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Is Santayana an Untimely Philosopher?

An interesting trend of recent scholarship on Santayana's thought is focused on his criticism of modernity. This topic is considered relevant in order to align Santayana with the major figures of postmodern philosophy, especially with Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Rorty.¹

In my opinion, while the criticism of modernity certainly offers a relevant key to understand the challenging and timely philosophy of Santayana, it should be rooted in some cultural and philosophical linkages

* Thanks are due to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions and comments.

¹ This is a controversial issue. A number of Santayana scholars generally reduce, from different points of view, Santayana's affinity with postmodernist philosophers. See for example: James Seaton, "Santayana Today," *The Hudson Review* 52(3) (1999): 420–426. David Dilworth, "The Place of Santayana in Modern Philosophy," *Overheard in Seville. Bulletin of the George Santayana Society* 15 (1997): 1–11. Frederick W. Conner, "'To Dream With One Eye Open': The Wit, Wisdom, and Present Standing of George Santayana," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 74(1–2) (1991): 159–178. Herman J. Saatkamp, "Santayana Cosmopolitanism and the Spiritual Life," in: *Santayana at 150. International Interpretations*, ed. Matthew C. Flamm, Giuseppe Patella, and Jennifer Rea (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 93–110. Matthew Caleb Flamm, "Santayana's Critique of Modern Philosophy and Its Application to the Work of Nietzsche," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 42(2) (2006): 266–278. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Santayana's Poetic of Belief," *Boundary* 7(3) (1979): 199–224.

that Santayana himself makes explicit throughout his writings, before finding out how it might be connected to the so-called continental philosophy. Since Nietzsche and Heidegger are recognized as the schoolmasters of this philosophical framework, I will refer to them in order to show how Santayana's criticism of modernity comes from and opens up a different way of thinking.

In particular, for various reasons, I wish to reflect on Santayana's refusal of modernity, referring, above all, to the ancient Latin author, Lucretius, and to the modern Italian philosopher-poet, Giacomo Leopardi. A primary reason is that Lucretius and Leopardi were both authors to whom Santayana referred as historical landmarks for his naturalism. At the same time, naturalism puts Santayana far from postmodern philosophy, whose main focus is rather on the loss or refusal of any physical foundation for science and philosophy.² Another related reason, which is interesting to take into account, is that both Lucretius and Leopardi were philosophical poets. Still, in Santayana's view, the liaison between poetry and philosophy, in spite of being a sign of a philosophical atmosphere marked by the refusal of rationality, as it happens to be in post-modern philosophy, seems to be an expression of that particular form of rationality and post-rationality which lives in the world of this "untimely" sage.

Answering the question put in my title, it seems to me that Santayana is an "untimely" philosopher in the sense in which Nietzsche made the "*unzeitgemäß*" term famous, that is, not only not-timely, but also ill-timed.³ Santayana rejected the widespread philistinism of modern culture and science as Nietzsche did, and they both loved the Greek and Latin world. Yet, they loved different sides of the classical world and this gave quite a different temper to their naturalism.

Furthermore, Santayana is an untimely philosopher in another sense: if being a "timely" philosopher today implies the legacy of that sense of finitude which leads Heidegger to think human existence as an experience of Nihil, and Being as a complex relation between the appearance and withdrawal of Being itself, Santayana is far from this understanding of Being.

² On this point I have drawn important suggestions from Angus Kerr-Lawson, one of the leading figures of Santayana scholarship. See especially Angus Kerr-Lawson, "Rorty Has No Physics," *Overheard in Seville. Bulletin of the George Santayana Society* 13 (1995): 12–15.

³ See Paul Rabinow, "Foucault's Untimely Struggle: Toward a Form of Spirituality," *Theory, Culture and Society* 26 (2009): 27.

Finally, he is a timely/untimely philosopher, like Michel Foucault, a leading philosopher of the twentieth century. As is well known, the “late” Foucault criticized modernity and, inheriting Nietzsche’s philosophical heritage of “untimely” meditations on the “true self,” edified a view of rationality and spirituality whose roots go back to the Greek and Latin world. Yet, as is also well known, the “untimely” Foucault never accepted the label of *postmodernist*. In the same vein, I presume, Santayana would never have accepted this label. Therefore, I will propose that his “untimeliness” can be viewed and understood within the framework designated by Foucault “*epimeleia heautou*” or “the care of self.”

