# "THE GENTEEL TRADITION IN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY" AS A VALEDICTORY INDICTMENT OF THE UNITED STATES[1]

JUAN JOSÉ CRUZ HERNÁNDEZ
UNIVERSIDAD DE LA LAGUNA

Ideas are not mirrors, they are weapons.

No one questions now the importance of what paradoxically has been termed "Progressivism" in the construction of American cultural history. That label implies more than a crucial period in the development of the United States as a modern power that covered four administrations and witnessed the shift towards modern liberalism, from the 1900s to the aftermath of World War I. What I am especially interested in pointing out in this era is how it witnessed the birth of a new role for the intellectual in his/her society, often as a result of a more or less critical revision of the past. The usable past, as Van Wyck Brooks patented it, became a verbal reminder of the efforts of many American intellectuals eager to extract some lessons from the history of the United States.

This spirit could be seen in a remodelling of different spheres of knowledge, to the extent that the adjective "new" became part of some disciplines. Thus a "New History," (as practiced by Frederick Jackson Turner, James Robinson and, last but never least, the Beards), a "New Anthropology" as

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promoted by Franz Boas, who himself opened the gates to Margaret Mead, etc. For their part, Columbia, Chicago and Harvard spawned a new way of thinking and became the centers of (New) American philosophy in the early twentieth century. The following pages will focus on one of the pivotal figures among the Harvard philosophers: George Santayana. His work in the opening years of the century well illustrates for the cultural historian the call for a change in the conscience of the American ethos. Whether thinking alone would change the necessities of an expanding power is a debatable question; however, Santayana's efforts at establishing a new set of power relations is worth quoting if only to better understand the way American culture and society were apprehended at home at that time.

George Santayana represents a distinct intellectual unit along with other fellow philosophers in Cambridge, such as William James and Josiah Royce. Santayana can be regarded as a peculiar member of that group, however. His style of philosophizing and the problems he addressed were very much a response to his American fellow-thinkers. He was an expatriate in more than one sense: he had left Spain when he was nine and lived in the United States until his late forties. He scrutinized his host culture without the self-searching intellectual agony of the "hundred-per-cent" Americans; for this reason, his detachment became an invaluable intellectual tool. At the same time, his examination of the United States also created in him a sense of alienation from the environment where he had spent the most productive period of his life. Thus Santayana's vision of the world is singularly objective and ecumenical and his insights can be exceedingly penetrating. But he can also show flashes of a resentment not very different from those pervading the later Henry James—though diluted in philosophical speculations and inevitably focused on the layers of the American intellectual life he knew best.[2]

Santayana's distinctive evaluation of American society and philosophy can be seen most clearly in his much quoted essay "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy." Delivered in August 1911 at Berkeley, today this short piece is considered a cornerstone in the study of American intellectual history. My interest in it is threefold. Firstly, it was written in the middle of the Progressive Era, and is an essential critical text for understanding that time. Second, it summarizes Santayana's weariness with America and answers the questions that provoked his resignation from Harvard and his eventual departure for Europe. Finally, and perhaps more relevant for my purpose, "The Genteel Tradition" draws a line between the general criticism of his previous speculative work, best exemplified in his multivolume *The Life of Reason* (1905-1906), and his later critique, published after he had left North

America for good. The extent to which his address to the Philosophical Union of Berkeley became famous can be appreciated in the words of so restrained a critic as Lionel Trilling, written at the height of the Cold War: "What the historian of the American culture would do without Santayana's term 'the genteel tradition' is impossible to imagine" (Wilson, 1967: 2).

Of course, Santayana drew on several writers to exemplify most of his ideas. But his liaison with the philosophical system at Harvard allowed "The Genteel Tradition" to go beyond the bounds of the literary historian. The concept of experience, so crucial for understanding the idea of the "specious present" had political and social implications that could not have had their origins in the work of canonical writers, with the possible exception of Henry James. But it was in his brother William more than in him, that Santayana found an explanation for the obnoxious influence of the genteel tradition on the cultural and ideological development of the United States in this century. It certainly was from William James that Santayana acquired the insight to link the exhaustion of the American ideals of the Early Republic with the bipartisan endorsement of an expansionist diplomacy and an ambivalent social policy incomprehensibly branded "Progressive." Otherwise, it should be difficult to trace the meaning of the following paragraph, uttered early in "The Genteel Tradition:"

> America did not have to wait for its present universities, with their departments of academic philosophy, in order to possess a living philosophy—to have a distinct vision of the universe and definite convictions about human destiny.[3]

At first sight redolent of anti-intellectualism, this sentence is more an ironic dig at the role the United States had taken on in the early years of the twentieth century (a question that attracted much speculation at that time), than an appreciation of the American way of philosophizing. But in order to infer this, one must look more closely at the letter and spirit of the address. Santayana offered a dramatic clue when he sought to point out the sources of the unjustified self-confidence (and sometimes self-righteousness) he perceived in American culture. A considerable portion of his lecture was devoted to revealing the effects that Transcendentalism as a cultural and political ideology produced in successive generations. At the same time Santayana and his colleagues at Harvard were uncovering some of the effects of that legacy. Transcendentalism, then, had proved to be a mixed blessing.

