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THE AVANT-GARDE'S VISUAL ARTS IN LIGHT OF SANTAYANA'S IDEA OF VITAL LIBERTY

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Abstract: In the present paper, the author looks at the political dimension of some trends in the visual arts within twentieth-century avant-garde groups (cubism, expressionism, fauvism, Dada, abstractionism, surrealism) through George Santayana's idea of vital liberty. Santayana accused the avant-gardists of social and political escapism, and of becoming unintentionally involved in secondary issues. In his view, the emphasis they placed on the medium (or diverse media) and on treating it as an aim in itself, not, as it should be, as a transmitter through which a stimulating relationship with the environment can be had, was accompanied by a focus on fragments of life and on parts of existence, and, on the other hand, by a de facto rejection of ontology and cosmology as being crucial to understanding life and the place of human beings in the universe. The avant-gardists became involved in political life by responding excessively to the events of the time, instead of to the everlasting problems that are the human lot.
Keywords: art, aesthetics, Santayana, avant-garde, liberty

Vital liberty and the "penitent" arts

George Santayana (1863-1952), a Spanish-American philosopher, poet, best-selling author, and cultural critic, believed that the culture and art of his day was become increasingly *democratic*, which by no means meant that they were becoming increasingly *liberal*. The avant-garde groups—cubists, expressionists, fauvists, Dadaists, futurists, abstractionists, and surrealists, to enumerate the most influential—were a part of the process of the democratization of the cultural and political life of the epoch, yet, they did not contribute—despite their claims—to making life more liberal, nor did they make those involved in cultural life much freer than before. Santayana used the term "liberal" specifically; in a note entitled "Liberalism and Democracy" (published in 1969, though written much earlier), he explained that liberalism is individualistic, pluralistic, "respectful towards things alien, new, or unknown; it welcomes diversity; it abhors compulsion; it distrusts custom." Whereas democracy necessarily provides more or less definite limits to singularity: "It would be a violent tyranny to make majorities absolute if, in a democracy the majority and the minority were not much alike" (Santayana 1969, 260).

In *Dominations and Powers* (1951), he defined his concept of *vital liberty* as the "exercise of powers and virtues native to oneself and to one's country" (Santayana 1951/

1998, 58). Fully exercising vital liberties means activating people's latent energies and evoking the potentialities of the cultural environment in the name of the moral autonomy of each of them. This includes a better appreciation of their heritages, and an ampler self-fulfillment. The notion of vital liberty refers to the distinct types of excellences that can be realized by those for whom these excellences are the articulations of their deepest needs and passions (cf. Skowroński 2007, 100-102). Santayana strongly rejected the claim that he was interested in introducing his own partisan political concept or a clearly defined vision of a social order; in many places he assured his readers that he welcomed other thinkers' ways, all the more so if they are complete, coherent, and bear witness to the authentic depths of the creators' souls

> If any community can become and wishes to become communistic 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 realisable, and whether those who pursue them fancy them to be exclusively and universally right: an illusion pregnant with injustice, oppression, and war (Santayana 1986, 227).

Santayana appreciated some particular groups, for example the cubists—describing cubism as "by no means an inexpert or meaningless thing" (Santayana 1936, 155); this did not stop him from harshly criticizing it and labeling it "Penitent Art" (cf. *ibid*.). One of the main reasons for this involved a non-artistic and an extra-aesthetic aspect and dealt with the notions of "vital liberty" and "liberalism." The avant-gardists, Santayana claimed, despite their cognitive, liberal, artistic, and humanistic ambitions, did not contribute to humans' vital liberties, nor did they contribute to the development and enrichment of the already established patterns of aesthetic thinking. Instead, they manifested their inability to face the cultural crisis of the *fin-de-siècle* and proposed a new and positive cultural project. His skepticism about the avant-garde arts overlapped with his accusation that they lacked an understanding of life and the world; this lack of understanding was caused, among other things, by their ignorance of the naturalistic roots of the aesthetic experience and vital liberty. He defended the naturalistic character of art, or aesthetic naturalism, against those tendencies that would attempt to re-construct the world anew and would see works of art as semi-independent entities with their own norms and rules, with hardly any reference to the external reality. Such was the case, for example, in abstractionism. Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), a leading abstractionist painter and the founder of a specific version called *suprematism*, wrote in his manifesto that "the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth" (Malevich 1915/1926, no page given). In part, such a stance had a political dimension, and Malevich put it this way: "The art of the past which stood, at least ostensibly, in the service of religion and the state, will take on new life in the pure (unapplied) art of Suprematism, which will build up a new world, the world of feeling" (Malevich 1915/1926).

In contrast, Santayana took it for granted that the trends in the arts that ignore the naturalistic background and focus upon "pure color," "caricature," and "deformation," display a helplessness in dealing more amply with real life and in providing a more penetrating experience of the world:

> I call pure colour and caricature penitent art, because it is only disappointment in other directions that drives artists back to these primary effects. By an austere and deliberate abstinence from everything that naturally tempts them, they achieve in this way a certain piece; but they would far rather have found it by genuinely recovering their na veté. Sensuous splendour and caricature would then have seemed to them not the acme of abstract art, but the obvious truth of things; they would have doted on puppets and pantomime as a child dotes on dolls, without ever noticing how remote they are from reality (Santayana 1936, 153).

From this viewpoint, avant-garde art seemed a sort of escape rather than a fuller realization of individual life and a deeper understanding of what should be done to make life better. In "What is Aesthetics?" (1936) Santayana wrote:

> a part of man's ideal, an ingredient in his ultimate happiness, is to find satisfaction for his eyes, for his imagination, for his hand or voice aching to embody latent tendencies in explicit forms. Perfect success in this vital, aesthetic undertaking is possible, however, only when artistic impulse is quite healthy and representative, that is, when it is favourable to all other interests and is in turn supported by them all. If this harmony fails, the aesthetic activity collapses inwardly by inanition—since every other impulse is fighting against it—while for the same reason its external products are rendered trivial, meretricious, and mean. They will still remain symptomatic, as excrements are, but they will cease to be works of rational art, because they will have no further vital function, no human use (Santayana 1936, 35).

