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Title of paper: "Some Old Names for a New Way of Thinking: Santayana's Style"

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ABSTRACT

Richard Rorty once suggested that, following a rigorous process of auto-critique, analytical philosophy attained coherence at a stylistic level, rather than being co-terminus with philosophy as such. Rorty's subsequent reassurance that this was no bad thing, since the analytical style was, after all, a *good* style, seems less than reassuring, in part because of the philosophical resistance to style. Stanley Cavell – a philosopher certainly possessed of a distinctive style – has drawn attention to the tension, within philosophy, between the stylisation of and responsiveness to experience. Taking Rorty's and Cavell's reflections as a starting point, this paper considers the status of George Santayana's philosophy in relation to overlapping questions concerning style: prose style within philosophy, styles of philosophy, and philosophy *as* a style. Santayana's poetic materialism and modest meta-philosophical premises make style central to his work in ways that anticipate the questions raised by Rorty and Cavell.

The question of an American style in philosophy is somewhat – and rightly – fraught, given the uncertain status of nationality and style alike within philosophy, their simultaneous presence and absence, with both factors at once inescapable and repressed. In his essay “Philosophy in America Today”, Richard Rorty suggested that contemporary analytical philosophy attained unity and coherence by virtue of a shared style rather than through an agreed upon set of discipline defining problems – that analytical philosophy was one philosophical style amidst others rather than co-terminus with philosophy as such. The suggestion was in some ways incendiary, and his subsequent reassurances could hardly be expected to placate. Austin wrote of “the bit where you say it and the bit where you take it back”; one characteristic of Rorty’s style is that “the bit where you take it back” only sharpens and further entrenches the initial claim (Austin 1962, 2). Here is Rorty’s reassurance: “In saying that ‘analytical philosophy’ now has only a stylistic and sociological unity, I am not suggesting that analytical philosophy is a bad thing, or is in bad shape. The analytical style is, I think, a *good* style” (Rorty 1982, 217). If this seems to be slim comfort, it is because the question of whether analytical philosophy represents a good or a bad style is entirely dwarfed by the gravity of the initial suggestion – that analytical philosophy is not just marked by but coheres as a “style”, with the term’s overriding implication, intended or otherwise, of *mere* style. This type of stylistic plurality is contrasted with earlier periods of confident consensus (logical positivism, for instance, evoked for Rorty by Reichenbach’s *Rise of Scientific Philosophy* (1951), or mid-century analytical philosophy) characterised by substantial agreement as to philosophical method and goal alike. Two different senses of “style” come together in Rorty’s overview: the very fact of a plurality of philosophical styles is taken to suggest the further claim that each of these philosophies finds coherence precisely through style.

Rorty goes on to distinguish between scientific and literary styles of philosophy: “The former style asks that premises be explicitly spelled out rather than guessed at, that terms be introduced by definitions rather than by allusion. The latter style may involve argumentation, but that is not essential; what is essential is telling a new story, suggesting a new language-game, in the hope of a new form of intellectual life” (Rorty 1982, 220). This contrast can appear prejudicial, or no contrast at all, since to regard scientific philosophy as a style seems *already* to have collapsed philosophy into literature. It is instructive to compare Rorty’s approach here to that of Stanley Cavell. At first glance Cavell’s work seems to fit more or less straightforwardly within Rorty’s new story about contemporary American philosophy. Cavell, after all, is a philosopher with an undoubtedly unique philosophical style, a particularly striking example, then, of the plurality of contemporary philosophical styles sketched by Rorty. There is a fundamental difference, however, since Cavell’s undoubted stylistic innovation – not only as a writer of philosophy but also in terms of the texts he is prepared to read *as* philosophy – is informed and controlled by a nuanced companion commitment ascribing to philosophy a significant degree of difficult continuity and experiential permanence. Rorty is relaxed about divergent styles of philosophy because, at a meta-philosophical level, he holds “that philosophy is not the sort of thing that *has* an historical essence or mission” (Rorty 1982, 220) from which such styles might depart. Cavell’s stylistic innovation assumes and works to retain an essence to philosophy that is at once institutional and experiential. This wish to delimit a relatively autonomous sphere for philosophy reflects Cavell’s modernism, in opposition to Rorty’s strong historicist or institutional account whereby philosophy “is not the name of a natural kind, but just the name of one of the pigeonholes into which humanistic culture is divided for administrative and bibliographical purposes” (Rorty 1982, 226).