It is true that as a contribution to Western philosophy, Transcendentalism offered a system that enabled the individual to surpass the constraints of the Lockean framework. William James, Santayana's mentor and professor at Harvard, had adopted Emerson as a prime figurehead when he formulated pragmatism as a celebration of individual sovereignty—both national and personal. As Professor Lentricchia suggests, Emerson started the tradition of a cult of individualism that not only broke the exhausting formulas of British empiricism in America; it also validated the moral outrage spawn in the intellectual circles that opposed American policies abroad as acts of transgression against the sanctity of human beings (1986: 15). Halfway between the times of Thoreau and the Berrigans, the 1910s offered opportunities for James to point up this conviction.

By the first decades of the twentieth century, however, Transcendentalism had proven to be as ambivalent as the doctrines it had aimed to replace. It had certainly once been coherent enough to be called a philosophy and precise enough to be labelled idealism—but this was no longer the case by 1911. Early in "The Genteel Tradition" Santayana termed Transcendentalism "the chief contribution made in modern times to speculation" (GT 100). His charge that despite his erudition and tactfulness Emerson "read *transcendentally, not historically*,[4] to learn what he himself felt, not what others might have felt before him" (GT 99), can apparently be dismissed as the reproach of a sophisticated intellectual looking down on the beginner of a tradition in American literature and culture. But Santayana's criticism should not be undervalued because he was allegedly unable to understand the lack of historical determinacy in Emerson. I feel that his argument against Transcendentalism as a form of *egotism* (note the frequency of this pejorative word in his work) is not so much that it contributed a naive theory of the state, but that in the long run, it turned out to be the breeder of dire social and political consequences in American life. Ironically, by the turn of the century the most revealing developments of Emersonian self-reliance became the domestic socio-economic havoc produced by industrialization, and an imperialistic foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere and the Philippines.

An attentive reading of "The Genteel Tradition" may give us further clues to Santayana's distaste for such an ideological swindle. If it was Kant who rescued the human essence from the barrenness of Lockean skepticism, Santayana did not spare German idealism a thorough rebuttal on account of the consequences that system had led to. His censure did not reach the anti-German extremes of *Egotism in German Philosophy* (1916); this notwiths-

tanding, one must not forget the negative tone in which he denounced the way a reified kind of idealism had managed to manipulate history. In response to the transcendentalists' claim of a new ontology, Santayana aimed to expose what he considered to be the truth underlying the romantic ideal of—call it harmony, spiritual power, or much better, Oversoul. To underscore his reluctance to accept the unworkable essences of an American proposal for philosophy, he resorted to the German example. A biased reader may well say that Santayana was foretelling a good deal of World War II Allied propaganda: "It occurred to [the Germans] to imagine that all reality might be . . . just their own transcendental self and their own romantic dreams extended indefinitely" (GT 100). The parallelism between German idealism and American Transcendentalism was more evident when he made Emerson match Kant. The former Unitarian had subverted organized religion into a call for American redemptionism, so deftly expressed in his "Divinity School Address." Santayana then found clues to point out where the seeds of that passion had been sown and how easily and why they had taken root in the United States:

> Kant had a genteel tradition of his own, which he wished to remove to a place of safety, feeling that the empirical world had become too hot for it; and this play of safety was the region of transcendental myth. I need hardly say how perfectly this expedient suited the needs of philosophers in America, and it is no accident if the influence of Kant soon became dominant here. (GT 101)

Of course one should not assume Santayana had said this in 1911 solely to discuss eighty-year-old Transcendentalism. His own times had witnessed enough events to validate the suggestion from Harvard that an aseptic idealism pervaded the politics of the Progressives. Attempts to thwart the labor movement at the domestic front (revolutionary or other non-A.F.L.) could go hand in hand with a foreign policy that had led to a second intervention in Cuba in 1906-1909, and the invasion of Nicaragua the following year.

But the impact of a reading of Transcendentalism on the cultural and political behavior of the nation had left scars long before the 1900s. Being as it virtually was an offshoot of the Unitarian system of belief, Transcendentalism simply fitted quite well into the bourgeois frame of reference in the United States, which was eager to replace an exhausted calvinism. It is not surprising then that one of the consequences of Emersonian idealism (despite the later Emerson himself) was that it should condone social injustice. If one is to understand Emerson's pre-Marxian version of detribalization, consisting

in the positive elements African-Americans could get from of their contact with the white race, one is prepared to accept Carnegie's explanation of the refinement of *homo sapiens* through exploitation. A random date earlier than 1911 could do just as well, such as 1877. This year is not only a watershed in American domestic political history. It may be just a coincidence, but the year that marks the rebirth of a nation and a new-found respect for the peculiarities of some states, is the same that has come down to us as the year of the first great nationwide strikes and that of a decisive trade agreement with the Kingdom of Hawaii. The "opening road of limitless freedom," as Matthiessen summarized the spirit of American romanticism and Jacksonian expansion, both in the 1830s, had proven to be a long and winding one.