In the avant-guard we deal with a definite rejection of such universal norms as classic aesthetics had; the Dadaistic way of "composing" "poetry" (the cut-up technique) being a most telling example. Tristan Tzara (1896-1963), one of the leaders of the group, famously suggested, in "To Make a Dadaist Poem" (1920), the following method: the sheets of paper on which some poetry had been written were cut into small pieces and, then, these pieces were accidentally re-collected and re-arranged so as to give a new or re-constructed version of the poem (cf. Tzara 1920). This provocative stance was also applicable to the aesthetic canons, according to which these works were to be assessed. At this point we can openly talk about a political dimension of the avant-garde's artistic rebellion and their aesthetic revolt, because their programs factually manifested their reservations about the established centers of cultural polities of the time, their criticisms were directed against those who were powerful in imposing the norms and criteria of aesthetic taste upon the audience, and they had doubts about the cultural institutions, which, in this way or another, were very closely connected with the political centers of power. The avant-gardists were, politically speaking, free and contested the established order; in contrast, Santayana, wanted to respect the order—or the existing orders within well established traditions—and, simultaneously, make it better and more perfect.

The rejection of the classic tradition might be acceptable to him under the condition that the substitution would provide us with something that was more complete, instead of something that was poorer, with something more instrumental so that we can live better lives, and give us a more penetrating insight into reality, including the social reality and the cosmic one. Santayana treated the arts seriously enough to look at them as a medium that can make life fuller, better, freer, and wiser. A telling example of what he expected of the arts (poetry in this particular instance) as regards their extra-aesthetic role might be a quote he provided when asked to review a piece of poetry. He sketched out his way of judging the arts as follows:

> What has this composition accomplished? Is it viable? Is it a stone in any habitable and homelike edifice in which the human imagination can come and dwell? Are we, by our retrospective literary fables, doing more than indulge a sort of school-boy's day-dream, dealing with nothing real, with nothing that can beautify or colour pertinently the lives we must lead? Is not our whole imaginative labour one hollow anachronism, encouraged by a mere coterie of dilettanti, and made possible by a pathetic incapacity to face our own world and feel the true eloquence and passion of our lives? (Santayana 2001, 309)

Below, I would like to briefly discuss Santayana's stance contrasting it with that of the avant-gardists' on some specific points, by focusing on the following pairs of opposites: 1) The *completion* and *perfection* in Santayana's aesthetics vs. *deformation* and *fragmentation*, as presented so characteristically in cubism and expressionism, especially in so-called analytic cubism; 2) Santayana's criticism of *primitivism* in cubism and expressionism; 3) His criticism of color as the main medium of artistic expression**,** as it was in fauvism; 4) *Harmony* understood as a union with natural forces (Santayana) vs. *harmony* understood as the internal order of a given work of art, without any visual representation of the external reality (in abstractionism); 5) The *imagination* vs. *dreaming* (in surrealism). Let me stress that I do not intend to make an exhaustive, detailed, and systematic comparison of these two aesthetics (Santayana's and the avant-garde's); the following comments are made to better show the relationship between the aesthetic themes and such aspects of political life as liberty and the recognition of the aesthetic role of the established centers of cultural policy that can have an influence upon the (vital) liberties of members of the public. Taking on board the aesthetic themes as did the avant-garde, and attempting to render these themes by means of a new language of expression, made the avant-gardists distance themselves from the established network of relationships within the socio-political order, not just from the artistic conventions and the aesthetic canons they wanted to break away from. It was a search for something that was *new* and *original* generally, rather than something that was technical and professional. Their efforts were expended in the conviction that what they had at that time was not enough, and the realization that artistic ambitions and social hopes should be looked for someplace else. Santayana did not see—or he was not ready to see—that and he was against the way in which the new arts articulated their aims and expectations.

Completion and perfection vs. deformation and fragmentation (in analytic cubism)

In the updated version of *The Life of Reason* (1905-1906, on which Santayana worked in 1951) we can read the following statement as regards the weight of *completion*: "What I have yearned for all my life, is not so much cosmic unity—like Whitehead, but simply 'completion.' If I see a circle half-drawn, I yearn to complete it" (Santayana 1905-1906/1998, x). This longing for completion was not purely philosophical or exclusively aesthetic in character; it did not refer to completion as an intrinsic value either. Instead, he wrote about completion as the ultimate effect of embracing possibly all the important aspects of a given object or of a given phenomenon to make it a coherent wholeness; the truth about a given object is a result of the incorporation of a variety of ingredients that make up this object or this phenomenon in addition to it showing its significance in the world and its possibly full realization in the practice of communal life. Amongst the many forms of opposition

to completion we could find more or less accidental renditions of the given object: *incompletion*, *deviation*, *perversion*, *abstraction*, *deformation*, and *fragmentation*—much used in the avant-garde work. Although all of these have been widely used in the arts throughout their history, deformation and fragmentation occupy a special place in twentieth century artistic trends; the paintings of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and George Braque (1882-1963) revolutionized the visual arts and created a new tradition of visualization by—if we wish to use the ontological point of reference—rendering reality by means of deformation and fragmentation.

There are many interpretations—within the history of art—as to the artistic role and aesthetic meaning of deformation and fragmentation in analytic cubism and expressionism (and also in some other groups). Without analyzing them here, I would like to briefly comment on their social and political dimensions, and I am prompted to do so by Santayana's view quoted above that holds that "If social structure were rational, its free expression would be so too" (Santayana 1905-1906/1998, 376). If the cubists—as we can interpret Santayana's view—had believed in the rational structure of society, they would have tried to artistically render it accordingly. A sense that the world is only partially a logical structure with immutable laws and definite norms made it possible for some of them to experiment with the potential possibilities of objects, bodies, and states of things as they might look like in the final appearance. Instead of attempting to discover and explore facts that actually exist according to established procedures, as mimetic art and realistic philosophy tried to do for a long time, they wanted to re-construct reality in a new way. They wanted to do this, because they did not trust the efficiency of the established procedures to obtain the truth about objects on the one hand, and, on the other, to capture universal structures rationally and systematically. True, they believed that objects had *some* structure—the regularity of the cube manifested this belief—yet, they did not believe that the "surface structure" of the perceived objects was as real as it might seem at first sight. They simply wished to re-discover the world and re-arrange the way things are perceived, because they did not share the conviction that the objects, bodies, and states of things are essentially immutable in character; as Guillaume Apollinaire, in his book on the cubists (*The Cubist Painters*, 1913) put it,

> The difference between Cubism and earlier painting is that it is not an imitative art, but a conceptual art, which reaches up to the heights of creation. When depicting conceived-reality or created-reality, the painter can obtain a three-dimensional effect, can, so to speak, *cubify*. He could not do that by just representing seen-reality (Apollinaire 1913/2004, 25).

