Literary Philosophers: Irving Singer and George Santayana

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, here is the article's first paragraph:

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After returning to the U.S., Singer graduated with a PhD in philosophy from Harvard in 1952. He taught at Harvard, Cornell, the University of Michigan, and Johns Hopkins before joining the faculty of MIT in 1958, where he was to remain for over half a century, retiring from there in 2013. Over his long and distinguished career, Singer wrote numerous articles and twenty-one books devoted to such diverse topics as aesthetics, creativity, film, literature, music, and moral philosophy. He combined the rigorous approach of analytic philosophy with the experimental technique of pragmatism. In addition to the *Nature of Love* trilogy, other titles include *Modes of Creativity: Philosophical Perspectives*; *Mozart and Beethoven: The Concept of Love in Their Operas*; *Cinematic Mythmaking: Philosophy in Film*; Ingmar Bergman: *Cinematic Philosopher*; Santayana’s Aesthetics: *A Critical Analysis*; and the aforementioned *George Santayana: Literary Philosopher*. The MIT Press has honored his work by initiating “The Irving Singer Library,” which has republished many of his books. At the time of his death, Singer was working on a manuscript entitled *Creativity in the Brain*, which, hopefully, will have a posthumous publication.

Singer was predeceased by his wife Josephine, who died in 2014. They had been wed for sixty-five years. He called her his semi-collaborator, and joked that “I write in bed, where I am comfortable, and dictate to my wife. She often disagrees with what I say, and we’ll discuss it, and sometimes I incorporate her ideas.”

On a personal note, I first met Irving Singer in 1991 at a conference organized in his honor by my friend David Goicoechea, at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. To prepare for this event I read *The Nature of Love*, and was astonished both by its depth and by its clarity. What astonished me even more than these qualities was the way in which Professor Singer—who immediately invited me to call him Irving—responded so knowingly to all the various papers delivered over the three-day conference. The proceedings were later published in a volume entitled *The Nature and Pursuit of Love: The Philosophy of Irving Singer*, to which he wrote an elegant and deeply responsive afterword.

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Singer was ever-mindful of these two propositions, and sought to supplement his own analytically-trained explications with plentiful illustrations from the works of poets and novelists such as Dante, Shakespeare, Shelley, Proust, Lawrence, and even the Marquis de Sade. And it is fitting that he should also use the work of Santayana himself, one of the few individuals besides Plato to excel in both philosophy and poetry.

There is also a personal element in Singer’s homage to Santayana. As he states in the afterword to the 1995 volume The Nature and Pursuit of Love: The Philosophy of Irving Singer: “What I learned most of all from Santayana was the importance of the humanities as an interdisciplinary resource in all intellectual pursuits. His writings taught me that in the life of the mind there is no absolute chasm between philosophy and literature, the two academic fields that have meant the most to me.” Singer delivered many lectures and published many papers on Santayana’s work, including the introduction to the critical edition of his novel The Last Puritan. And, as mentioned earlier, in 1950, along with his wife, he had the opportunity to meet the aged philosopher in his Italian retreat.

This personal touch must have had a profound effect on Singer. Yet he was no acolyte or apologist. In fact, the majority of references to Santayana in Singer’s writings on love take him to task, or point out differences between their views on the role of idealization in love. Santayana is a touchstone rather than a foundation stone for Singer’s work. “As Santayana complained that Dewey was a half-hearted naturalist,” he writes, “so too do I feel that Santayana was a half-hearted materialist.”

What Singer is most troubled by is the tragic element in Santayana’s philosophy of love, the view that our ideals can never really be met. He rightly credits Santayana for a powerful invocation of ideals and the hold they have on us, and he admires the way in which Santayana never deviates from grounding these ideals in material bases. In Volume I of The Nature of Love, Singer discusses Santayana’s writings on the ideal of love:

For Santayana, as for Plato, all love worthy of the name must have an “ideal object.” Lovers seek in one another the embodiment of “an ideal form essentially eternal and capable of endless embodiments.” This “form,” or “essence” as Santayana was later to call it, is the abstract possibility of some perfection. If a man falls in love with a fair-haired woman, he does so because his heart has been captured by the ideal of a perfect blonde. It is this ideal object, not the woman “in her unvarnished and accidental person,” that the man truly loves.