But the spiritual search for a native *Weltanschauung* in the nineteenth century was not the task of one thinker only. Santayana did not put all the blame on Emerson. Strangely enough, in his essay-lecture at Berkeley he ignored Thoreau, whose "action from principle" proved to be as ambivalent as any product of American liberalism and thus a marvellous piece of criticism. Neither did he mention Melville, whose skepticism, on the contrary, would no doubt have destroyed his argument against the ethos of the American Renaissance. But Santayana criticized Poe and Hawthorne. The latter receives attention in another part of this commentary. Santayana's mention of Poe is more opportune than accurate for his thesis against Transcendentalism, and especially with regard to the German roots/bias of the movement.

Regardless of the implausible relation between Poe and the group of Concord, he and Emerson seemed to have absorbed German idealism through their divergent approaches to Coleridge. Whereas Emerson came in contact with Kant through Coleridge's translations and used the Fancy/Imagination disquisition to distinguish the ethical and esthetical realms of perfectibility, Poe did not. On the contrary, he pretended to fuse both "aspects of the poet's reach into that divine realm of harmony from which fallen man is estranged," as Geoffrey Rans so well expressed it (1965: 25). It was not so for Santayana. Despite the differences in the creed of each writer, he believed the writings of Emerson and Poe shared the call of the irrational and the egocentric. Accordingly, theirs seemed to be a second-hand critique of pure reason: "A refined labour, but it was in danger of being morbid, or tinkling, or self-indulgent. It was a play of intra-mental rhymes" (GT 99). Reading Poe and Emerson after the nineteenth century was ended and their writings were decontextualized turned these two writers into geniuses "employed on a sort of inner play." The supreme danger Santayana forewarned his American audience against did not reach the pitch of total disaster, although it did in his

second edition of *Egotism in German Philosophy* (1940). Instead of paranoia, by 1911 Santayana found schizophrenia to be the socio-political outcome of Transcendentalism. His much quoted comparison between the skyscraper and the colonial mansion is irrelevant for a study of his critique of the United States; the following description of American thought positively is not:

> The truth is that one-half of the American mind, that not occupied intensely in practical affairs, has remained, I will not say high-and-dry, but slightly becalmed; . . . alongside, in invention and industry and social organisation, the other half of the mind was leaping down a sort of Niagara Rapids. (GT 97)

Fortunately, Santayana would think of a counter-genteel tradition that righted the obliteration of the American promise in cultural-ideological terms. From this we presume that political and socio-ideological grounds were present too.

The first examples of cultural resistance consisted in those he labelled "the humorists," though it should be said he paid especial attention to Californian writers. A literary historian may assume that Santayana's "humorists" included not only Mark Twain and Bret Harte, but in general the writers of the so-called "Western local color"—a group I prefer to call Western realists. By so considering them, Santayana transgressed realism as understood by the New England canon. However, he qualified his own words; as one quotes from his lecture, "the humorists . . . only half escape the genteel tradition" (GT 103).

It is not necessary to remember here the social conditions reproduced west of the Mississippi in order to understand to what extent Western realism was impelled to contradict the bourgeois scale of values imported from the Eastern seaboard. But just let me attribute to those writers and not to the psychiatrists the description of American nervousness as a corruption of Tocqueville's American restlessness. Twain and Warner's *The Gilded Age* (1873) is then a fold-up version of *Democracy in America.* Once capitalism and liberalism discovered the West we must not center our attention only on those well known and by now banal events such as the Indian genocides, generous Homestead laws, or women's suffrage. Boom and bust, speculation and collapse, boomtowns, schemes, etc, also became high-frequency words.[5] As the years went by and the human adventure turned out to be less satisfying, the humorous flavor of the narrative mediations started to be more bitter, indeed more tragic. Twain's pen offered the best example of this ordeal. In

1876 Tom Sawyer appeared simply as the naive prototype of a believer in the American promise or, as Tony Tanner put it, “a capitalist pioneer with none of the sense of guilt” (1965: 180). Years later, *A Connecticut Yankee* denounced the deranged condition of many American ideals. Maybe Twain’s novel of 1889 presents a gross distortion of the perils of industrial capitalism. But already Huck’s flight to nowhere in Twain’s most celebrated novel is a symptom of the void capitalism had left for any alternative to its social stratification and economic pattern in America. As the most representative writer of Western realism, Twain resolved that what remained was either the retreat into fantasy or resignation before the new condition of his country—even a full decade before Turner issued his thesis of the frontier as myth.