Below, I venture to sketch out the following outline of a philosophical interpretation of the deformed figures of women presented in some of Picasso's and Braque's works—for example: Picasso's *Woman with a Mandolin* (1909), *Girl with a Mandolin* (1910), *Woman with a Mandolin* (1911) and Braque's *Woman with a Guitar* (1913)—to provide an illustration of this re-constructive stance.

In a situation in which ethical norms and aesthetic canons were scarcely believed to be capable of dealing with the "really real" and realistic works of art as factual representations of the truth about objects, there was a growing tendency to see them all as sorts of conventions cultivated by cultural policy makers. This was also true of the notion of womanhood. There seemed to be almost no objective way of defining womanhood; nor

was there a definite way to apply the norms and principles for establishing the essence of womanhood; nor were there any sources—social, political, cultural, moral, or philosophical—that would be ultimately justified in imposing such non-partisan norms and non-biased definitions on the issue. If here had been, there would have been no reason to cultivate the established and conventional ways of doing so; instead, such norms and principle were to be re-invented and re-established without much concern as to what the traditional centers of cultural power, including the Church, the education system, and the prevailing morality, had to say about them. There is barely any cognitive meaning in practicing this type of art, the cubists might think, if we are to understand by this (cognition) a realistic and true rendering of the world that exists independently of the mind, and the objects (and figures) within it. Instead, practicing this kind of art is re-constructive and re-inventive in meaning, and the artist's role is to propose, by means of artistic compositions, fresh vistas and new options for seeing the world and making sense of its objects, bodies, norms, regulations, and obligations. From this viewpoint, one of the great achievements of cubism (and partly expressionism) was to show us the great variety of possible interpretations of the world, including the great variety of possible interpretations as to what womanhood is and what it can be. It seems to me that contemporary feminists should appreciate Picasso's role—despite various controversies regarding his sexist treatment of women in his art and in his private life—in showing women and womanhood as something indefinite, unlimited, and to be re-invented. Picasso, like the feminists (and their followers and sympathizers) today, rejected the conventional presentation of female themes in art and the female social role in public life—against the Church and the established socio-political conventions of the time—and, in this sense, he engaged his art with political life in the broader meaning of the term.

The main reasons why Santayana opposed artistic deformation as a serious means of artistic expression were as follows. Firstly, deformation (and fragmentation), although useful in some contexts as a means of intellectual provocation, does not provide us with the *truth* about a given object or phenomenon. It does not allow us to embrace, as the classic arts could, a fuller insight into the presented object and a more penetrating look into the place of this object in a more universal scheme of things. Santayana did not claim that the truth about a given object is fully attainable and that the factual presentation by a given piece of art is satisfactory; instead, art, like philosophy, can assist by providing a view from just a certain perspective and from just a certain angle of vision, yet, it can bring us closer to the truth about it and closer to its beauty.

Secondly, it expresses the artist's surrender in his attempts to reach such an insight and penetration: "It is not true that deformity expresses the spirit—it only expresses the sad plight of the spirit that can't express itself" (Santayana 2001, 38). Treating seriously deformation as the bearer of artistic values—as some avant-gardists tended to do—not only manifests the poor state of the spiritual and cultural background that makes it necessary for the artists to use this means of expression but, at the same time, expresses a sort of self-disrespect. Namely, those who became engaged in deformation as a reliable means of artistic expression had given up hope of facing the world as it is, and abandoned looking to the future and fully respecting what the world really looks like and how life in it can be made better. He wrote that "Perhaps what we regard at first sight as a terrible decline in art may be sometimes the awakening of this sort of self-scorn. See how ugly I am, it cries, how brutish, common,

and deformed!" and continued "Instead of decorating a Byzantine sanctuary, our artists do penance in a psychological desert, studying their own sensations, the mysteries of sheer light and sound" (Santayana 1936, 159). He characterized the work of such artists in this light:

> Before you can compose a chaos or paint the unnamable, you must train yourself to a severe abstention from all practical habits of perception; you must heroically suppress the understanding. The result, when the penance is genuinely performed, has a very deep and recondite charm; you revert to what the spinal column might feel if it had a separate consciousness, or to what the retina might see, if it could be painlessly cut off from the brain; lights, patterns, dynamic suggestions, sights and memories fused together, hypnotic harmonies such as may visit a vegetative or even mineral sensitivity; you become a thousand prisms and mirrors reflecting one another. This is one kind of aesthetic repentance. Vain, vain, it says to itself, was the attempt to depict or beautify external objects; let material objects be what they will; what are they to the artist? (Santayana 1936, 155-156).

In contrast, Santayana's position was naturalistic, materialistic and perfectionist, according to Greek (e.g. Democritus, Aristotle) and classic (Renaissance) standards. In this aesthetic stance, the obligation of the artist is to explore the ideal—according to the nature of an object and the knowledge of the object we get from science—, and present potential excellent renderings of the object. Yet, merely cultivating the traditional way of presenting objects or imitating the classic standards is not the main concern here; thinking about the past equals using the accumulated knowledge about the objects and the ways it has been perceived, in order to make it even better and more complete;

> It is not the past that seems to me affecting, entrancing, or pitiful to lose. It is the ideal. It is that vision of perfection that we just catch, or for a moment embody in some work of art, or in some idealised reality: it is the concomitant inspiration of life, always various, always beautiful, hardly ever expressible in its fullness (Santayana 2001, 331-332).