In the introduction to *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, Cavell compares his own “picture of art as a chapter of the history or progression of philosophy” with the “current prominence, perhaps dominance, in Anglo-American professional philosophy of the ‘naturalizing’ of philosophy, which means regarding philosophy as, in Quine’s phrase, a chapter of science” (Cavell 2005, 2). Thinking of art as a “chapter” of philosophy acknowledges a degree of pluralism but refuses a free eclecticism, since each chapter is part of and circumscribed by a broader narrative. A proliferation of styles might be read, of course, as the failure of a discipline to attain a paradigm and, thereby, progress, so Cavell’s insistence that art form a part not only of the history but also of the “progression” of philosophy is polemical.

Cavell further refuses an uncontrolled eclecticism of philosophical styles through the claim that both strands of philosophy are commensurable insofar as they are considering a similar question or shared problem: “These are not head-on clashes of philosophical ambition; the greater contretemps would be if they failed to touch. What is at stake is, even before the idea of knowledge, the sense of how human experience is to be called to account. The classical empiricist’s idea of ‘impressions’ as the origin, or cause, of ‘ideas,’ like Quine’s ‘check-points of experience’ in the service of theory-building, stylizes experience” (Cavell 2005, 2). Referring to scientific strands of philosophy as *stylizing* experience levels the discursive field somewhat by implicating the scientific strand in questions of style rather than seeing it as prior or neutral. Cavell concedes that the empiricist stylisation of experience is pragmatically justified by its undoubted fruitfulness, but notes that this stylisation risks a reductive narrowing of experience. He identifies his philosophical task as one of “wording the impressions made upon me by the things and persons and events of the world, the ways they matter to me, count for me, a capacity in the word ‘impression’ whittled away in the empiricist’s ‘impressions.’” (Cavell 2005, 2) The worry is that such whittling, however purposive, is only partially responsive and therefore potentially reductive, insufficient for any philosophy that wishes, with Cavell, “to articulate and preserve the richness of [...] experience” (Cavell 2005, 3).

The questions that Cavell and Rorty pose here, concerning the surprisingly wide reaching ramifications of style (encompassing style within philosophy, styles of philosophy, and the philosophical stylisation of experience) were addressed several decades earlier by George Santayana. We can see this in Rorty’s suggestion, for instance, that the representative image of the philosopher, having shifted historically from scholar to scientist, might be updated and revised to that of lawyer. The contemporary analytical philosopher, for Rorty, is distinguished by their facility for argumentation rather than by wisdom or by their privileging of scientific method: “Perhaps the most appropriate model for the analytical philosopher is now the *lawyer*, rather than either the scholar or the scientist. The ability to construct a good brief, or conduct a devastating cross-examination, or find relevant precedents, is pretty much the ability which analytical philosophers think of as “distinctively philosophical” (Rorty 1982, 221).

Santayana habitually described professional philosophers as resembling lawyers, preparing so many cases in defence of their favoured philosophical systems. In Santayana’s hands, the comparison was unambiguously pejorative, since he contrasted such lawyerly activity with the pursuit of truth: “Those who are genuinely concerned in discovering what happens to be true are rather the men of science, the naturalists, the historians; [...] But professional philosophers are usually only scholastics: that is, they are absorbed in defending some vested illusion or some eloquent idea. Like lawyers or detectives, they study the case

for which they are retained, to see how much evidence they can gather for the defense, and how much prejudice they can raise against the witnesses for the prosecution; for they know they are defending prisoners suspected by the world, and perhaps by their own good sense, of falsification. They do not covet truth, but victory and the dispelling of their own doubts. What they defend is some system, that is, some view about the totality of things, about which men are actually ignorant” (Wilson 1998, 48).