In this context then, we can better understand Santayana’s seeing through the failed attempt of Western realism to subvert the cultural-ideological status quo:

> Their humor would lose its savour if they had wholly escaped [the genteel tradition]. They point to what contradicts it in the facts; but not in order to abandon the genteel tradition, for they have nothing solid to put in its place. When they point out how ill many facts fit into it, they do not clearly conceive that this militates against the standard, but think it a funny perversity in the facts. (GT 103)

In fact to what extent Santayana’s dismissal of Western realism as subversion of the genteel tradition is accurate can be seen in the cultural negotiation of life in the West that pervaded the eclipse of the first writers. This is the case of the Western, as a canonized subgenre in the universe of American Studies. The way the Western movie has reflected the zigzags of American foreign policy is well documented and deserves more space than these pages permit. But it is important to point out that since Owen Wister assisted in building the Western as a cultural meeting point between American ideals and U.S. history, it has worked as a barometer of the way the place of the United States in the world was being felt at home. Undoubtedly Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902) represents an early rebuke of the Progressive Era in the sense that the vanishing cowboy is a figure in retreat, and his space is progressively (in all senses) taken over by the buccaneering capitalists. But such domestic disarray can be mended, Wister and other cultural producers seem to suggest, by a change in American foreign policy. It is not for nothing that *The Virginian* was dedicated to President Roosevelt. The rare cowboy himself became a sign “of a true democracy disappearing under pressure from corporate and alien forces.”[6] In the same way, the frontiersman

sought—as an epitome of ingrained anti-intellectual biases—spaces to vent his altruism and redeem the aliens in need of American civilization. It might be in this sense that these narratives granted the Platt and the Teller Amendments, concerning Cuba's sovereignty after 1898, the ideological justifications that the urban settings could not provide in cultural form. All of this positively led Santayana to conclude that ontologically the realists—other than Boston-centered—did not have many reasons to challenge the genteel tradition.

Whitman and the James brothers were a different matter. All three seemed to represent different kinds of successful opposition to the oppression of the established tradition.

Whitman definitely embraced in this context a striking, radical, and blatant rupture with the effects of the prescribed American culture. Whitman then was the *enfant terrible* among the searchers for a new cultural ontology to the extent that Santayana referred to him in his lecture as a poet "who has left the genteel tradition entirely behind." In other words, he was a visionary loner, although not a solipsist. According to Santayana, there are obvious reasons for Whitman's being cast out from the intellectual records of the times: "Educated Americans find him rather an unpalatable person, who they sincerely protest ought not to be taken for a representative of their culture; and he certainly should not, because their culture is so genteel and traditional" (GT 103). As a matter of fact, if civilization (understood as the appropriation of American idealism in late 19th-century United States) stifled as many traits of nature (human and physical) as was imperative for the expansion of a booming economy, Whitman succeeded as the conscientious critic in a way the Western realists did not and could not. Santayana had previously praised Whitman's concern about his expression of liberty and the prevalence of nature over the elements that had attempted to restrain it in all its forms.[7] And it was in Whitman that he found the source for his early speculations on the function of poetry.[8] Whitman's poetry thus appeared in "The Genteel Tradition" as an expression of that freedom which continually eluded cooption by bourgeois conformity. If so, then we could see Whitman as a forerunner of that select group of skeptics who had charged capitalism with obliterating "nature" and turning Emerson's ahistoricity into a respectable idea. Whitman was, then, the first to dissociate himself from the prevalent conventional values as he advanced guidelines for the 1900s. We could say that Whitman had discovered that "whatever is, in the context of bourgeois delusion, called nature, is merely the scar of social mutilation" as Adorno would comment later in a different context.[9] It is probable that

readers might argue that at most Whitman's criticism was lukewarm. Santayana was seeking justifications for the limitations of Whitman's ideal America when he pointed out that "an American in the nineteenth century who completely disregarded the genteel tradition could hardly have done more" (GT 104). By promoting the subversive role that Whitman adopted in the intellectual development of his times, Santayana was not only seeking a social function of poetry other than that of utilitarianism, which had concerned him so greatly in his early essays. He eventually opened a critical breach that led to the modern understanding of forms as social practices and expressions of power relations.

But Santayana's Whitman is a problematic figure, unable to hold up a well-structured alternative to the genteel tradition. Notwithstanding the conclusions reached in Santayana's essay, Whitman is the intellectual child of Emerson. The latter's disdain for the poets of the sublime, is an example that encourages us to contrast Whitman with the most genteel of poets—the Brahmins. Their reflections and passions, indictments and defenses were well-known celebrations of that progression towards the official ideal of an American ethos. Quite distinctly and in virtual opposition to the Boston-New York-Philadelphia ideologues and producers, Whitman apprehended a new ethical system. At least that is what Santayana apparently meant when, discussing Whitman, he contended that "the various sights, moods, and emotions are given each one vote; they are declared to be all free and equal, and the innumerable commonplace moments of life are suffered to speak like the others" (GT 104).

No doubt this is a very democratic discourse. But it does foster a reading of Whitman within the regular assumptions of the very tradition Santayana targeted. Somehow Whitman displayed in both his poetry and prose several political principles that the settled intellectual tradition had mystified into dogmas. Manifest destiny, for example, did not necessarily require more monumental epics than some sections from *Song of Myself* or *Drum Taps*; social cooption is simply obvious in "Starting from Paumanok." Whitman even becomes a myth-maker in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." His elegy to Lincoln is not alien to the hermeneutics of power expressed by the late Emerson in *Representative Men.* Finally, Santayana's criticism of Emerson that "the deeper he went and the more he tried to grapple with fundamental conceptions, the vaguer and more elusive they became in his hands," (1969: 218) could perfectly be applied to Whitman's brotherhood of (specifically) men.