In a very real sense, then, Santayana is discussing not a love of persons but rather a love of essences, or ideals. There is a note of sadness, even at times despair, in some of his writings. One can see a strong affinity for ideals as ideals, which can be the source of great poetry.

Interestingly enough, Santayana places the origins of love in general within sexual passion, specifically the mating drives between men and women. One notes

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5 Ibid., 360.


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7 Ibid., 3:268.


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Interestingly enough, Santayana places the origins of love in general within sexual passion, specifically the mating drives between men and women. One notes here the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer’s dour notion that romance is the blind will’s way of tricking human beings into perpetuating the species. Santayana’s emphasis on sexual passion is intriguing speculation from a man who himself never married or reproduced, and who was suspected of having homosexual inclinations, which he may or may not have acted upon. Santayana maintained an aloof attitude when it came to sex. Singer touches upon these biographical details (although he does not address what may have been the material cause of Santayana’s aloofness: his upbringing by an emotionally withdrawn mother who seldom showed him any affection or nurturing). Without wishing to magnify these details, Singer cannot help but address them since Santayana himself places such great emphasis on the role sexuality plays in producing the ideals of love. Singer writes that “despite the differences between Proust and Santayana, they write as men who have been disqualified from appreciating the possibilities of a satisfying sexual love for any other person.”

What Santayana does brilliantly is to show how when this ideal is not achieved through sexual union, it can still be vital in life. In *The Sense of Beauty*, the book which outlines his aesthetic theory, Santayana points out how this drive is at the center of artistic appreciation. He writes:

Sex is not the only object of sexual passion. When love lacks its specific object, when it does not yet understand itself, or has been sacrificed to some other interest, we see the stifled fire bursting out in various directions. One is religious devotion, another is zealous philanthropy, a third is the fondling of pet animals, but not the least fortunate is the love of nature, and of art; for nature also is often a second mistress that consoles us for the loss of a first.

One can again sense a Schopenhauerian detachment, an affinity for art as an escape from the world. But unlike Schopenhauer, Santayana never derides the material world, nor expresses a disgust toward nature. It is in his discussions of the love of things and of ideals that Santayana is most profound. He is surely speaking from experience. His sensitivity to subtle nuances is particularly refined. This eye for details shows in both his theoretical works and in his fiction, especially *The Last Puritan*. Oliver Alden, the central character, is a young man who finds his deeply refined sensibilities to be of little use in the hustle-and-bustle of turn-of-the-century New England. Attracted to men, but duty-bound to propose marriage to two young women who recognize that he sees them only for their ideals and not themselves, and who thus spurn his offer, Oliver retreats into an independent bachelorhood. As Morris Dickstein astutely pointed out in his review of the reissue of *The Last Puritan*, “with this doomed character, priggish and virginal yet sensitive and brilliant, the ageing author reaches a complicated verdict on his own strengths and limitations.”

I think the best description of Singer’s qualifications regarding Santayana’s idealization of love may be found in Volume 2 of *The Nature of Love*, in his discussion of Percy Shelley’s love poetry. Singer writes: “It is because Shelley thinks of love as

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5 Ibid., 360.


7 Ibid., 3:268.


imagination subsuming imperfect creatures under an inborn image of nonexistent perfection that his poetry is able to express such heart-rending lamentations about the world. His soaring soul suffers as it does because it cannot understand how nature could have provided him with a prototype of beauty and goodness while systematically preventing any reality from living up to it." This seems to mirror Santayana’s own tragic view—love at best is an appreciation of ideals, not a deep relationship between persons. Shelley, though, has a deeper appreciation of human relationships, the need that humans have for social interaction, and more importantly, the need to act upon ideals. There is a Prometheus element in Shelley’s life and work. His many love affairs and his tempestuous marriages demonstrate his concern with physical relationships. While there is a Neoplatonic aspect to Shelley’s thinking, it is superseded by his emphasis on action.

Santayana, Singer points out:

saw in Shelley’s genius nothing but a longing for abstract ideas. He therefore concluded that Shelley’s poetry could not express historical reality or human nature in general. . . . But this interpretation, which puts too great an emphasis upon Neoplatonic elements in Shelley’s thinking, neglects his constant preoccupation with the need to act, to strive within the world . . . Santayana thought that Shelley betrayed his vision and the high calling of his poetic talent by seeking for love through actual experience, by having love affairs and getting married rather than being content to write about the beauty of love’s sheer possibility.