1. Santayana’s Criticism of Modernity and Postmodern Philosophy

In this section I will show the crucial feature of Santayana’s philosophy which separates him, despite his expressed appreciation and apparent similarities, from Nietzsche and Heidegger. It is the “definite interest”⁴ for reason, science, truth and ideal that, unlike the two German philosophers, Santayana cultivated.

Starting from Heidegger, it seems to me that, although suggestive similarities have been found between the two philosophers, their views reveal important differences.⁵ The first, more general point, regards the relation to reason and science: Santayana, far from stigmatizing the dominance of reason in the history of western thought, focused on this topic in *The Life of Reason* and never announced its end, or hoped for it.⁶ At the same time, while Heidegger, becoming dissatisfied with rationalism, science and philosophy, turned to art and poetry, Santayana, starting with a concern for poetry and aesthetics, maintained that all his writings were to be appreciated especially for their philosophical content and never disavowed science.

⁴ See George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: or, the Phases of Human Progress*, in: *The Works of George Santayana*, ed. Martin Coleman, Marianne Wockeck, vol. 7, Book one (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2011): 30.

⁵ See Katarzyna Kremplewska, *Life as Insinuation: George Santayana’s Hermeneutics of Finite Life and Human Self* (New York: SUNY Press, 2019) and Glenn Tiller, “Katarzyna Kremplewska, *Life as Insinuation: George Santayana’s Hermeneutics of Finite Life and Human Self*”, *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 12(1) (2020): 1–5.

⁶ Santayana, *The Life of Reason: or, the Phases of Human Progress*, 1–2.

The second point concerns a radically different stance towards naturalism. Suffice it to say that Heidegger and Santayana both criticize the Cartesian, geometrical model of knowledge of nature and go back to Aristotelian naturalism. Heidegger points to Aristotle to find a concept of nature which embodies its *morphé*, its form or *eidós*, that is to say, what can be seen. However, this sort of anthropomorphism, from my unorthodox point of view, can be understood ultimately as *Dasein's* centrality in *Being and Time*, by which Heidegger, despite his endeavors, can never free himself, and which is far removed from Santayana's mind. For him, the human being, after all, is only an element of nature, a portion of the natural flux,⁷ whose special status is to be aware that "all vistas together, each kept distinct from the rest, might traverse the same universe in multitudinous perceptions, crossed and incompatible if taken as form of things, but complementary as impressions, perspective and signs."⁸

Indeed, this view might be considered in line with the other spokesman of continental philosophy, namely Nietzsche, in particular with his naturalism and perspectivism. Some scholars have recently noticed a similarity between Nietzsche and Santayana who, in turn, sparingly admitted it.⁹ Nevertheless, it is well known that Santayana sharply criticized Nietzsche in his *Egotism in German Philosophy*, for example when he wrote that "Nietzsche was personally more philosophical than his philosophy" and that "his talk about power, harshness, and superb immorality was the hobby of a harmless young scholar and constitutional invalid."¹⁰

Apart from this scornful attitude, there are serious philosophical reasons that suggest avoiding an overestimation of the affinity between the

⁷ *Ibidem*, 17.

⁸ George Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons L.T.D. 1919), 172. Hereinafter cited as *EGP*.

⁹ See letter to Nancy Saunders Toy (10 October 1939), in: *The Letters of George Santayana 1937–40*, ed. William G. Holzberger (WGS), vol. 5, Book six (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2003): 277. George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*, ed. Kellie Dawson, David E. Spiech, vol. 8 (Cambridge, MA–London: The MIT Press, 2019), 21. Among recent studies on this topic, see Angus Kerr-Lawson, "Santayana's Critique of Nietzsche," *Overheard in Seville: Bulletin of the George Santayana Society* 26 (2008): 27–55; Lydia Amir, "The Democritean Tradition in Santayana, Nietzsche, and Montaigne," *Overheard in Seville. Bulletin of the George Santayana Society* 38 (2020): 74–92; Katarzyna Krempleska, *Life as Insinuation*, 169–175; Matthew C. Flamm, "Santayana's Critique of Modern Philosophy and Its Application to the Work of Nietzsche," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 42(2) (2006): 266–278.