Appropriately enough, then, when Santayana introduced his own philosophical system in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, some throat clearing was in order, with Santayana assuring the reader that his system “differs widely in spirit and pretensions from what usually goes by that name” (Edman 1953, 368). Santayana’s system differed in pretension in part because it made no claim to describe the world on its own terms, seeing human knowledge in all its forms as symbolic rather than literal. For Santayana, this applied to scientific as much as to any other type of knowledge so that, to an extent at least, Santayana anticipates Cavell’s caution that philosophy should not impoverish experience by styling it exclusively after its pragmatic and scientific uses. (Santayana’s epiphenomenalism, however, complicates the question of whether his philosophy is able, in Cavell’s terms, to “articulate and preserve the richness of experience” – particularly if one wants experience to have a say in contesting its own scope.) Even Santayana’s cornerstone materialism is strangely literary, and is perhaps better described as his “signature” materialism, given its idiosyncratic character, his system more cultural artefact than scientific building block. For Santayana, as Hodges and Lachs write, “[t]he word ‘matter’ is, when all is said and done, a poetic term without literal significance, merely gesturing toward that which lies at the limit of all meaning” (Hodges and Lachs 2000, 99).

Santayana sought, further, to evade the circularity of defending his system in local, internal terms, in part by confessing to and acknowledging that system’s very relativity, but also by considering it an expression of pre-philosophical, pre-reflective orthodoxy. Santayana claimed that his “essential doctrine [...] rests on public experience. It needs, to prove it, only the stars, the seasons, the swarm of animals, the spectacle of birth and death, of cities and wars” (Edman 1953, 372). The highly arguable suggestion here is that his materialism is a commonsense rather than theoretical commitment, such that his philosophy escapes the fate of becoming merely one more school. Although his “system” will issue in a suitably esoteric and even obscure sounding vocabulary, the materials from which that system is constructed pertain to ordinary experience rather than to specialist knowledge. Santayana’s style is that of the wise philosopher scholar, but this style is somewhat deceptive. His eventual philosophy claims for itself the style and grandeur of a metaphysical system, but it is metaphysical only “in the mocking literary sense of the word” (Edman 1953, 369). Santayana’s system building is ironic because it retains something of the style of traditional philosophy even as it deflates the pretensions of metaphysical systems by recasting them precisely as so many stylisations of human experience. Conscious of at least some of the ironies of offering “one more system of philosophy”, Santayana still sought to ground that philosophy (to use his terms) in the psyche’s life amidst things, as that life is stylised by or symbolised in spirit (Edman 1953, 368).

There is another and perhaps more obvious sense in which Santayana can be positioned in relation to the question of an *American* style in philosophy. Santayana’s identification or discursive construction of what he referred to as the genteel tradition in American philosophy involved the (less than celebratory) uncovering of an American style of thinking. This stands in need of qualification, however, since Santayana found American philosophy characterised for the most part by survivals rather than expressions. Rorty

welcomed this puncturing of American exceptionalism, praising Santayana for being “entirely free of the instinctive American conviction that the westering of the spirit ends here – that whatever the ages have labored to bring forth will emerge between Massachusetts and California, that our philosophers have only to express our national genius for the human spirit to fulfil itself” (Rorty 1982, 60). Santayana did not expect an American fulfilment of the human spirit, of course, although he was, on balance, more contemptuous of the teleological fictions of metaphysical idealism than of American thought and culture. For such fulfilment to be possible, in any case, would require that the ‘national genius’ be expressed at all. On Santayana’s account, however, native styles of thinking emerge within American philosophy only as subversive outgrowths and stunted rebellions against the inherited, official composite of Calvinism and metaphysical idealism that constituted the genteel tradition. To an extent, then, Santayana regretted the very absence of an established American style in philosophy. Santayana’s compelling narrative account of the American philosophical scene, though, complicates this notion. His re-description of American philosophy is characterised by specific and inter-related styles of writing, thinking and argumentation, all bearing the stamp of his favoured brand of cognitively neutral materialism. It is also informed, less obviously, by recognisably American philosophical influences and styles.