Critique of primitivism and caricature (in cubism and expressionism)

There was a strong tendency—especially in post-impressionism (Paul Gauguin, Henri Rousseau), proto-cubism (Pablo Picasso's African Period) and expressionism (Paul Klee)—to look for inspiration in "primitive" cultures in the conviction that cultures free of Western civilization could have preserved the most essential traits of dealing with reality in their artistic products. Such an experience would—beyond a layer of a local culture—maintain the pristine fountains of a trans-cultural experience and a universal approach toward the universe in the "savages." The so called "primitive" cultures would appear, to Western artists, to be "authentic" cultures that have a more "genuine" insight into reality and more opportunities to evoke "archaic expression" than the artificial and conventional Western civilization has had. A political aspect of the whole issue was the avant-gardists' reservations about the officially held norms, topics, ways of artistic creation, sanctuaries of the works of art, and the tastes of the audiences: in other words, the whole system of the arrangement and the vindication of the sphere of aesthetics had lost its solemnity, its exclusiveness, and its truth. The conviction that European culture had higher status and a special role, along with its procedures, artistic achievements, and political regulations, was also severely undermined. In this context, the

notion "primitive" started to mean "authentic," and the notion "savage"—"spontaneous"; the era of Europe's cultural colonization and artistic superiority came to an end, at least in the minds of many of the avant-gardists.

Many of them visited exotic countries in order to take a deeper look at unknown ways of seeing and perceiving the world. For example, Otto Mueller (1874-1930), one of the *Die Brücke* group of German expressionists, visited Hungarian and Romanian Gypsies in the 1920s trying to study their authenticity and use it in his own works; Emil Nolde (1867-1956), one of the leaders of *The Blue Rider* group within German expressionism, went much further, to New Guinea, to study the local tribes—of which his pictures *Youth of Papua* (1913/1914) and *Papuan Head* (1914) are excellent illustrations—and drafted a book (not finished) *The Artistic Expressions of Primitive People*. Most famously, however, and much earlier, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), one of the greatest post-impressionists, explored the island of Tahiti; his most famous work, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897), most conspicuously expressed the hopes and expectations of the European artists in encountering "primitive" art. The answer to these fundamental questions should be looked for in the savage cultures, not in our civilized and Christian one; none of the European institutions, no matter how long and noble their heritage had been, could be relied upon to reveal the real sources of truth about our life and our destiny. Also Picasso referred to medieval pre-Roman Iberian art, and to African and Oceanic inspirations in some of his most famous works, including *The Young Ladies of Avignon* (1907): the angularly presented bodies, African mask-like faces, and a savage climate of the whole work, made the whole thing uncommon, new, and original.

Santayana did not criticize simplification as such; what he criticized was the act of *reducing* the presented objects to their accidental aspects; *simplifying* their contents by narrowing them down into something like skeleton-like schemes; *depriving* them of the charm they had when seen in their fullness and completion; and, also, *escaping* from the culture that could suggest answers to the problems. For him, art should provide us with much more, not much less, than the object itself. Yet, one of the primal conditions of the presentation is to embrace in it the essential substance of the presented object in its truth. For these reasons, art, in general

> must be more real than nature, or it loses its raison d'être. By more real, I mean more primitive, simple, and clear. A passion, feeling, or character must be presented more according to its inner essence and tendency than it can appear in the world owing to disturbing accidents. A composition which is nothing but a mass of accidents is worse than the truth, uglier than the reality. Why should one take the trouble of producing such a thing? Nature does it all too frequently; but she seldom succeeds in bringing a single seed or tendency to full development without distorting it and crippling it by some foreign influence. This is why she leaves room for art (Santayana 2001, 37).

Santayana did not suggest that the so-called "primitive" cultures did not or do not try to make their arts more complete; nor did he mean that they wanted to merely sketch reality instead of giving it a fuller interpretation and an ampler coloring. In "Penitent Art" he wrote that "Savages were never rudimentary on purpose; they were not experimenting in the distortion or simplification of forms; much less, of course, did they voluntarily eliminate all

representation of objects in order to deepen sensibility for the medium. They simply painted as well as they could" (Santayana 1936, 158). The Europeans, who have had a very long and a very rich heritage of doing the same, should not reject the achievements of their tradition, so rich and ample in inspirations, and should not look for stimulation amongst those, whose artistic ways have been much weaker; the European way of artistic creation should grow ever more perfect in providing us with better and deeper insights. This does not mean that Santayana was a sort of Eurocentric chauvinist.

He did not intend to reject or deplore the artistic (and philosophical) traditions of other cultures in the name of cultural prejudice; instead, he appreciated artistically and philosophically well-developed cultures, and those that have, among other things, long aesthetic practices, multifarious modes of artistic expressions, and many elaborate movements of philosophical thought. From his works we can see that, apart from the European, American, and Jewish cultures, he highly valued the Oriental. He studied Arabian literature (*One Thousand and One Nights*), Hindu (*Mahabharata*) and Chinese; in one of his letters he wrote something that does not allow us to accuse him of cultural Eurocentrism, namely: "I happen to be reading Lao Tse at odd moments. I wonder if we have any better solution to propose than he proposed long ago" (Santayana 2003b, 400). All this is compatible with his general conviction—much used in his philosophy, literary criticism, and aesthetics—articulated while deliberating in the ruins of Damascus, during his trip to the Middle East in 1905, which says that "The full grown human soul should respect all traditions and understand all passions; at the same time it should possess and embody a particular culture" (Santayana 1986, 464).

Criticism of using color as a main medium of artistic expression (fauvism)

The emancipation and elevation of a part of the material aspect (color) of the sensual perception onto the highest plane of the aesthetic experience, was, for Santayana, a kind of degradation of art and a kind of admittance of its impotency. Instead of treating it as merely a medium whereby the perceiving agent has contact with the nature of things, color obtained special status in the works of fauvists, and some other groups. For him, something like this was a pitiful example of the artists renouncing their struggle to get to the truth of things and another symptom of the abandonment of the attempts to profoundly understand the world along with the artists abandoning the search for the adequate tools for doing so. Leaving just one, coloring, as a principal "instrument," the use of which to express the subjective interpretation of the reality was unacceptable. In a letter to Curt John Ducasse (1881-1969), an American philosopher and aesthetician, Santayana characterized the traditional or classical understanding of the arts as the "command over the instrumentalities and methods" (Santayana 2003a, 39); the opposite of which was characterized, if we assumed Santayana's viewpoint, by such groups as the fauvists: the instrumentalities, methods, and means would be focused upon more than the object itself and the truth about the object. He could not accept such an attitude towards the meaning of color—usually treated as a medium in the practice of artistic activities—, which elevated its meaning and made painters focus on it at the cost of other factors.