¹⁰ *EGP*, 110.

two philosophers. The principal reason is Santayana's commitment to the core notions of ideal and truth. A philosopher like Santayana, who wrote in an early work, that "everything ideal has a natural basis, and everything natural an ideal development"¹¹ and, in a later work, that the truth is "a realm of being,"¹² could not adopt naturalism and perspectivism in the sense intended by Nietzsche. He wrote that "Nietzsche (more candid in this than some other pragmatists) confessed that truth itself did not interest him; it was ugly; the bracing atmosphere of falsehood, passion, and subjective perspectives was the better thing."¹³ Ironically he goes on further, writing: "I am solitary, says the romantic egotist, and sufficient unto myself. The world is my idea, new every day: what can I have to do with truth?". Thus, for Santayana, when Nietzsche "speaks of the will to be powerful, power is merely an eloquent word on his lips."¹⁴ On the other hand, Nietzsche's naturalism as well as his revaluation of values are dismissed by Santayana for a double reason. One of them is to be found in the necessary connection between matter, substance, nature and the ideal. About that, Santayana writes that

to frame solid ideals, which would, in fact, be better than actual things, is not granted to the merely irritable poet; it is granted only to the master-workman, to the modeller of some given substance to some given use – things which define his aspiration, and separate what is relevant and glorious in his dreams from that large part of them which is merely ignorant and peevish. It was not for Nietzsche to be an artist in morals and to institute anything coherent, even in idea.¹⁵

The other reason is that, according to Santayana, Nietzsche's ethical naturalism is reduced to mere brutal instinct. He evidently did not appreciate Nietzsche's fondness for Dionysian spirit; for him Greek ethical naturalism implied a different view. As regards the *Übermensch*, he stigmatizes his powers as far as these "should be superior to ours by resembling those of fiercer and wilder animals,"¹⁶ and observes that, while "one would have expected his [Nietzsche's] superman to be a sort of Greek hero", as a matter of fact "it is remarkable how little he [Nietzsche]

¹¹ Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 21.

¹² George Santayana, *The Realm of Truth: Book Third of Realms of Being*, in: George Santayana, *Realms of Being*, four volumes (New York: Charles Scribner's Son; London: Constable and co. Ltd., 1927–1940).

¹³ *EGP*, 111.

¹⁴ *EGP*, 110.

¹⁵ *EGP*, 119.

¹⁶ *EGP*, 120.

learned from the Greeks¹⁷ especially about their mastering the opposition between will and reason. For Santayana:

inspiration, like will, is a force without which reason can do nothing. Inspiration must be presupposed; but in itself it can do nothing good unless it is in harmony with reason, or is brought into harmony with it. This two-edged wisdom that makes impulse the stuff of life and reason its criterion, is, of course, lost on Nietzsche, and with it the whole marvel of Greek genius... they [Greeks] were severe and fond of maxims, on a basis of universal tolerance; they governed themselves rationally, with a careful freedom, while well aware that nature and their own bosoms were full of gods, all of whom must be reverence.¹⁸

Maybe many postmodern thinkers would object that Santayana, in turn, misunderstood and learned nothing from Nietzsche, all the more so when he puts him among modern philosophers. What I want to point out is that, if we want to classify Santayana as a postmodern philosopher in line with Nietzsche, we can do so superimposing on his interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy another narrative, namely, the postmodern narrative which is manifestly absent in Santayana, as I am trying to show, definitely for his commitment to values like ideals, reason, and his interest in science, that are essential factors of his naturalism.

2. The Bosom of Nature

This leads to the topic of this section, which is Santayana's attitude towards contemporary science, as it is in contrast with Lucretius' science of nature focusing on the concept of substance. Starting from this premise, my claim is that Santayana's commitment to Lucretius' naturalism and the sense of finitude which he derives from it, may be compared also to Leopardi's naturalism. Analogies and differences among them will be underlined in order to show how for Santayana both Lucretius and Leopardi reveal one-sided views on nature.

