



Santayana: Genteel Fascist

By JOEL BRADFORD

PERSONS AND PLACES: The Background of My Life, by George Santayana. Scribner's. \$2.50.

EVERYBODY knows the anxieties which befell Mrs. Bluebeard after she looked in the closet, but I think it is not generally realized that until then she had lived a moderately happy life with her terrible husband. The moral of the fable is therefore ambiguous: does it show that democracy, aware of its peril, will be rescued from fascism, or that in our bitter world one should be incurious in order to be safe?

Mrs. Bluebeard deserves study. Shall we say, for the sake of jest if not of science, that, being a woman, she could not help opening the door, whilst a man would have been content to leave it locked upon its secrets? That would reserve too strictly to the female sex the gallantry of risking life for new knowledge. Yet doubtless many a man would forego such risks and would instead establish his life's comfort in the shadow of things unknown. Such a man is George Santayana.

The book here before us was flown in manuscript out of Rome shortly before Mussolini too was flown out of Rome (not, alas, in manuscript) in another direction. It was written, one supposes, in fascist Italy during the years of war which began with a jackal's yelp and ended with a mouse-squeak. Santayana had always loved Italy, and he retired thither upon giving up the teaching of philosophy. There, surrounded by a progressive past and a retrograde present, he wrote his later books.

Mussolini's Italy, while reared upon fables and educated with blackjacks, was not blind to the uses of culture. It is known that the Duce himself authored a drama in which he delved, though perhaps not profoundly, into the complexities of Napoleonic personality. Works of art were thought to have some value in themselves and considerable social value, as attracting tourists.

As a means of concealment, the cultural facade was by no means ineffective. It had, moreover, the somewhat inconsistent but useful power of attracting the outside admirer within. Men retire into renaissance Italy, medieval Italy, and Roman Italy as into a refuge; before the Medici sculptures it is difficult not to feel that all's well with the world. The admiration so begotten and sustained insensibly transmits itself to the regime. A heady compound of snobbery and nostalgia soon conquers all reserve, and one can hear Ezra Pound broadcasting fascist homilies from Rome.

Santayana has not trod this path to a conclusion. I think, indeed, that he never would do so—not that his political views forbid it, but that his basic personal motivation forbids it, as I shall shortly explain. He would, moreover, unquestionably repudiate the name of fascist or conservative or any political appellation whatever. I have no wish to speak abusively of America's most literate philosopher. Yet I ask myself, what are we to say of a man who is almost but not quite a mystic, who is almost but not quite a snob, who is almost but not quite anti-Semitic, who "loves tory Britain and honors conservative Spain, but not with any dogmatic or prescriptive passion?" I think that, being almost but not quite abusive, we must call him a genteel fascist. The limits which he sets to his aristocratic notions are not a denial of his fascism but an assertion of his gentility.

Santayana has founded no school; indeed, in the twenty years of my acquaintance with philosophy, I have never met or read any philosopher who agreed with him. There is universal admiration for his style, which is beautiful; there is sympathy for his spiritual yearnings, which are fragile and sweet; but agreement?—none whatever. As Professor Whitehead once observed, with deadly compliment, "When we want literature, we'll read Santayana."

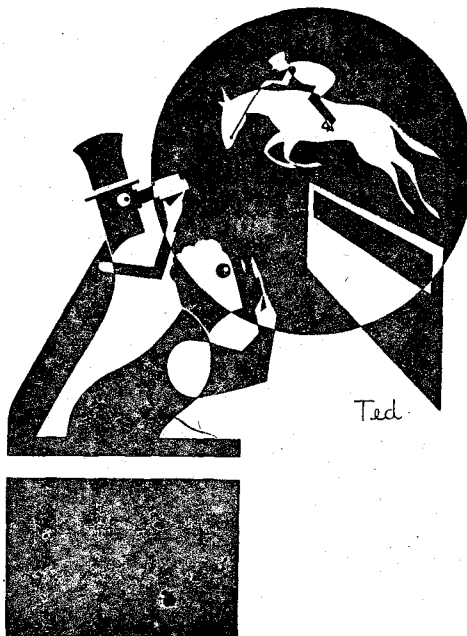
I have long marvelled at so paradoxical a fame, and not until I read this first

autobiographical volume could I understand it. The fact is that Santayana's philosophy is so constructed as to attract and repel simultaneously. His arguments, as Hume said of Berkeley's, "admit of no answer and produce no conviction"; but they are adroit, sensitive to the tastes of cultured men, and larded with appropriate references to sorrow, art, and prayer. Santayana has never engaged in controversy, still less in polemics. He has a knack of treating opponents as if they required indulgence rather than refutation. Thus, philosophically at least, he will not come to you, and you cannot come to him.