On the contrary, the James brothers helped Santayana to rekindle his essay at Berkeley. As already seen, William James had supplied him with a referential alternative that contributed greatly to make possible a criticism of the genteel tradition, at least as Santayana had envisioned it. Indeed, pragmatism had defined the limits of nineteenth-century European thought in America, or rather, had provided the historian with an intellectual tool to explain how the import of European theory had made social havoc and aggressive diplomacy so likely in the United States.

By dismissing the successive interpretations of the Emersonian absence of evil, James strove to find a substitute for the appropriated liberal creed. As he was skeptical enough of millenarian and redemptive movements (also imported from Europe), he may be accused of temporizing with the nascent Establishment and even of expressing deviant compromise with reform.[10] But if mistrustful of definitive solutions, James also proved to be nonconformist enough not to sanction the American political system as the best of all possible ways of government: thus his aversion towards the negation of historical conditioning or, in other words, his opposition to exceptionalism. To the latter he opposed a 'tough-minded' philosophy, hardened by the evidences published in the mass media and the justification of the social status quo by thinkers of the day. Let us not lose sight of the fact that despite its current exhaustion as a philosophy of opposition to the Establishment, pragmatism was relevant a century ago on account of its proposal to de-intellectualize—that is to say, relativize so that terms be modified when appropriate—assumptions ingrained in the social and cultural fabrics. Little wonder then that syllogisms like those used in *Pragmatism* (1907) sought to disclose the fallacious ideological premises that held sway in the perplexing Progressive years. For his part, Santayana honored James by dedicating some paragraphs in "The Genteel Tradition" to him. His indictment of an accepted ahistoricity was a homage to his former professor for his refusal to be coopted:

> Ideas and rules that may have been occasionally useful [the genteel tradition] put in the place of the full-blooded irrational movement of life which had called them into being; and these abstractions, so soon obsolete, it strove to fix and to worship for ever. (GT 105)

As mentioned above, one of the most controversial legacies the Progressives received from the intellectual tradition was that of a revised manifest destiny, actualized into an aggressive foreign policy in Latin America

and the Philippines. This aspect of idealism is objected to by both Santayana and William James, and the latter's views can be traced in "The Genteel Tradition." Although apparently Santayana did not take a clear-cut position regarding the foreign affairs of his country of adoption, his defense of James was eloquent. An example of this may be the oblique way Santayana referred to the transpartisan expansionist vocation of the United States. Right in the beginning he explained the American redemptive stand vis-à-vis the world in his own way: "Goodwill became the great American virtue; and a passion arose for counting heads, and square miles, and cubic feet, and minutes saved —as if there had been anything to save them for" (GT 99).

It is commonplace to accuse Theodore Roosevelt of being an expansionist who paved the way for the global superpower that the United States eventually came to be in the twentieth century. But "The Genteel Tradition" involved many more people. Santayana was aware that that "tradition" involved the progressives' expansionist discourse. Progressivism had aimed at recovering the elements of American civilization obliterated by the two-party system. It did not stop then at accepting the biases of the former movements that had sought vainly to break that historical trend, from the Know-nothings to the populists. The result of the Spanish-American War, and the favorable results of the U.S. diplomatic efforts at the Far East had provided an argument for those in the Establishment who believed in the intrinsic goodness of the American institutions. And once the social consequences of industrialization had begun to lose their impact, the progressives' recipe for political survival was to criticize expansionism not because it depleted the right of other nations to exist, but because it failed to extend the benefits of American civilization to other peoples.

But as a text that questions a peculiar conception of foreign policy, "The Genteel Tradition" is not so much proselytizing as echoing William James's active compromise in the Anti-Imperialist League and his good relations with an array of dissidents throughout the 1900s. Let us not disregard then Santayana's meaningful description of James as a person once he had introduced him as an intellectual:

> William James became the friend and helper of those groping, nervous, half-educated, spiritually disinherited, passionately hungry individuals of which America is full. He became, at the same time, their spokesman and representative before the learned world; and he made it a chief part of his vocation to recast what the learned has to offer, so that as far as possible it might serve the needs and interests of these people. (GT 105)

Some may see in these words the defence of a radical. Independently of what that political label actually meant, the truth is that both men lived in harmony within an alternative ethos to that of industrial capitalism. As Frank Lentricchia suggests, William James's major concern was to prevent the triumph of the American version of imperialism and capitalism, which he considered a "world historical menace of unparalleled proportions" (1986: 21). Indeed this would be a far more pessimist prediction than that spawned by Leninist scholastics. It was that fearsome speculative conclusion of James's that gave rise to his search for a new system. And it was from that point onwards that his alternative to capitalism was aimed to explain the interaction between the redemptive discourse and the imperialist praxis, or in other words, between empire as theory and theory as empire (Lentricchia 1986: 11, 12).