Santayana points fingers at physicists such as Heisenberg, Bohr, and Born,¹⁹ and in his *Marginalia* one can read interesting hints about his view on nature and on the science of nature, that is to say, physics. Santayana's

¹⁷ *EGP*, 121–22.

¹⁸ *EGP*, 123.

¹⁹ *George Santayana's Marginalia. A Critical Selection*, in: *The Works of George Santayana*, ed. John McCormick, vol. 6, Book one (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2011): 1:229.

reading of *The Nature of the Physical World*, by Arthur Stanley Eddington, confirms his commitment to scientific realism: nature is a whole of substances and properties which are independent from their more or less adequate descriptions. As to Eddington's claim, according to which "the external world of physics has (thus) become a world of shadows" and substance "one of the greatest of our illusions,"²⁰ Santayana replies: "What rot! The Indians have always known it"²¹ and observes: "Your measures & your categories are all mere terms, not substances. But they describe substance."²² A page later, he writes: "Confusion (which is likely to be pervasive) of the physical world with physical theories about the world"²³ and, again: "science and nature seem to be identified. Quelle erreur!"²⁴ Finally, one last interesting point: reading what Eddington proposes as a "revelation" of modern physics, that is, "the dissolution of all that we regard as most solid into tiny specks floating in void," Santayana replies: "And Lucretius? Has nobody heard of him?"²⁵

Today's sophisticated philosophers of science might regard Santayana's *Marginalia* as superficial comments revealing a misunderstanding of physics. For this reason, Santayana could be considered an "untimely" philosopher in a negative sense of the word. However, since Santayana's philosophical concept of nature is at stake here, Greek science and naturalism need to be taken into account now.

About this, different historiographical suggestions lead me to focus on Lucretius' development of Greek naturalism. First of all, Lucretius' *De rerum natura* was the most expansive and the most robust source of Epicureanism until the discovery of the *Herculaneum papyri* in the mid-eighteenth century, among which were many books of Epicurus' great treatise, *On Nature*. In addition, the previous rediscovery of Lucretius' poem during the Renaissance is generally considered a major source of inspiration for modern atomism.²⁶ Secondly, in recent seminal works on *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius' defense of philosophical poetry (against Epicurus' stigmatization) has been considered a key factor in Lucretius'

²⁰ Arthur S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (Cambridge GB: Cambridge University Press, 1928).

²¹ George Santayana, *Marginalia*, 1:224.

²² *Ibidem*, 1:223.

²³ *Ibidem*, 1:224.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 1:226.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 1:224 (underlinings in the text).

²⁶ See Francesco Verde, "Lucretius and His 'De Rerum Natura' Six Centuries After: A Conversation with David Sedley," *Lexicon Philosophicum. International Journal for the History of Texts and Ideas* 5 (2017): 189–192.

elaboration of Greek physics and ethics.²⁷ These two points are interesting, to be sure, in finding a close connection between Lucretius, naturalism and Leopardi's and Santayana's naturalism. Nietzsche also focused on Lucretius when speaking of Epicurean philosophy. For example, he wrote that "one must read Lucretius to understand *what* it was Epicurus opposed: *not* paganism but 'Christianity'."²⁸ Not worrying about the anachronism, Nietzsche claims that the Epicurean refutation of religion makes sense within the frame of Lucretius' naturalism and his disavowal of the concept of guilt and punishment.

As for Santayana, he appreciated Lucretius' philosophical style and naturalism stating that "the greatest thing about this genius is its power of losing himself in its object, its impersonality" so that "we seem to be reading not the poetry of a poet about things, but the poetry of things themselves."²⁹

Indeed, this poetic style was one with a philosophical view refuting all teleology and anthropomorphism. Santayana summed it up with two Lucretian statements from *De Rerum Natura*: "Nothing arises in the body in order that we may use it, but what arises brings forth its use" and "so much will things through light on things". He further added: "Nature is her own standard."³⁰ Santayana's refutation of teleology and anthropomorphism towards nature is expressed in all his works and has been widely and deeply analyzed by scholars. Still, I would like to stress that in reading *De Rerum Natura*, Santayana shows the double face of his naturalism in a way that puts it at a distance from any other philosophical system, especially from a postmodern view on nature. The need for a philosophical system, different from any other, had been repeatedly claimed by him until he "confessed" to his critics the main tenets of his philosophy. In *A General Confession*, just mentioning Lucretius, he affirms:

