Irving Singer (1925-2015)

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The noted philosopher and Santayana scholar Irving Singer, author of the magisterial three-volume work The Nature of Love, died on February 1, 2015, aged 89. Singer was born in Brooklyn on December 24, 1925, and served in World War II. He graduated summa cum laude from Harvard in 1948, under the G.I. Bill. The following year he wed Josephine Fisk, an opera singer with whom he had four children. They spent a year at Oxford (1949-1950), during which time Singer read The Last Puritan and in 1950 took a trip to Italy to meet its author. This is related in detail in the delightful article 'A Pilgrimage to Santayana,' which can be found in Singer's 2000 book George Santayana, Literary Philosopher, an essential work for anyone interested in the life and thought of Santayana. Graduating with a PhD in philosophy from Harvard in 1952, Singer taught at Harvard, Cornell, the University of Michigan, and Johns Hopkins before joining 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 21 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 Berman: 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. A more detailed description of Singer's many works and awards can be found on the MIT website: http://web.mit/edu/philosophy/singer.html Singer was predeceased by his wife Josephine, who died in 2014. They had been wed for 65 years. He called her his semicollaborator, 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.'"
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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. Catharine’s, 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 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, in which he wrote an elegant and deeply responsive afterword.

We stayed in touch over the years, and he always alerted me when his latest book came out. What I most remember are the many visits I had with Irving over the years whenever I was in Boston, walking down various streets with him and learning more about his meetings with such legendary figures as George Santayana, Bertrand Russell, Leonard Bernstein, and Mrs. Alfred North Whitehead, as well as discussing with him his ongoing views about opera, movies, novels, and other creative areas. He was generous with his time, and always asked me to fill him in on my own work. It was clear to me that he relished conversation, and like Socrates believed that true wisdom is arrived at through dialogue. I wish that I had had more opportunities to interact with him in this way, as he exemplified Nietzsche’s remark in Twilight of the Idols that only thoughts reached by walking have value.

Throughout his writings, Irving Singer called for cooperation among scientists, philosophers, poets and novelists, and 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 in all his work. For Santayana, with his level-headed, dispassionate manner, had the eye of a scientist, yet was also one of the few people to master the fields of philosophy and literature. It is also interesting to note that he always kept a framed photo of Santayana prominently displayed on the window sill of his office at MIT, right next to the photos of his family.

Just as Irving was fortunate to have met George Santayana in 1950, so was I fortunate to have met Irving in 1991. As he states in the afterword to 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.” 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.

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-Tim Madigan, Associate Professor of Philosophy, St. John Fisher College