Researchers find that Santayana was less sanguine than James as regards his criticism of the American system. Certainly his political criticism had not reached the explicitness of his later writings, especially from *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920) onwards. His recollections of America's "singular preoccupation with quantity" had taken place in a context different from that of the prewar years. But what was being fully detailed in 1920 came to be an articulated continuation to his impassioned response to the stifling consequences of the genteel tradition. Sometimes Santayana's stratagem of intellectual confrontation with the Establishment can be wrongly perceived on account of his inaccuracies when putting his admired James against the socio-cultural background. I think that the most notorious instance of wishful thinking as regards James's social support can be perceived in Santayana's fallacy of what Americanism might be:

> [William James] had a prophetic sympathy with the dawning sentiments of the age, with the moods of the dumb majority. . . . His way of thinking and feeling represented the true America and represented in a measure the whole ultramodern, radical world. Thus he eluded the genteel tradition in the romantic way, by continuing it into its opposite. (GT 104)

The last sentence of the excerpt is true enough to be held as a consented truth. But to compare William James with the "true America" is sheer exaggeration. What Santayana called "true America" used to adopt positions that simply did not hold within a tolerant and cosmopolitan philosophy. The "dawning sentiments of the age" as were expressed in the average citizen did

not have to correspond with those of either of the James brothers, much less with William's. Santayana, probably unconsciously mistranslating his European cultural background into an American context, understood the making of a cultural tradition as a task reserved for a cultivated elite. But the common man, functionally illiterate, nationalist, nativist, and individualist to an extreme, had been not only the recipient of the American mythology: he was doing his share to set the WASP model, if only by casting a nativist eye on the immigrants arriving at U.S. ports. True America had more to do with the Hegelian "tragic-comic history of experience" (GT 104) than with the romantic clash proposed by William James.

However, due to his deep conviction that "philosophers are only apologists" (GT 102), Santayana faithfully followed James's identification of discourse and praxis, theory and empire. Starting from this assumption we can understand Santayana's substitution of history and science for philosophy. In the former disciplines Santayana believed one could find less contaminated tools than those a coopted philosophy advanced. It is for this reason that he boldly asserted that the truths found by history and science were so superior segments of knowledge that "no later interpretation can invalidate or afford to contradict [them]."

We can infer his insistence that Tocquevillean views on America aimed to highlight not so much the discovery of a past as the plausibility of a perfectible future. And in the pursuit of a brighter future the United States had to retrace many of its misguided steps and dispense with many adventuresome traits of exceptionalism. Here we have evidence not only of Santayana's plausibly Europeanized frame of mind, but also of his reliance on William James's subversive re-reading of Transcendentalism. The cure for conformity in America lay in a social realignment along old lines—the development of class-consciousness among intellectuals. James's gullibility obviously responded to the possibilities shown by the transcendentalists' (and in general the romantics') axiom concerning the social role of the bard.[11] But this conviction nevertheless represents the reply of the dissenting intellectual to what both William James and Santayana perceived as uni-directional social and political processes. Their proposal set out to rework all the principles on which the democratic system theoretically stood. Specifically for Santayana this new version of the American myth encouraged his appraisal of Whitman and Henry James as judges. The latter's resort to "turning the genteel American tradition, as he turns everything else, into a subject-matter for analysis . . . to be compared with other habits of mind" (GT 104) is relevant in this respect. Santayana's appreciation of Henry James's insight implies a

new concept of power relations whose relevance goes beyond those of culture-making. William James devised a pragmatic tool to pull down a comfortable unity and self-righteousness; his brother Henry submitted American culture to the formidable punishment of relativization. For his part, Santayana acquired an ideological network sufficient to define his belated naturalism. The intellectual's challenge turned unity into diversity. Consequently history is not just the fulfilment of a destiny manifest by fate; it becomes a text to be written by all and sundry, a "multi-authored book" (Lentricchia 1986: 11).

William James proposed the multiple reading of history as the counter-offensive to the totalizing plan of contemporary metanarratives, be they liberal, conservative or radical. By means of describing truth as an attribute of ideas rather than of reality,[12] life is released from uniform customs and convictions. Four years after *Pragmatism,* James's views on society as an open text are assumed in Santayana's universe. Thus constructed global reality is an "experiment" that "has not ultimate or total nature, because it has no end" (GT 106). This sense of society as an open text is indeed different from the chiliastic theories that in one way or another informed the ideology of contemporary naturalist thinkers and writers, especially those of the muckraking slant who served progressive politics. Santayana's distrust of formal democracy went in line with his concept of naturalism, which undervalued human beings' efforts to struggle forward in an unending progression to some ultimate goal. Santayana also learnt from James that reality surpassed preconceived ideas, as the following quote from "The Genteel Tradition" testifies:

> [Nature's] purposes are not to be static harmonies, self-unfolding destinies, the logic of spirit, the spirit of logic, or any other formal method and abstract law; its purposes are to be concrete endeavours, finite efforts of souls living in an environment which they transform and by which they, too, are affected. (GT 106)