One day during his undergraduate years Santayana remarked to his half-sister Susana that he was better suited than she to the cloister. Susana replied, "You have one of the things required. You are detached." (Santayana's emphasis.) Detachment—that is the secret quintessence of Santayana. He has moved among men as among ideas, aloof, speculative, solitary. His friendships, as he describes them, are cordial but not intimate; the barriers are carefully laid which are to protect against unseemly intrusion into his inner self. It is as if he had concluded treaties of friendship with mankind but was careful to maintain a good standing army. He reveals himself as an intelligent and cultured man, and thereby disarms opposition. At the same time the unpersuasiveness of his views seems almost deliberately calculated to avoid the risks of comradeship.

After this manner he presents himself as a naturalist in philosophy, but a naturalist who recognizes that nature has an ideal side communicable only in art, love, and religious experience. Thus, since he is a naturalist, you cannot attack him as a mere mystic; and since he is a mystic, you cannot attack him as a mere naturalist. His philosophy grants due praise for scientific method, but asserts also the existence of ideal essences apprehensible by Reason alone. Thus, since he is an empiricist, you cannot attack him as a lover of abstractions; and since he is a rationalist, you cannot attack him as a mere grubbing laboratorian. Every avenue of assault is ingeniously blocked by expert philosophical engineering.

Similar skill in making the best of all worlds is discernible in Santayana's political observations. "If any community," he says, "can become or desires to become communitistic or democratic or anarchical I wish it joy from the bottom of my heart. I have

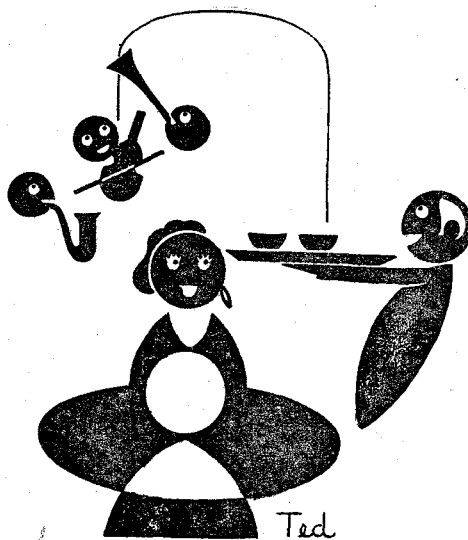


only two qualms in this case: whether such ideals are realizable, and whether those who pursue them fancy them to be exclusively and universally right: an illusion pregnant with injustice, oppression, and war." It is clear from this passage that Santayana has something less than a learned acquaintance with political realities. It is also clear that he gives us permission to espouse any social doctrine we please so long as we don't "force" it upon him.

I am not sure how things stand in the Realm of Essence, where Communism and democracy survive eternally as changeless atoms of thought. But I know that in the world where all men have their political being it would be impossible to hold such views without at the same time making a headlong assault upon fascism. A man who loves tory Britain and honors conservative Spain, however imprescriptive his passion, will find himself at Franco's side, supporting a tyranny that is both prescriptive and passionate. And one may add that injustice, oppression, and war issue not from any evangelical fervor of belief but from the content of the belief itself.

IN HIS next most recent book, *The Realm of Spirit*, Santayana remarks that men "are organized, they know not why, into a system of universal slave-labor for the production of rubbish" (the chapter, not inappropriately, is entitled "Distraction"). Rich and poor alike are ground in the same machinery, the poor imagining that a little money would cure their ills, and the rich reflecting with sophisticated disillusion that money brings more sorrow than joy. Such a view is the social fantasy of an aristocrat, and reveals Santayana's connections with Spanish *dons*. It leads him to applaud the conservative politician Canovas, who did not try to make Spain "a capitalist plutocracy with an industrial proletariat, things equally contrary to her nature." It leads him to say, "The modern Jew recognizes verbal intelligence, but not simple spirit. He doesn't admit anything deeper or freer than literature, science, and commerce." But the remark which settles everybody's hash is that "Only snobs are troubled by inequality."