Santayana's criticism can be seen as ambiguous. On the one hand, Henri Matisse, (1869-1954), the father and the main leader of the fauvists, and some other representatives of this

group, did realize the emotional, expressive, persuasive, and subjective—not cognitive, not descriptive, and not objective—functions of their paintings. They wanted to evoke emotions, in themselves as authors, and in the audience as the perceivers. They claimed that color is both a means of articulating the author's emotions and a means of better influencing the audience's minds. They did not claim that they wanted to render the world around as it really is, and they had no intention of showing the truth about the objects or some states of things in their works or by means of their works. For example, in *The Green Line* (1905), Matisse painted a portrait of his wife using colors to evoke her image and, famously, used, unnaturally, a slash of green paint down the center as if to indicate a borderline on her bisected face. Matisse did not intend to "describe" her nor did he want to objectively analyze the features of her face. Instead, he wanted the emotions aroused and the sensations experienced to be petrified in the work.

On the other hand, Santayana's criticism is to the point, because the fauvists did avoid the path of the classic doctrines in embracing the objective features of the real world and they became articulators of a subject-directed interest and a medium (color) oriented mode of presentation in their artistic productions. Some additional context must have influenced this specific way of rendering the objects round about, and that was photography, gaining popularity at that time. The fauvists—as co-founder of fauvism Andre Derain (1880-1954), reminisced later—wanted to do everything possible to make their paintings as different from photographic films as they could and to offer the viewer a different way of perceiving and experiencing objects than a photograph would (cf. Haftman 1954, 25). Interestingly, Santayana seemed enthusiastic about photography at the very beginning of its nascence, and his speech, at Harvard Camera Club, can be seen as proof of this. I am not sure of the exact date of his presentation (the text was published decades later, in 1967) but it must have been before 1912, when he left America for good, which was more or less the time when the fauvists had their acme. Santayana said, among other things, that photography can do us a great service in depicting the world as it factually is; "To be accurate and complete is therefore the ideal of photography, as of memory" (Santayana 1967, 401). He treated photography, as opposed to Derain, as an instrument that would help provide us with a better and more exact exposure of the reality in its truth.

Classic harmony vs. abstractionist harmony

The notion of "harmony" has been one of the most crucial in the arts and aesthetics, since the beginning of Western thought. In the Pythagorean and Platonic doctrines, so very present in many branches of classic thought (including Christian, neo-Platonic, and the Renaissance), the "cosmic order" on the one hand, and, on the other, "harmony," "proportion," and "balance" signified a unity of the whole universe, including social and artistic reality. Universal reality was rational as a whole, and, in this way, mathematically calculable, and the arts like music, painting, and architecture, should reflect that by means of a proportion and harmony that could be mathematically estimated. The Greek Parthenon was an example of harmony in architecture, logic was an example of harmony in science and Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* was an example of harmony in anthropology—all showing the perfection and the beauty of the world as a whole, not just in its particular parts—and they are

manifestations of the classic stance. In classic aesthetics, certain works of art were intended to reflect, in their symmetry and balance, these universal proportions; they were to follow cosmic order and the harmony of the universe—such was the linkage with the world that was external to the given work of art and to any human constructions. The internal structure of a given work of art should be correlated with the external structure of the universe; any separation of these two would produce distortion, misunderstanding, and distaste.

In contrast to that view, for abstractionists such as Malevich, already mentioned, and Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), harmony, being also a crucial factor in art and aesthetics, referred factually to the unity of the internal elements within the particular work of art, to its inner meaning, and to its intrinsic beauty. Since works of art are separate and semi-independent unities with hardly any logical or representational connection with the world outside of the work, the realization of harmony in each of them has a unique character and a singular specificity. Kandinsky, in *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* (1914), put it the following way:

> Perhaps with envy and with a mournful sympathy we listen to the music of Mozart. It acts as a welcome pause in the turmoil of our inner life, as a consolation and as a hope, but we hear it as the echo of something from another age long past and fundamentally strange to us. The strife of colours, the sense of balance we have lost, tottering principles, unexpected assaults, great questions, apparently useless striving, storm and tempest, broken chains, antitheses and contradictions, these make up our harmony. *The composition arising from this harmony is a mingling of colour and form each with its separate existence, but each blended into a common life which is called a picture by the force of the inner need.* Only these individual parts are vital. Everything else (such as surrounding conditions) are subsidiary (Kandinsky 1914, 86).

A work of art is seen here as an autonomous piece of matter, with its specific space, structure, unrepeatable relations within this structure, and with its original and newly constructed language; without knowing this language we, the receivers, cannot adequately make sense of the work and understand the meaning of the abstract constructions. The work is harmonious, because the internal elements make up a composition according to the principles that are internal to this work; we do not talk about harmony in the classic meaning of this term, as a well balanced relation between the work and the world external to this work.

From the point of view of Santayana's aesthetics, abstractionism or abstractionist tendencies were unacceptable, because they practically meant cutting up and separating out something to which harmony naturally referred to as to its inevitable background and as its natural point of reference. While discussing the capacity of imagination in a text devoted to literature, he, indirectly, referred to such tendencies that would cut us off from practical life, the ordinary perception of daily things, and living sources of vital liberty; "If the imagination merely alienates us from reality, without giving us either a model for its correction or a glimpse into its structure, it becomes a refuge of poetical selfishness. Such selfishness is barren, and the fancy, feeding only on itself, grows leaner every day" (Santayana 1900/1957, 20).

Imagination and naturalism vs. dreaming and fiction (surrealism)

In his first Surrealist *Manifesto* (1924) Andre Breton (1896-1966), the founder of surrealism and its main ideologist, asked the following questions:

> Why should I not expect from the sign of the dream more than I expect from a degree of consciousness which is daily more acute? Can't the dream also be used in solving the fundamental questions of life? Are these questions the same in one case as in the other and, in the dream, do these questions already exist? Is the dream any less restrictive or punitive than the rest?

