at least, for the freedom of hospitality, the enlargement of possibilities. You may be a hermit or an innkeeper.[52]

Italy, she suggests, is a "refuge" for Santayana, a place for him to work in, though she sees the same buried hurts at America's treatment of him that she saw in Berenson. Little of this hurt can be seen in Santayana's letters: he remained grateful for his popularity in America, even while poking fun at the Boston elite, so this is perhaps another instance of the need to perceive strong links between this determined internationalist and the country in which he had spent four decades. Berenson saved desperately to leave his villa and its contents to Harvard. Such an action would have been entirely atypical of Santayana, despite the nostalgia which Lowell's poetry had engendered.

The final and perhaps the most important assessor of Santayana's last years never visited him in Rome, or even in Europe. Wallace Stevens had last seen Santayana, so far as we know, during his years at Harvard around the turn of the century, where they had known each other and exchanged sonnets. But Stevens had in his own distant and episodic fashion remained aware of Santayana. He quotes, for example, the Santayana sonnet beginning "I would that I might forget that I am I" in a letter of 1909, a phrase which might be seen as one of the sources of the great affirmation of 1942, "I have not but I am and as I am I am."[53] In 1940, contemplating the Poetry Chair which his friend Henry Church wanted to set up, he suggested Santayana as an "illustration" of the type of incumbent it should

[50] Elizabeth Hardwick, *A View of My Own: Essays in Literature and Society* (London: Heinemann, 1964), pp. 205–06; Santayana, *Letters*, pp. 341–2. Hardwick's essay originally appeared in the *Partisan Review*.

[51] Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978), pp. 165, 203.

[52] Hardwick, p. 208.

[53] *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, selected and ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 146.

have, though he adds that there is too much of the philosopher in him.[54] The poetry professorship was one of the incarnations of Stevens' idea of the "theorist" who unites art and life. In his 1948 essay "Effects of Analogy" Stevens describes an old man who returns to his village, a man for whom "reality is enough," but who nevertheless dwells "in an analogy," in a state of being which has to be imagined. The idea that Santayana's life is just such a metaphor is immediately apparent in moving from the (unspecified) old man of "Effects of Analogy" to Santayana as he appears in the other essay of 1948, "Imagination as Value." He is the man who has come home to the most spiritual of all villages, happy in the world of his art:

> There can be lives, nevertheless, which exist by the deliberate choice of those that live them. To use a single illustration: it may be assumed that the life of Professor Santayana is a life in which the function of the imagination has had a function similar to its function in any deliberate work of art or letters. We have only to think of this present phase of it, in which, in his old age, he dwells in the head of the world, in the company of devoted women, in their convent, and in the company of familiar saints, whose presence does so much to make any convent an appropriate refuge for a generous and human philosopher.[55]

This idealised view of Santayana must have been modified by a letter from Santayana which his Cuban friend José Rodriguez Feo sent him in 1949. The letter delighted him, he said, in particular the aphoristic phrase "I have always, somewhat sadly, bowed to expediency or fate."[56] Stevens turned this over in his mind, and seemed to have concluded that Santayana was a particularly poetic kind of philosopher, like Nietzsche, or like, for that matter, Stevens himself in his late attempts to theorise. This identification is apparent in the letter which he wrote to Barbara Church three days after Santayana's death. The point at which Stevens inserts his report of Santayana's death is interesting. He had just described a trip to New York, one of those visits which used to mean an escape from one world to another:

> If you go to New York when you are young, you find endless young people; if you go there when you are sort of old and sort of lame and sort of stiff, the place is crawling with cripples and one comes home to hold one's head up again and feel young once more.... I grieve to hear of the death of George Santayana in Rome. Fifty years ago, I knew him well, in Cambridge, where he often asked me to come to see him. That was before he had definitely decided not to be a poet.[57]

[54] Ibid., p. 378.

[55] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), pp. 129, 147–48.

[56] *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 635.

[57] Ibid., p. 761.

He goes on to discuss Santayana's becoming a full-time philosopher, implying that his own situation is similar:

> The reason (like the law, which is only a form of the reason) is a jealous mistress. He seems to have gone to live at the convent, in which he died, in his sixties, probably gave them all he had and asked them to keep him, body and soul.

The sudden lurch from a discussion of Stevens' own life cycle and return "home," the young/old Stevens and the young/old Santayana, seems to suggest that the patterns of their lives are comparable. The old poet bows to fate, and returns to a state of pure being like that which Stevens described in a letter written the next year, when "the time will arrive when just to *be* will take in everything without the least *doing* since even the least doing is irrelevant to pure being."[58] In order to see such a motionless perception as part of the life-cycle of the poet/philosopher in Santayana, Stevens stretches his period at the convent and over-emphasises his monasticism, making him a man dwelling in an analogy.

The analogy was, of course, also that of Stevens's own life, his own sense of living inside his works.[59] It is his identification with Santayana which explains his closeness to his subject in "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," the poem in which Stevens most unreservedly sees the writer achieving an apotheosis in death. The poem was written as what Harold Bloom calls a "pre-elegy," probably in early 1952.[60] In Santayana's death, art and life are united:

> The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
> Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
> It is as if in a human dignity
> Two parallels become one...[61]

Santayana is the theorist who composes a final self as "the design of all his words takes/Form and frame from thinking and is realized." There is no longer any cavilling about his being over-philosophical. Indeed it is

[58] Ibid., p. 767.

[59] Frank Kermode develops the idea of the works as a "dwelling" in this poem in his essay "Dwelling Poetically in Connecticut," in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 256–73.