The aristocratic attitude, however, has perhaps a useful side when its polite arrogance is set against fascist buffoonery. Santayana and Hearst were on the *Harvard Lampoon* together. The bad boy who grew up to be an evil man had provided the *Lampoon* with advertisements, its editors with an office, and the office with quantities of comic magazines, among them *La Vie Parisienne*. Hearst, one gathers, understanding French better with the eye than with the ear, restricted himself to the pictures; but Santayana gravely perused the text of issue after issue. Then he decided that *Mademoiselle de Maupin* had put the case much better, and ceased from further labors.



Santayana's humor flowers most urbanely in the description of his Harvard professors. James and Royce are there, drawn to the life with dreadful accuracy. Bowen is there, whom J. S. Mill had demolished in a footnote as "an obscure American." And George Herbert Palmer, whose most spectacular and perhaps most philosophical achievement was his marriage to the president of Wellesley.

The main lesson of the book, however, is one which its author did not intend to teach. Aristocrats, by nature, desire not to know. The feudal lords were totally ignorant of their own place in history and of the bourgeoisie before whose power they crumbled. In their descendants, displeasure with the modern world takes the form of a dim organic sensation. Philosophizing upon this, they weave fabrics more or less lovely and garments more or less grand. For them the night is filled with voices and the day with dreams. When awake, they have a sense of sleeping; and when asleep, of waking into the truly real.

But other tasks, other philosophies. We who do the world's work and seek the world's weal cannot move upon a ghostly tide of dreams. For us let the dark be voiceless, so that sleep may give us strength.

Yankee, Radical, Catholic

ORESTES BROWNSON: Yankee, Radical, Catholic, by Theodore Maynard. Macmillan. \$3.00.

ONE of the peculiar products of nineteenth-century America, Orestes Brownson is perhaps remembered best as a restless metaphysician who ran through a number of religious denominations and wound up in the Catholic Church still restless. Students of American labor history also recall his association with Robert Dale Owen and the Working Men's Party of New York in the early 1830's.

Brownson, unfortunately, has received little modern biographical appreciation, despite the wealth of material available in the twenty volumes of his collected works and

in the three-volume biography written by his son. Schlesinger's book in 1939 failed to make clear Brownson's experiences in the Catholic Church; and Mr. Maynard's present volume errs in neglecting the years before his conversion in October 1844. A full-dress account of Brownson, a perspective view so to speak, is still to be written.

Brownson is by no means the biographer's delight. Much of the subject matter of his speculations seems of little account today. Problems of theological dispute, the nature of ontology, damnation, the Lord's Supper, and the like, are not in the modern idiom, yet such problems were of grave concern to Brownson. His thinking is intimately bound up in them; and one of the merits of Mr. Maynard's patient biography is his illumination of those obscure, yet vital, aspects of Brownson's theology.

Of more contemporary interest are Brownson's political opinions. Although he helped to build the first working class political party in New York, he subsequently took a defeatist position and opposed independent political action. "The movement we commenced," he wrote, "could only excite a war of man against money, and all history and all reasoning in the case prove that in such a war money carries it over man." He therefore counseled trying to induce all classes of society to cooperate in efforts to better the condition of the working man. At a later date, he actually advised workers not to join the Working Men's Party in Massachusetts. Mr. Maynard paraphrases his advice to the effect that they "would gain nothing by it . . . ; instead they would have their veins sucked by a new and more hungry swarm of demagogues."

Actually Brownson had reservations about democracy itself. "This is our democracy," he declared. "We admit the sovereignty of the people when the question is of many or few; we deny it when we speak absolutely. The people are not sovereign. There is no sovereign but the Infallible, that is, God. . . ."

Despite evidence to the contrary, there are some who have termed Brownson's *The Laboring Classes* "socialism of the true Marxist type." Schlesinger, in fact, rushes in to say that the pamphlet is "perhaps the best study of the workings of society written by an American before the Civil War." Such praises are certainly extravagant, for in that pamphlet Brownson again reveals a defeatism which none but the naive (or the distorter) would point to as Marxist. Contrasting the state of the wage worker and the slave, Brownson wrote: "As to actual freedom one has just about as much as the other. The laborer at wages has all the advantages of freedom and none of its blessings, while the slave, if denied the blessings, is freed from its disadvantages. We are no advocate of slavery, we are as heartily opposed to it as any modern abolitionist can be; but we say frankly that, if