He answered them in the following way:

> I am growing old and, more than that reality to which I believe I subject myself, it is perhaps the dream, the difference with which I treat the dream, which makes me grow old (Breton 1924, no pages given).

He paid tribute to Sigmund Freud, whose thought hugely influenced the philosophy of surrealists through the years to come, by claiming that "Freud very rightly brought his critical faculties to bear upon the dream," and that thanks to Freud's discoveries "a current of opinion is finally forming by means of which the human explorer will be able to carry his investigation much further" (Breton 1924).

Breton continued by saying that "If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them—first to seize them, then, if need be, to submit them to the control of our reason. The analysts themselves have everything to gain by it" (Breton 1924). The artistic rendering of dreams (in poetry, literature, and painting) should be, then, a way to best evoke human aspirations and make human life better for the individual and in communal dimensions. Breton's first manifesto aspired to be a sort of social program that showed how surrealism could contribute to the melioration of social and political life, not just the aesthetic and artistic. In it, he claimed that man "alone can determine whether he is completely master of himself, that is, whether he maintains the body of his desires, daily more formidable, in a state of anarchy. Poetry teaches him too. It bears within itself the perfect compensation for the miseries we endure." He continued by proclaiming a kind of a socio-political program in the following way:

> The time is coming when it decrees the end of money and by itself will break the bread of heaven for the earth! There will still be gatherings on the public squares, and *movements* you never dared hope participate in. Farewell to absurd choices, the dreams of dark abyss, rivalries, the prolonged patience, the flight of the seasons, the artificial order of ideas, the ramp of danger, time for everything! May you only take the trouble to *practice* poetry. Is it not incumbent upon us, who are already living off it, to try and impose what we hold to be our case for further inquiry? (Breton 1924).

All this does not mean that surrealism became an artistic demonstration of the internal life of humans without any reference to the external reality. For example, Max Ernst (1891-1976)—who, incidentally, studied psychology and psychiatry for some time and was fascinated with the paintings of the mentally ill patients he would meet in asylums—from time to time dealt with cosmic themes. He evoked celestial bodies in many of his paintings, prints, and collages, for example in *Approaching Puberty* (1921) and *La femme 100 têtes* (1929). Yet, these themes expressed the unconscious powers of human lust, the conviction that "inscribed upon the night sky are some of our deepest held fears and fantasies" (Hatch 2004, 87), and the reference to the fertilizing energy of "solar semen" or solar wind (cf.

Hatch 2004, 91). Ernst shared Breton's view on liberty and freedom that it should be searched for in the inside of human minds and human hearts rather than outside of them, for example, in the relationships among people and in the non-human, cosmic, world. This way, he alleviated, if not annihilated the normative role of the existing social obligations and the regulative character of the political norms in his art. Such a stance is more understandable if we bear in mind that the surrealists grew up amidst the terrible experiences of the First World War and the atrocities committed at that time in the name of the highest values; they—in contrast to their artistic ancestors, Dada—wanted to rebel against the norms existing at that time and, simultaneously, proposed a vision of a new order. Part of this new vision of man was the mission to explore the world of individual dreams to greater excess.

Focusing upon the exploration of these internal forces and moving away from the exploration of the external and the non-human world would, for Santayana, represent the bone of contention with surrealism (and with Freud). Santayana had always been a critic of anthropocentrism in its different forms: in transcendentalism, pragmatism, utilitarianism, Freudism, and in others. The exploration of human dreams would be narrower and shallower than the exploration of human imagination in reference to the whole world, and not forgetting that humans constitute a small, if not tiny part of the universal economy of existence. Elevating man's world, the greater the elevation of part of man's world such as his/her dreams to the level of a special faculty for recognizing the truth of destiny would, at the start, seem abortive for Santayana. Imagination should bring us closer to the richness of the world, including the external world, rather than separating us from it by limiting our attention to what is inside us and our dreams. It may be thus, because imagination, unlike dreaming and fancy, is a faculty through which we can attempt to reach, or try to reach, objective perfection in our lives, instead of attempting barely more than to fulfill our subjective ambitions. Seeking ideals is wiser for us than focusing on our egoistic projections; the evaluation of things that have more than just an individual meaning and transcending our lives so that we can see ourselves from a much more universal perspective should be one of the aims of any socio-political program. If we lose this universal perspective, we give up searching for more sense to our lives and our attempts become artificial and fictitious in the negative sense of these terms.

A search for the meaning of life and attempts to lend it much more significance and coloring would seem to unite Santayana and the surrealists; however, the way in which they proposed to realize these aims separated them extensively. Santayana would see the norms, both aesthetic and political, in external and general factors, rather than in internal and individual ones. He would not advise that the depths of the individual mind be penetrated to such a degree as the surrealists (and Freud) proposed, so as not to become too fanciful in aesthetic life and too anarchistic in the political. Indeed, ignorance and anarchism—apart from anthropocentrism and banality—were one of Santayana's major accusations directed towards the world of contemporary art and contemporary politics.

Penetrating the world rather than experiencing it: problems with expression (expressionism)

At first sight, it may appear somewhat strange for us to see that Santayana, who, devoting much attention (in *The Sense of Beauty* and elsewhere) to the problem of "expression" and

"expressiveness", did not appreciate expressionism as an artistic and cultural movement at the beginning of the twentieth century in German-speaking countries. Even more amazingly, he declared his philosophical position using artistic terms, so close to expressionism, by characteristically proclaiming that "If philosophy were the attempt to solve a given problem, I should see reason to be discouraged about its success; but it strikes me that it is rather an attempt to express a half-discovered reality, just as art is, and that two different renderings, if they are expressive, far from cancelling each other add to each other's value" (Santayana 2001, 90). We can detect some common aims in Santayana's aesthetics and in those of expressionism.

Philosophically and epistemologically, one of these aims was to penetrate the depth of the human psyche, which is not so different to Santayana's ascribing such a great role to the psyche, spirit, and imagination in various works. At the same time, culturally and morally, expressionism aimed at liberating the body out of the social conventions and mental prejudices, something that Santayana should have applauded given his claims, in *The Sense of Beauty*, about the crucial role of the body and sexual instinct in aesthetic life. Also, psychologically, expressionists wanted to express the power of emotions, something that was in line with Santayana's appreciation of passion in life. Last but not least, politically, the "deed" or an active posture in reforming social and political life and making art an important tool for this aim would not sound strange to him either. Did, then, Santayana fail to recognize a movement that would, in the visual arts, manifest ideas so close to his heart? My answer to this is no. On closer inspection of Santayana's criticism of the expressionism that comes under the label (along with some its tendencies) of "Penitent Art" and, indirectly, of Walt Whitman we can discover some points relating to the controversy, and the character of this controversy was political in hue.