Although Santayana presented American philosophy as choked by European intellectual paradigms, out of step with the material energies of American culture and society, this did not prevent him from finding that culture and society surprisingly saturated by and responsive to philosophy as such. Santayana’s writing modelled a broad-brush type of intellectual history that, even as it revised Hegelian dialectic – offering a series of dramatic and ironic narratives with nature and matter rather than spirit at their heart – was empirical more in principle than in fact. His *Character and Opinion in the United States* lends more prominence to philosophers and, if not to technical, then to specialist philosophical debates than the book’s title would lead its readers to reasonably suppose. One of the key American influences on Santayana’s philosophical style derived from his Harvard teacher and colleague, William James. Santayana took seriously James’s suggestion that philosophers are swayed as much by temperament as by argumentation, and nationality indeed often emerges in Santayana’s philosophy in hopelessly dated terms *as* temperament, with temperament in turn sketched as a matter of adjustment to and expression of such factors as climate, geography and history. In this way, Santayana recast idealist speculations about national spirit or character in materialist terms.

Temperament comes to assume a prominent role in Santayana’s work. In his often repeated rehearsals of what Santayana understood to be the false steps of American pragmatism and British empiricism, temperament and nationality are equal in explanatory or diagnostic status to argument and dialectic, fully at home in the space of reasons and perhaps even prior in terms of their importance. In *Character and Opinion in the United States*, Santayana portrays the British empiricist wish to try conventional beliefs in the tribunal of “experience” as motivated by a cultural need as much as by a purely intellectual itch: the “hard-headed Briton [...] was anxious to clear away those sophistries and impostures of which he was particularly apprehensive, in view of the somewhat foreign character of his culture and religion” (Santayana 1956, 16). Experience, happily understood as “knowledge produced by direct contact with the object”, ought to have led to method, to intelligence, to science...to materialism (Santayana 1956, 16). Instead, and unhappily, the empiricist concept of experience was psychologised and therefore halted, turning in on itself and becoming introspective, attesting only to its own presence rather than to contact with things. The

decisive misstep from experience as experience of things to experience as absolute is presented by Santayana as at least as much cultural as dialectical in origin: “[w]hat prevented British empiricism from coming to this obvious conclusion was a peculiarity of the national temperament. The Englishman [...] is fond of musing and withdrawing into his inner man. Accordingly, his empiricism took an introspective form; like Hamlet he stopped at the *bon*; he began to think about thinking” (Santayana 1956, 16). How seriously should we take the decisive force given here to temperament, this splicing of philosophical argumentation with reflections on supposed national character? Unusual enough that a book whose title promises a study of national character and opinion should consider philosophical argumentation in such detail, but to then find sketches of national temperament playing an integral role in the rehearsal of philosophical ideas seems outlandish. Santayana lamented that for the British empiricists “a set of pathological facts, the passive subject-matter of psychology” came to seem “the only facts admissible” (Santayana 1956, 17), but how admissible exactly are his own ruminations on character and temperament?