A denial of human contingency in history perpetuates what Santayana derided as the "Satanic dream that we are creators and not creatures." Indeed "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" is the written expression of an individual whose research led him to find that all isms, although capable of an oppositional role in a certain historical context, can be diminished by power relations. What remains, then, is our "animal status." This was true not only of the United States, of course; but American exceptionalism, idealism, moralism, etc, were targets set by the genteel tradition for Santayana to hit. To what extent William James actually assisted him in denouncing American

life and culture may be a debatable issue. The truth is that Santayana's critique had never been more pungent than in his lecture at Berkeley. It is correct to say that he came to distrust absolutes. His words in *Reason in Common Sense* had been clear: "Among unstable and relative ideals none is more relative and unstable than that which transports all value to a universal law, itself indifferent to good and evil" (1968: 2.200). But what he said on that occasion had a very wide—virtually universal—scope, whereas the subject matter of "The Genteel Tradition" was the society, the intellectual achievement, and the policies of the United States.

Such is Santayana's skeptical thesis. As an argument to contradict some contemporary tendencies of history-recording in American culture it is quite an elaborate piece of writing that only a thorough and somewhat iconoclastic intellectual effort could produce. However, a *reductio ad absurdum* of his own conclusions supports us in seeing them as dated. When trying to rescue his cultural heroes from the fire of intellectualism, he fell into the same trap. Already by the time of "The Genteel Tradition" Whitman and Henry James had started the making of an anti-realist, "detached," and doctrinaire tradition. We have inherited that stream of thought transmogrified into a variety of formalism, as intellectually discouraging as the tradition Santayana denounced at Berkeley: the so-called "humanist vision" that spread over part of the American learned collectivity is a good example. That bland notion of the genteel tradition gave a wide ideological umbrella to works like those by Wharton, Cather, Griffith, etc, especially before World War I definitively turned intellectuals into antagonists of the *Establishment.*

Various specific cases exemplify the way Santayana's thesis defended some ideas that at best can be called into question. Such is the case of Henry James as *the* successful analyst of the American tradition. Santayana most probably alluded to the sage Henry James who wrote *The American Scene,* not to the author of *Daisy Miller* or any of the so called international-theme novels prior to *The Ambassadors.* The late James had already purged his conscience when discussing his native land. But the one active in the two last decades of the nineteenth century experienced a great dilemma when approaching his cultural origins. Not until his failure as a playwright did Henry James renounce America as an idea—until that moment his predication had been less one of opposition than of suspension. The failure of Santayana's argument is not so much one of quality as one of degree: Henry James reached the same level of skepticism as the Californian humorists. However, Santayana elevated James's perplexity at the United States to the pitch of anti-Americanism. Besides, he prevented the Western realists from substitu-

ting a new essence of their country for the old, wasted, and (after the American Historical Association Conference was held in 1893) not-so-genteel New England tradition.

Santayana's discrediting of Hawthorne is also striking and one may be tempted to believe that it was forced. Early in the essay he tried to launch an attack on Calvinism as the defining layer of what was to become the genteel tradition. I think that his irony on calvinism's axiomatic indictment of human nature falls in a void; not so much as a result of his lack of dialectical resources to defend freedom, but because he puts Hawthorne on the same pile as those other writers who did not dare change the course of the prevalent intellectual status quo. For Santayana Hawthorne's achievement seemed as flawed as those of his fellow writers; it was "in danger of being morbid, or tinkling, or self-indulgent" too. Had Santayana known Hawthorne's work better, he should have taken into account that the latter had also denounced the secularization of Puritanism scores of years before it was scrutinized in "The Genteel Tradition." *The Blithedale Romance* and "The Celestial Railroad" are ample critiques of Transcendentalism and clearly distinguish Hawthorne from the thinkers with which Santayana compared him at Berkeley. And in general Hawthorne's efforts to explain the deviant behavior of national ideals by means of interpreting seventeenth-century America to the nineteenth-century readership is as valid a reflection on what the United States might have been as Santayana's valedictory reflections would be.

In spite of adopting from William James what he found fitting in his vision of nature, Santayana should have taken certain differences into account. Whereas James rejected any concept of telos, Santayana harangued his audience in the final words of his lecture; he believed that the human being's spirit, (he preferred to call it "mind") "rather than any fortunes that may await his body in the outer world, constitute[s] his proper happiness" (GT 109). The end of "The Genteel Tradition" then seems to favor a revision of Transcendentalism. It would be easier for Santayana if his aim were such, because he undervalued in his final paragraph the very pressure that social and political history had exerted on the cultural achievement of the United States. Despite his scathing overt and covert comments on the heritage of gentility in the United States, Santayana (as well as the Jameses), could not avoid belonging to the Era that he tried to indict and there are examples in his lecture that confirm this. The poor, the immigrants, and the blacks were disfavored social groups obdurately real beyond the walls of Harvard University. They all might apparently have expected William James to speak for them—if ever there was room for them in that aggregation of "half-educated, spiritually dis-

inherited, passionately hungry individuals of which America is full." Of course it was not Santayana's fault. He and his mentor had unfolded an antinomian vision that was frowned upon by the well-established intelligentsia. The problem was that the social response to their proposals had necessarily to be more receptive than it had been up to that moment. This caused their efforts to be judged negatively. At best, a critique like theirs only makes possible the adjustment of the individual to the society as it develops. And Santayana's words seen in isolation, "The Genteel Tradition" at worst could also be regarded as another case study of plea for ahistoricity. As John Dewey suggested, by counting exclusively on a collective like that considered in "The Genteel Tradition," culture would turn into "an individual achievement and not a class possession" (1939: 728). In a naive ideological twist of another kind, Santayana's thesis would only delay prompt appropriation.[13]