Shelley, who was influenced by the utilitarian thinkers of his time, such as Hume, Adam Smith, and his father-in-law William Godwin, was concerned about the usefulness of ideals. How could they enrich life in the here-and-now? There is a strain of utopian thinking in Shelley, perhaps best manifested in his masterpiece Prometeus Unbound, where love unites all of the formerly warring parties on earth:

Man, one harmonious soul of many a soul,
Whose nature is its own divine control,
Where all things flow to all, as rivers to the sea;
Familial acts are beautiful through love . . .

Shelley understood that this ideal of universal peace and harmony would probably never be achieved, and he felt the pain of ideals unrealized. But he was propelled by these ideals, and felt that they keep one from retreating into splendid isolation. Unlike Santayana, Shelley, in his poetry and his writings on love, was not content to contemplate ideals—he saw them as guidelines for actions. While it is true that the map is not the territory, there is no need to worship the map itself.

Ultimately, what Singer finds lacking in Santayana is the concept of bestowal. Santayana seemed to lack an appreciation for the ways in which bestowing love on another person enriches both involved. The interpersonal aspect is crucial. In loving the ideal, one cannot help but be dissatisfied with the object of one’s affections. As mentioned earlier, love for a fair-haired woman, no matter how beautiful she be, cannot match up with the ideal of ultimate beauty. Singer calls this appraisal—there is something about the love object which moves one, and which leads to a relationship. This is a rather cold-eyed view of love, an objective appraisal of individuals as to how close they come to meeting a standard. Santayana would be an excellent judge of a beauty pageant. But Singer feels there is more to love than mere appraisal. Once one bestows value on another person, a bond is formed which can alter each individual. As Singer puts it:

In treating the beloved as an end, however, the lover has no need to compare her with anything else. His love is not a way of ranking her in relation to the ideal; he cares about her as a particular person despite her imperfections, despite her inevitable distance from any or all ideals. The lover uses his imagination not to see an ideal object reflected through another person, but rather to find ways of acting as if that person were herself the ideal.

And Singer adds that even when it comes to appraising, Santayana has an unrealistic attitude. Our standards are seldom as precise as he makes them out to be. This is perhaps due to the fact that Santayana had an uncanny sense of just what constitutes our ideals. Perhaps his above-the-battle position, coupled with his deep sensibilities, gave him a unique perspective on love. In many ways, he achieves what the Buddhists call a detached compassion. It would be wrong to see Santayana as a aesthete, withdrawn from the world in sullen retreat. He was fascinated by the world, and by the many ways human beings interact with each other. This is witnessed by his defense of materialism. It is important to note that he himself was never puritanical when it came to discussing sexual or—as he put it—“frank” love.

In Volume 3 of the Nature of Love, Singer pays tribute to Santayana’s insistence upon appraisal as a crucial ingredient of love. Those who would try to eliminate the physiological and psychological mechanisms that shape our ideals and give them form are themselves missing out on an important element. Singer expresses a hope that the work of biologists, brain researchers and physiologists will deepen our understanding of the ways in which our ideals are formed.

Throughout his writings on love, Irving Singer called for cooperation among scientists, philosophers, poets and novelists, and he demonstrated a conscious effort to familiarize himself with the literature of love from all fields. It is fitting that George Santayana should be a major touchstone on all his work. For Santayana, with his level-headed, dispassionable manner, had the eye of a scientist, yet was also one of the few people to master the fields of philosophy and literature. We can learn from Santayana a great deal about the forms, if not the content, of love. It is this aspect which Singer appreciates and pays tribute to, even as he feels obligated to point out its inadequacies in delineating a full-blown theory of love. Santayana, if the character of Oliver Alden is any indication, recognized this lacuna in himself, and—like all great artists—used it as an inspiration for his narrative writings.

If I may be allowed to wax poetic, I see the relationship between Santayana and Singer in The Nature of Love as being akin to that of Virgil and Dante in another three-volume work, The Divine Comedy. Throughout The Nature of Love, Santayana helps to guide Singer, and comments upon the many fascinating but flawed personages who come into Singer’s line of view. But ultimately they reach a point at which they must part company, a point at which Santayana can go no further. Once Singer begins to explore the notion of bestowal, Santayana—true to his own empiricism—must drop behind. The inability to achieve a deep and lasting

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11 Ibid., 422-423.
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11 Ibid., 422–423.
personal relationship with another was Santayana’s own limbo (a concept which
an atheistic Catholic like himself would no doubt appreciate). Consider the ending
of Canto XXVII of the Purgatorio, on the threshold of the earthly paradise, where
Virgil bids adieu to Dante:

My son, you’ve seen the temporary fire
And the eternal fire; you have reached
The place past which my powers cannot see;
I’ve brought you here through intellect and art;
From now on, let your pleasure be your guide;
You’re past the steep and past the narrow paths.13

While Singer and Santayana may part company at the point of discussing the
meaning and importance of bestowal, their relationship throughout The Nature of
Love is a fruitful and rewarding one.