It might be said, of course, that they amount to no more than ornamental flourishes, helping moreover to make philosophy vivid for a non-philosophical audience who might already be wondering how the dialectical relationship between empiricism and idealism pertains to the American character. Santayana did note, and not without with some unintended humour, that his system contained “some refinements in speculation, like the doctrine of essence, which are not familiar to the public” (Edman 1953, 369). For the most part, though, Santayana insisted that his philosophy was non-metaphysical and non-specialist, and as such could “only spread a feast of what everybody knows” (Edman 1953, 372), echoing Wittgenstein’s notion of philosophy leaving everything as it is – something easier said than done. Santayana’s appeals to character and temperament are considered and deliberate, then, in two respects. First, such appeals are fully consonant with his care to align his philosophy with pre-philosophical instincts and faiths: “I stand in philosophy exactly where I stand in daily life; I should not be honest otherwise. I accept the same miscellaneous witnesses, bow to the same obvious facts, make conjectures no less instinctively, and admit the same encircling ignorance” (Edman 1953, 369). Secondly, they chime with his wish to evade and render ironical the form of life of professional academic philosophy altogether. If this blurring or crossing of boundaries in Santayana’s philosophy between narrow philosophical argumentation and broader cultural reflection constitutes an argument in itself, involving not so much an exaggerated claim as to the reach of philosophy as a further reminder of its modestly human locus and of our impressionability to matter, it is also underway in Santayana’s writing style.

With his several influential portraits of the genteel tradition, Santayana identified an American style of philosophy, albeit a style mostly inherited, and rebelled against only in partial, pent and symptomatic ways. Santayana’s own status within the canon of American philosophy has been much discussed, with philosophers and intellectual historians noting the influence of such thinkers as Charles Sanders Peirce, Josiah Royce and William James. Some of the traits that Santayana ascribed to the genteel tradition make an unexpected, even prominent appearance in his own work. His memorable description of Emerson as a thinker who read “transcendentally, not historically, to learn what he himself felt, not what others might have felt before him” (Wilson 1998, 43), hardly sounds like praise, keeping in mind Santayana’s valuing of tradition over Romantic subjectivity, but echoes his later confession at having treated philosophers “somewhat cavalierly, not at all from disrespect or quarrelsomeness or lack of delight in their speculations, but because my interest has seldom been strictly philological or historical. I have studied very little except for pleasure, and have

made my authors a quarry or a touchstone for my own thoughts” (Schilpp 1940, 543). At least that “quarry”, has a materialist ring to it, nearly enough to distinguish Santayana’s transcendental reading from that of Emerson, the latter feeding on books, which “for a philosopher or a poet, is still to starve” (Wilson 1998, 43).

Santayana wrote, archly, of philosophers arguing against rival positions by assimilating them to their own views, thereby bringing them into disrepute: “I am well aware that idealists are fond of calling my materialism, too, metaphysics, in rather an angry tone, so as to cast discredit upon it by assimilating it to their own systems” (Edman 1953, 370). He frequently did the opposite – presenting rival philosophies in the best possible light by refashioning their insights in terms of his own materialism: “I endeavour to retain the positive insight of each, reducing it to the scale of nature and keeping it in its place” (Edman 1953, 371). This enterprise involved entangling philosophy with temperament and with material considerations. In “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy”, for instance, Emerson and William James are presented as winning at least some distance from that tradition, with its residual Calvinism and unbound idealism, but this is distance secured as much through their “personal spontaneity” and “vitality” as by intellectual argument (Wilson 1998, 54). This material expressivity is particularly direct in the case of James, whose “[c]onvictions and ideas came to him, so to speak, from the subsoil” (Wilson 1998, 54). The status of Santayana’s qualification (“so to speak”) is potentially complex and uncertain here. In one sense the claim that ideas arise from the subsoil is not figurative at all, given Santayana’s epiphenomenalism, whereby ideas are indeed thoroughly a product and part of the material world, ideas possessing undoubted reality even as they lack causal efficacy or power. In another sense, the qualification “so to speak” might accompany and preface *all* of our thoughts and ideas, given Santayana’s insistence on the symbolic rather than literal character of human knowledge. Santayana’s further premise that the speculations of fellow philosophers should be taken as delightfully expressive rather than cognitive – with ideas significant for being held rather than for being true or false – was more likely to infuriate than to come across as a winning absence of quarrelsomeness. The upshot here is that style is in any case not to be understood in terms of *mere* style: Santayana’s engagements with his fellow philosophers amount to materialist re-descriptions within which turns of phrase do significant philosophical work. His very materialism, moreover, which he claims is non-metaphysical since it “does not profess to know what matter is in itself” (Edman 1953, 370), leads him to an account of thought as stylisation.