I evoke Whitman's poetic creation in the context of expressionism, not without reason. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) was translated into German and distributed by a mass market publisher in 1907; it strongly influenced some expressionists and, in this way, the links with German expressionisms became considerably stronger. For example, in the case of Kirchner, already mentioned, the impact of Whitman's ideas can be seen in his adoption of the theme—the cult of corporal freedom and a direct attitude towards Nature, if not unification with her—and the way it is presented in paintings such as *Towards the Sea* (1912). Also, one of the leading literary expressionists of that time, Franz Werfel (1890-1945), labeling Whitman as a "prophet of a cosmic democracy," wrote the following: "Walt Whitman taught me and my generation that in the realm of reality there is nothing commonplace; that in the simplest word, the commonest designation, the most shopworn idea there lies hidden an explosive poetic force surpassing a thousand-fold that which is aesthetically sanctified" (Grunzweig 1994, 56).

Santayana did not share the expressionists' admiration of the American poet. In "Poetry of Barbarism" (1900), he criticized Whitman for promoting an ordinary stance for common people: "Being the poet of the average man, he wished all men to be specimens of that average" (Santayana 1900/1957, 181). He understood the term *expression* to be much wider and deeper in meaning that simply experiencing daily life and the things around us; in the context of art it should mean: "to penetrate and not merely to 'experience' this world, and to penetrate it in every possible direction" (Santayana 2004, 277). He insisted upon penetrating

things in their natural order and beauty, something—as an aside—that is barely possible for an unsophisticated audience to achieve. Without this penetration into the texture of things, the expression would be deprived of its basis and would float on subjective whims, accidental suggestions, and contingent half-truths. Whereas in Whitman, he claimed, "We find the swarms of men and objects rendered as they might strike the retina in a sort of waking dream. It is the most sincere possible confession of the lowest—I mean the most primitive—type of perception" (Santayana 1900/1957, 178). In contrast to the ancient poets, he added, who were more sophisticated and gave proof of "longer intellectual and moral training," Whitman "has gone back to the innocent style of Adam, when the animals filed before him one by one and he called each of them by its name" (*ibid.*).

In sum, Santayana characterized him as a poet of democracy, who tried to express the egalitarian and down-to-earth aspects of Americanism; there is "some analogy," he suggested, between "a mass of images without structure" on the one hand, and, on the other "the notion of an absolute democracy". Santayana concluded the following: "He accordingly came to think that there was a spirit of the New World which he embodied, and which was in complete opposition to that of the Old, and that a literature upon novel principles was needed to express and strengthen this American spirit" (*ibid.,* 182). We should mention at the end that he did not absolve himself from criticizing democracy, as he experienced it in America, by saying that the democracy there was not democratic enough, and in one of his letters he defined "Yankee freedom" as "freedom to walk on the track!" (Santayana 2001, 188).

Santayana as a "self-indulgent impressionist"

A note on Santayana's closer affinity may seem helpful in gaining a better understanding of his criticism of the avant-garde movement. As mentioned above, Santayana openly and frequently expressed the view that the humanities and the arts have much in common. For example, when characterizing his drama *Lucifer: A Theological Tragedy* as "a philosophy conveyed in an image" (Santayana 1936-1940, 291), he intended to say that a comprehensive system of philosophy (and theology) provides us with pictures and images of the universe that in fact are more or less coherent literary (or poetic) compositions about the ontological and epistemic. Since these pictures or images are usually, if not always, taken from a given point of view, like a photographic image taken from a certain perspective, these compositions, in having a constructive character, do not annihilate the objective background of the whole picture, the realistic nature of the presented view, nor the factual, not fictitious, dimension of the universe, of which the world of human affairs constitutes a part. Human affections, human imagination, human sensitivity, and human reason can and should be used in the process of creating these pictures and images of the real world, making them more articulate impressions, more interesting vistas, more penetrating insights, and wiser perspectives.

Although here we encounter the impressionistic stance, I do not want to say that Santayana should be included within the camp of literary impressionists; technically speaking, he did not practice any form of impressionism in his literary career; yet, his way of looking at the world and his way of rendering it resembles the impressionistic approach, and he even labeled himself as "really a self-indulgent impressionist" (Santayana 2004, 277).

He added, somewhere else, that he intended to "sketch my buildings in perspective," (*ibid*.) and briefly mentioned Nietzsche in this context. Although unsure if his interpretation of Nietzsche was correct, he saw some resemblances with Nietzsche's perspectivism. As we know, Nietzsche deplored impressionistic cosmopolitanism, and his *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) inspired expressionists much more than impressionists, yet, his perspectivism—as a *method* of looking at objects from various angles of view, without giving one of them privileged ontological and/or epistemic status—was not incompatible with the impressionistic stance in this respect.

There are many examples that can testify to Santayana's impressionistic and perspectivistic stance in his attempts to philosophically articulate his attitude toward the world. He wrote for example, that "The universe is a sum of vistas: to talk of any one as adequate is like discussing from which mountain you can view the whole surface of the earth … And human experience includes many ways of viewing the world, it is, in fact, a vast succession of momentary ways of viewing it" (Santayana 2001, 116). Elsewhere, the similarity between his and an impressionistic approach seems even closer. Namely, "Existence, learned to see, is intrinsically dispersed…arbitrary not only as a whole, but in the character and place of each of its parts. Change the bids, and you change the mosaic: nor we can count or limit the elements, as in a little closed kaleidoscope, which may be shaken together into the next picture" (Santayana 1940/1951, 16). There is hardly any contingency in the structure of the universe, he says, and an artist, no less than a philosopher, should respect the fact that "accidents are accidents only to ignorance; in reality all physical events flow out of one another by a continuous intertwined derivation" (Santayana 1986, 4). Finally, he appreciated the moment of catching or of having a certain perspective; for example, he defined beauty as "a vital harmony felt and fused into an image under the form of eternity" (Santayana 1967, 422).