Just as Irving Singer was fortunate to have met George Santayana in 1950, so
I was fortunate to have met Irving in 1991. As he states in the afterword to The
of all from Santayana was the importance of the humanities as an interdisciplinary
resource in all intellectual pursuits. His writings taught me that in the life of the mind
there is no absolute chasm between philosophy and literature, the two academic
fields that have meant the most to me.” These are lessons passed on to me by Irving,
and I will never forget them. He was—and remains—a true inspiration to me, and a
genuine example of a thinker of the highest caliber.

Irving Singer’s writings will, I am sure, stand the test of time, as his primary
topic—the nature of love—is not likely to disappear any time soon, and one cannot
find a better guide to help one navigate its many shoals.

TIMOTHY J. MADIGAN
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Timothy J. Madigan is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at St. John Fisher College
in Rochester, New York, and the Director of its Irish Studies Program. He received his Ph.D.
degree in philosophy from the State University of New York at Buffalo, as well as M.A. and
B.A. degrees from the same institution. He is the author of W. K. Clifford and “The Ethics of
Belief” (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010). He also edited (with David Suit) Lucretius:
His Continuing Influence and Contemporary Relevance (B&H Press, 2011), Prometheus Love
(Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), and edited and wrote the introduction to God and the
Philosophers, by his friend, the late Paul Edwards (Prometheus Books, 2009).

Unmasking Bergson: Cosmic
Agoraphobia, Literary Psychology
and Death

Acute Bergsonmania

From Seville, on January 6, 1914, Santayana wrote to Charles Augustus
Strong: “Dear Strong, Reeves has sent me the enclosed clippings (among
others) which amused and I hope may amuse you.” The clippings are
about Bergson and bear headings such as: “On écoute aux fenêtres le cours de M.
Bergson” (the Collège de France auditorium was so crowded that people listened
from the street through the open windows), “M. Bergson parle presque en plein air”
(M. Bergson lectures almost outdoors), “Lecture by New ‘Immortal,’” “Bedlam at
M. Bergson’s lecture.”

Indeed, Santayana’s “The Philosophy of M. Henri Bergson,” published in
Winds of Doctrine,2 was written at the peak of the acute Bergsonmania that spread across
the French intellectual/artistic world—and even all the way across the ocean, if
it is true, as the author of the “Bergson” article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of
Philosophy claims, that the first traffic jam in the history of Broadway may have
occurred because of Bergson’s first lecture at Columbia University, after the New
York Times had published a long and enthusiastic article on him.3

Santayana’s essay on Bergson curiously neglected

A review of Winds of Doctrine, titled “Pessimism or Sanity—Prof. Santayana
Criticizes the Optimistic Tendencies of Certain Modern Schools of Speculation,”
was published on June 1st, 1913, in the New York Times.4 Although the volume
under review contains “The Gentleman Tradition in American Philosophy” (which
is part of the American Studies canon) and “The Philosophy of Mr. Bertrand
Russell” (which is supposed to have shattered singlehandedly Russell’s ethical

1 This essay is a revised and expanded version of a paper delivered before the George
Santayana Society at the annual meeting of the Eastern American Philosophical Association,
January 7, 2016.

2 George Santayana, “The Philosophy of M. Bergson” in Winds of Doctrine: Studies in
Contemporary Opinion (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 58–110. Hereafter, this
text will be cited parenthetically according to the standard abbreviation “WD.”

3 Lawlor, Leonard and Moulard, Leonard, “Henri Bergson,” The Stanford

4 “Pessimism—or Sanity?: Prof. Santayana Criticizes the Optimistic Tendencies of Certain
Modern Schools of Speculation,” New York Times, June 1, 1913, accessed October 4, 2016,
http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdfres=9402E4D9143FE633A25752C0A9609C
946296D6CF.