The intellectual historian Paul Conkin provided a compelling analysis of Santayana’s life and work, reading the philosopher somewhat against the grain by situating him emphatically in the American grain. On Conkin’s account, Santayana emerged as another of the *Puritans and Pragmatists* of his book’s title, with the singularity of Santayana’s philosophy consisting in its combining rather than bypassing these two strands of American thought – Santayana might prefer the term “strains” to “strands”, given his opinions of Puritanism and pragmatism alike. He said of himself that “it is as an American writer that I must be counted, if I am counted at all” (Schilpp 1940, 602). The choice of words here is interesting – rather than using the term “philosopher”, he states that he is to be counted as an American *writer*. Perhaps the implication is that, although Santayana understood his cornerstone philosophical premises as in a sense stable beyond contingencies of location – the sense in which his philosophy would have been the same “under whatever sky I had been born” (Edman 1953, 372) (“sky” already a sufficiently abstract way of rendering place) – they were also expressed through disagreements of a local, specifically American origin and occasion.

My purpose here is not to oppose American philosophy and American writing but rather to focus attention on Santayana's style. In the context of a discussion of Kantian philosophy, Jean Luc-Nancy once noted that the "misfortune of a dreadful style in writing has befallen more than one philosopher – perhaps all of them" (Luc-Nancy, 2008). It might be said that Santayana's prose style has the misfortune of being *less* than dreadful, with its very elegance raising suspicions about its character or even status as philosophy. Henry Aiken noted that Santayana's accomplishment as a writer risked obscuring his achievements as a philosopher: "Nearly everyone pays lip service to Santayana's powers as a stylist. Yet to many, by no means all of them analytical philosophers, his manner of writing has seemed essentially unsuitable to its genre. Under the present dispensation, philosophical discourse is not regarded as a branch of literary art. [...] Its aim, more properly conceived, is said to be the logical analysis of concepts and the clarification of propositions" (Aiken 1953, 339). The requisite style for this type of activity, Aiken noted, was that of Bertrand Russell. Santayana's writing style, by contrast, appeared: "clogged with imagery and laden with all the tropes that are so maddening to a literal mind. It represents, or so it said, the mind of a poet who for some perverse reason insists on dealing with subjects inherently alien to the poetic imagination" (Aiken 1953, 340). Aiken was aware, of course, that the assumptions informing this response overlooked the fundamental premises or "poetics" of Santayana's philosophy, which lent a form of epistemic parity to literal and figurative modes. Further familiarity with the fundamentally aesthetic and poetic status of human understanding within Santayana's philosophy, however, would be unlikely to make his work any more attractive to those already unforgiving of his style.

This sense of Santayana's style of writing and argumentation as running against the professional grain echoed aspects of Russell's own account. Russell remembered "something rather prim about Santayana. His clothes were always neat, and even in country-lanes he wore patent-leather button boots. I think a person of sufficient intelligence might perhaps have guessed these characteristics from his literary style" (Russell 1956, 94). Russell's sketch of Santayana navigating country-lanes in his button boots captures something paradoxical in the latter's philosophy, its essentially aesthetic, unworldly materialism. The portrait both contradicts and evokes Santayana's ideas – suggestive on the one hand of an almost gothic mal-adaption to the environment and subsequent lack of harmony, matched on the other hand by an inner harmony of scrupulous organisation and self-definition, albeit self-definition that runs the risk of singularity.