Marcel Proust (1871-1922), one of the leading literary impressionists, shared some of Santayana's ontological views. They were so close in this respect, that, in a text entitled "Proust on Essences" (1929), published later in *Obiter Scripta*, Santayana found Proust to be a writer who would skillfully manifest, in his novel *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927), Santayana's doctrine of essences, one of the central points of his philosophical and ontological thought. Santayana wrote of Proust's sensibility as being "exquisite" and "voluminous," that is "filled with endless images and their distant reverberations" (Santayana 1936, 276), and quoted, from Proust, the passages that manifest Proust's impressionism quite clearly:

> These various happy impressions…had this in common, namely, that I felt them as if they were occurring simultaneously in the present moment and in some distant past…The person within me who was at that moment enjoying the impression enjoyed in it the qualities it possessed which were common to both an earlier day and the present moment (Santayana 1936, 275).

Yet, my intention is not to more profoundly analyze Proust's art as a better clarification of Santayana's ontology. Much more crucial, for the purposes of the present article is to indicate their affinity as regards the political dimension of the impressionist stance; this is conspicuous in Proust's sense of freedom through his impressionistically establishing a new relation to the world. Namely, appreciation of the subjective perspective, instead of

rigorously sticking to the existing norms and obligatory canons, appeared to be of primary importance. The same concerned most of the impressionists of the day. Philip Nord, in his book *Impressionists and Politics*, put it the following way:

> To paint portraits of Clemenceau and Rochefort, as Manet did, was to paint modern life, but it was also to make a political statement… Impressionism, in its heyday, associated itself with a democratic politics, which, within the context of the times, was a gesture dramatic enough. Modernism and radical politics did go together (Nord 2000, 9).

By saying this I do not want to suggest that Santayana shared with the impressionists *their* political stance or other features: psychologism, seeking inspiration in the modern rather than in the classic, etc. Yet, I claim that he shared with them the sense of individual freedom and of the justification of sundry vistas in approaching the world. If we were to speculate as to which artistic group of his time Santayana was most sympathetic, impressionism would by far have been the one. Impressionism foreran the avant-garde movement, without being an integral part. Santayana affinity to the former partially explains his distance to the latter

From the standpoint of the language of a work of art

The specific language of a given work of art, irrelevant to the structure of the work, may be more or less vulnerable to being used and abused for non-artistic and non-aesthetic goals. For example, it may become a manifestation of the cultivation of existing norms and liberties or, just the contrary, it may become a voice of protestation, if not a rebellion against the recognized authorities, the accepted conventions, and the established patterns of thought. The more complex a work is in its reference to the richness of the world and to the depth of the human condition, the more this work is capable of meaningful utterance about social, cultural, and political problematics. However, in some cases, things go in a different direction: non-representational works of art—as in the case of the abstractionists—are deprived of any meaning in the classic sense of this word, which does not mean that they are deprived of any meaning in a new sense. When Malevich, already mentioned, proposed that we should see *The Black Square* (1915) as a vision of the unity of the universe, though deprived of any representational imagery, it was extremely difficult for the viewers of the time to understand it and, we can speculate, it would have been unacceptable for Santayana to give it any credit. However, the Communists' and the Stalinists' strong condemnation of abstract art, including Malevich's, can make us realize its political potential. A picture that factually presents hardly anything other than a black square on a white background was seen, in a given political context, as revolutionary, rebellious, and dangerous. The fruit of a non-objective creation demonstrated a different reality and a different approach to reality than the socially engaged creation of the soc-realist aesthetics and its political background. In addition, Malevich's descendants in Eastern Europe, who wanted to follow their master artistically, suffered political repression in the 1960s. There were three main reasons for this: the authors' artistic, philosophical, and spiritual independence from the centers of political power; themes that referred to things differently from the way the political power wanted to see them; and the language in which the artwork was articulated.

Santayana misses, in my view, some of the main achievements of the avant-garde groups. The fact that they worked out a new language, or new languages, in the artistic articulation of life and the universe was one of these. Language, for Santayana and for the classic tradition, should refer to the truth about life and the universe; harmony should deal with the true exigencies of living that take place outside of the work of art; given norms and standards should be compatible with universal ones, and the messages contained within works of art should articulate wisdom rather than sweet will. Internal regularities are vapid when they do not refer to the external rules that govern the flux of life. Likewise, the autonomy of a work of art means nothing if it does not refer to the genuine position that the work (or its author) can aspire to have in life. Santayana might have appreciated the (successful) attempt to create a new artistic language by the avant-guardists; however, he would have asked whether this new language is a better means of telling us the truth about human life and about the universe. If the answer had been in the negative, the whole initiative would have been seen by Santayana as abortive. It would have been even worse in his estimation of the avant-garde work of art, if the answer had also been that this new language does not aspire at all to be a means of better understanding the world as it is. Such was the case with Malevich, to whom I return one more time: "An objective representation, having objectivity as its aim, is something which, as such, has nothing to do with art" (Malevich 1915/1926).

A good question for us would be: was Santayana right to hold such a view of the avant-gardists and their works of art? Perhaps, he himself suggested the answer to this question by saying that the classic arts (Greek, Christian) were so inspirational that he was harmful and unjust in his opinions on the non-classical: "I am unjust to other forms" (Santayana 2001, 44). Perhaps, Christopher Perricone is right in saying that "although temperamentally and stylistically Santayana was unprepared for modernism, much of his work is quite modernist in substance" (Perricone 1994, 637). Due to his classic kind of naturalism, Santayana could not recognize, it seems to me, the potential of the avant-garde groups and their positive role in showing the possibilities of artistic and cultural creation. He might have agreed with the avant-gardists' individualism, but he parted company with them on the role of tradition. He claimed that "Aesthetic values are essentially individual and occasional," rather than to be had by programs, manifestoes, and cultural policy. A cultural policy should give ample space, inspirational, and conditions for making individuals better feel the intuitions; "for intuition the only lens needed is that which nature creates in each living organism: the rest—academies, precepts, public opinion—is so much dead lumber" (Santayana 1936, 253).

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