A quotation from "The Genteel Tradition" is most suitable for the conclusion of this essay. Santayana's good faith was obvious by the end of the lecture, when he conceded that the ruin of a residual tradition did not necessarily substitute for newer social and cultural constructions:

> The genteel tradition cannot be dislodged by these insurrections [i.e., the Jameses, Whitman, etc]; there are circles to which it is still congenial, and where it will be preserved. But it has been challenged and (what is perhaps more insidious) it has been discovered. No one need be browbeaten any longer into accepting it. (GT 107)

No exhaustive analysis is required here to understand how far Santayana had been infected by an optimistic assessment of America's tendency to challenge established values. He had no qualms about considering the success of this subversion (via the pragmatic method) of the culture and ideology that were alive in the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century.

In a wider sense, all this means that concepts born in the American pantheon, such as "democracy," "freedom," "justice" etc., must be worked over and given a new meaning. The artists/intellectuals—in their role as ideologues—would have a dramatic role to play then. An implementation of the thinking of Santayana's heroes in "The Genteel Tradition" implies the demise of tried and true concepts, devoid of their original content but formidable as sociopolitical bulwarks of a tradition that ultimately became the American ideology. Only then would individuals like Walt Whitman be genuinely respected, and the multifocal reality proposed by William James have serious consequences.

But a politics of realism determined it could not be so. The construction of the United States as an Emersonian transaction was far too powerful, and by 1911 there were already too many interests vested to renounce to the ultimate fruits of such a venture. Santayana underrated the prodigious capacity of the genteel tradition to assimilate disparate elements and reproduce itself in so many ways. Had it not been so, these would not be the closing years of the so-called "American century."a

# NOTES

1. Part of this essay derives from a paper delivered at the First Conference of the Spanish Association of American Studies at Madrid in 1994. I wish to acknowledge the constructive criticism of *Miscelánea's* anonymous readers. I am also indebted to Sally Burgess and Marita Fumero for their comments on this work in a previous stage.

2. Contrast my arguments with those offered by T. Sprigee and A. L. Rowse. See Sprigee (1980: 200) for an assessment of Santayana's approach to the United States. On the contrary, Rowse (1990: 320) insists on the influence of Spanish thinkers of the "Generation of 1898" on Santayana's referential framework.

3. Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy* (1993: 97). Hereafter, page numbers will be given at the end of the excerpt; the title is abbreviated as GT.

4. My italics. Santayana's criticism of Emerson's negation of history is traced from 1900, when *The Interpretation of Poetry and Religion* was published. In the chapter on Emerson Santayana described what came to be one of the most permanent charges against Transcendentalism: "To reject tradition and think as one might have thought if no man had ever existed before." See Santayana (1969: 216-233); quotation from p. 220.

5. In a general sense I agree with some of the ideas expressed by Philip Fisher (1988).

6. See Eric Sundquist (1988: 501 ff). For a contrasting comment on the ideology of the West as a literary region and, especially Wister's achievement, see Peter Conn (1983: 14). Despite their obvious differences, both authors consider a common source in Henry Nash Smith's seminal metaphor written in the late 1940s: "The agrarian utopia in the garden of the world was destroyed, or rather aborted, by the land speculator and the railroad monopolist. These were in turn but expressions of the larger forces at work in American society after the Civil War—the machine, the devices of corporation finance, and the power of big business over Congress." See Smith (1969: 191).

7. For Santayana's previous acknowledgment of Whitman's poetry, see Ross Posnock (1991: 69-70).

8. Such opinion can be inferred in *The Sense of Beauty* (1896). Santayana wonders on the controversial borderline between the form and the content: "The Beautiful does not depend on the useful . . . but it is not independent of the necessary, for the necessary must also be the habitual and consequently the basis of the type, and of all its imaginative variations." See Santayana (1955: 98).

9. Quoted by Ross Posnock (1987: 34).

10. See also Douglas Tallack's interpretation (1991: 148).

11. See also Lentricchia (1986: 20); Rowse (1990: 323).

12. For an account of James's ultimate social applications of the pragmatic method, compare Lentricchia's argument (1986: 10) with Ralph Barton Perry's seminal study of William James's achievement (1964: 294 ff).

13. For more on the ideological debate Dewey-Santayana on account of culture, see Robert Westbrook (1991, esp. 345); for the sociological loopholes in Santayana's naturalism, see Warren Susman (1985: 92 ff.).

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