It should be noted that if style is understood as that which departs from tradition, it held little interest for Santayana, with wisdom for him consisting in a self-conscious, untroubled awareness of human knowledge as itself a form of stylisation, accompanied by a valuing of philosophical commitments and systems as so many ironic ontologies. Happily conceding the "rigidity and untimeliness" of his philosophical views, Santayana suggested that the "common" misunderstanding of those views "is rather my fault, because I have clothed them in a rhetoric that, though perfectly spontaneous and inevitable in my own thoughts, misleads at first as to their character, and in some readers may induce an assent that afterwards has to be rescinded. I am a Scholastic at heart, but I lack the patience and the traditional training that might have enabled me to discuss every point minutely, without escapades or ornament or exaggeration or irony. My books would then have been much more solid, and nobody would have read them" (Edman 1953, 604). Until one understands the internal link between Santayana's style and his philosophical doctrines, then, that style will mislead, and this is only compounded by escapades, ornament, exaggeration and irony. Less comfortably, but in the same vein, Conkin writes of Santayana's "private nomenclature"

(Conkin 1968, 431), describing his thought as “a nightmare of subjective definitions” (Conkin, 1968, 444).

If James’s pragmatism supplied a new name for some old ways of thinking, it might be said of Santayana that he deployed some old names in the service of what was in fact a new style of thinking. The suggestion that his philosophy is characterised by innovation or novelty, of course, would not be entirely welcomed by Santayana. Although his vocabulary (of “essence”, “system”, “being”, “truth”) seems traditionally philosophical, such terms are re-articulated in his work in a way that tempers their metaphysical drift. This point is well made by Hodges and Lachs, who refer to Santayana’s “self-displacing” and “ironic” ontology whose “central purpose...is to let the air out of the grand metaphysical systems of the past” (Hodges and Lachs 2000, 91). In their suggestive comparative study *Thinking in the Ruins*, they argue that Wittgenstein and Santayana share an equally anti-ontological sensibility, with both philosophers acknowledging and seeking to do justice to the brute fact of contingency. This affinity, however, is obscured, since Santayana retains, if only to subvert, traditional philosophical terms that Wittgenstein wishes to avoid entirely. Although Santayana deploys the term “essence”, for instance, his “commitment to the infinity of essences” resembles Wittgenstein’s “demonstration of the indefinite multiplicity of language-games” in that both are “strategies for getting out of the blind alley of essentialism” (Hodges and Lachs 2000, 95). Readers of Santayana should not let his style – with its “faint echo of old ways of philosophizing” – lead them to the “seriously mistaken assumption that Santayana is a system builder after the systems have failed, an atavistic anomaly in contemporary thought” (Hodges and Lachs 2000, 88).

The title of this essay stages a comparison and contrast between Jamesian pragmatism and Santayana’s poetic materialism. The contrast is intended to question Santayana’s preferred sense of himself as a philosophical traditionalist rather than an innovator, entirely in control of the ironies of making it new. Although Santayana saw Jamesian pragmatism as retaining the egotism of idealism, Santayana’s own philosophy risks a different, stylistic egotism. Santayana described James – in temperamental terms – as a restless figure impatient with philosophy: “[i]t would be incongruous [...] to expect of him that he should build a philosophy like an edifice to go and live in for good. Philosophy for him was rather like a maze in which he happened to find himself wandering, and what he was looking for was the way out” (Santayana 1956, 57). James’s Wittgensteinian search for the way out, however, can be seen as a wish for that very contact with things from which Santayana’s own philosophical edifice effectively withdraws. Speculation, for Santayana, arises out of the proper sense ‘that what you can do avails little materially, and in the end nothing’ – a potentially dispiriting thought but one that should lead to a form of compensation that is fundamentally aesthetic: “Let us be content to live in the mind” (Wilson 1998, 64). Santayana’s “materialism” becomes in fact a chastened version of idealism, characterised by faith in rather than knowledge of the external world – an edifice from within which to retreat, away from things, into fragile, reflective spirit.

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