[60] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 361. The poem was one of a group submitted to the *Hudson Review* in March 1952. It is impossible to assign it a precise date, but it was probably written in early 1952, since Stevens said in late 1950 that he had nothing for the *Hudson Review*, and refused other editors in 1951, apparently concentrating most of his energy on the essays of that year.

[61] *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 508.

an advantage that he is a systematic thinker, so that his works become a world in which he dwells, the "Total grandeur of a total edifice,/Chosen by an inquisitor of structures/ For himself." His distance is also an advantage, for as Frank Kermode suggests, Stevens often uses (or "fetishishes", a Marxist might say) certain figures precisely because they are so remote.[62] Santayana in Rome is so distant and perfected that the normal tensions between art and life can be relaxed. Paralleling this distance is Santayana's silence. Stevens's late poems often suggest that in order to avoid the personal locutions of rhetoric the poet must produce a voiceless (or textual) poetry which avoids metaphor. That is why, in a paradoxical formula, the remote and ancient figure is asked to "speak it, without speech,/The loftiest syllables among loftiest things" so that "each of us/Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice/ In yours." The man who speaks for us all speaks into his pillow, just as Stevens mumbled his own public speeches into near-incomprehensibility. He is icon rather than man, and the words of his books – present on Stevens's shelves, but quite possibly unread – are all that exist of him. In the "solitude of sense" which Stevens describes, his identification with Santayana is another name for his own solitude, his own death and the threshold in which life becomes the "fortune of the spirit," an American legend.

On can compare this to "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," Stevens's poem on the death of Henry Church, in which the dead are anatomized into parts guarded by the deities "high sleep" and "high peace." The former pertains to the death of the human poet who achieves a "diamond jubilance beyond the fire," the second to his corpus as it is stitched into the "generations of the imagination," while a third figure, a goddess, presides over the moment of death itself.[63] In the poem on Santayana all theses figures are unified; the life, the work, and the moment of death are all part of the central image of the threshold on which the old man half-sleeps. The poem may do some violence to the reality of Santayana's final months – he worked to the end, as Lowell suggested – but as Stevens wrote in his notebook, borrowing from Seneca, "Every man dies his own death."[64] Stevens used what materials he could find to achieve his "being unto-death," and he found them in Santayana even more strongly than in Heidegger. Santayana said in his final conversations with Cory that he desired "not unity, but completion" in his life, and it is an *image* of unity,

[62] Kermode, pp. 272–73.

[63] *Collected Poems*, pp. 431–36.

[64] Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 165.

an artistic completion, that Stevens seeks, rather than unity itself. Santayana sought such an image in the poem on which he was working at the time of his death; a poem about how a god and his nymph are turned to stone. "And now my only remaining wish is to live to polish further the translation of *Ambra*," he said, refering to it as though it were his funeral urn and the symbol of his final change.[65]

Santayana was a remarkable figure, and one whose character – as Wilson and others noted – was difficult to assess, so completely self-sufficient, polite, and distant did he seem to these visitors. But almost all of them departed from him feeling that they had been granted a special insight, a glimpse of a special soul, a unique perspective on the life of their times. He seems to be a "character" in the root sense of that word, a person who signifies rather than is, almost in the mode of the old or solitary figures in Wordsworth's poetry. The accounts presented above show a number of common elements in what was read into him. These include the special significance of his position, in the most spiritual of cities, in Europe, distant but a mediating point between the old world and the new at a time in which the bonds between the two had been strained. It is essential that he is also an American, and in this context his memoirs are often singled out by these writers as the work which they love (or the only one which they know well) – an account of life among the legendary figures of New England letters which binds him to the adopted country which he had left forever. Finally and most importantly, there is his age and monk-like existence. The archetype of the wise old man seems to be deeply imbedded, and even if Santayana's philosophy was not much read there was a need which he supplied for a central philosopher: a man who stands at the end of a long life outside of a history which seems turbulent and accelerated; a fixed point who represents the classical values. He also, for Lowell and Stevens, provides an image of the good death, of the way in which an artist should compose his life and the final stage of his career. For these two poets he becomes involved in the ideal of a life in writing, uncompromised by all the normal struggles of existence and happy in his posterity.

Santayana seems to have been willing enough to support his own myth in his behaviour, for his life had become one of the mind in its routine and concentration on his work, despite the normal fears of old age and the uncertainties which are described in Daniel Cory's account of his later years. Indeed, he *believed* that old age should become the embodiment of

[65] Cory, *The Later Years*, p. 323.

the long perspective and disinterested contemplation. He was lucky enough to have confirmed this belief in his behaviour and situation, unlike other aged would-be prophets who have retained all too visible weaknesses or desires. And as we have seen, he was in the right place at the right time, so far as the accidents of reputation are concerned. It seems fitting to end with a passage from the final volume of his autobiography, published after his death:

> Old places and old persons in their turn, when spirit dwells in them, have an intrinsic vitality of which youth is incapable; precisely the balance and wisdom which comes from long perspectives and broad foundations... old age, having less intensity at the centre has more clearness at the circumference, and knows that just because spirit, at each point, is a private centre for all things, no one point, no one phase of spirit is materially a public centre for all the rest. Thus recognition and honour flow out of all things, from the mind that conceives them justly and without egotism; and thus mind is reconciled to its own momentary existence and limited vision by the sense of the infinite supplements that embosom it on every side.[66]

Echoes of Pater and Emerson, but a succinct summary, ironically, of the old Santayana and the way in which he was perceived. He may have been made a "public centre" of spirit by some of those who wrote of him, but as such he was a transparency, a peg on which they hung their own texts, the "infinite supplements" which form literary history. "Recognition and honour" are curious things.

[66] George Santayana, *My Host the World* (London: The Cresset Press, 1953), pp. 169–70.