I recited my Lucretius with as much gusto as my Saint Augustine; and gradually Lucretius sank deeper and became more satisfying. What I demanded

²⁷ See David Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 190. Guido Milanese, *Lucida carmina. Comunicazione e scrittura da Epicuro a Lucrezio* (Milano: Vita e pensiero, 1989). W. Jeffrey Tatum, "The Presocratics in Book One of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 114 (1984): 177-189.

²⁸ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo and The Antichrist*, transl. Thomas Wayne (New York: Agora Publishing, 2004), 169 (emphasis in original).

²⁹ Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*, 21.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 18.

unconditionally was dramatic wholeness. I wanted to articulate each possible system, to make it consistent, radical, and all-embracing.³¹

What Santayana finds in Lucretius' system is, as I see it, the double face of substance: its permanence and its passing through new forms of things or forms of life, not because of its necessary metaphysical reality, but because of its material reality. And this is the force and the positivity of the nature of things: "Nothing comes out of nothing, nothing falls back into nothing, if we consider substance", as Santayana says. Tragedy arises when we consider the question on a human scale, that is to say, its inverted spectrum. Again in Santayana's words: "Everything comes from nothing and falls back into nothing if we consider things the objects of love and experience." The experience of nothing arises only insofar as time has a different effect, respectively, on things and on human beings. In fact "time can make no impression on the void of atoms; nay, time is itself an *eventum* created by the motion of the atoms in the void; but the triumph of time is absolute over persons and nations and worlds."³² Here is the root of Lucretius' profound melancholy, which allows us to find a clear *liaison* with Santayana's sense of finitude.

For this reason there is no need, I think, to align Santayana to post-modern philosophers like Nietzsche and Heidegger. Indeed, it would be "a false step" in Santayana's philosophy, since he always distances himself from his own contemporary philosophers because they "have banished the word Matter from their writings" and turns back to the materialism of ancient poets, because "in their exuberant fictions, had not misled the scientific mind but rather prepared a soft nest of imaginative wonders within which the pure spirit of science might be fledged."³³ Yet, it is possible to find a thin but meaningful line, in my opinion, that leads from Lucretius to Leopardi's naturalism and, at the same time, to Santayana's.

The line from Lucretius to Leopardi is perhaps thin. Mostly Italian scholars argue that Leopardi never read *De Rerum Natura* and that, when he mentions Lucretius in his prose works, his comments are mostly limited to the linguistic and formal features of the Latin poet. Furthermore, they think that some similarities between Lucretius and Leopardi are

³¹ George Santayana, "A General Confession," in: *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp (La Salle IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1991), 24.

³² Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*, 27 (emphasis in original).

³³ George Santayana, Daniel Cory, "On the False Steps of Philosophy: Prefatory Note," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61(1) (1964): 8.

not worthwhile. Yet in *Zibaldone*,³⁴ a collection of scattered linguistic, historical, literary and philosophical reflections, it is interesting to read two long passages where the Italian poet, mentioning Lucretius, proposes a particular philological and philosophical analysis of the concept of nothing, linking nothing with matter as follows:

I suspect that I have, in fact, found this root *hil* in very ancient Latin. Observe. *Nihilum* [nothing] is virtually *ne hilum* [not a thing], says Forcellini, and with him the etymologists. See Forcellini also under *Per hilum*. And there can be no doubt, since Lucretius says *neque hilo*, etc., breaking up the compound, rather than *nihiloque* [and nothing], as the ancient Romans customarily did, especially the poets [...] and they did so even in classical times, and so did the Greeks. Not only Lucretius but others, for whom see [2307] Forcellini under *Hilum*. On the privative particle *ne* (changed in compounds to *ni*) see Forcellini under *ne* and under *nego*. There could also be a *nec*, since *necopinans*, etc., means *non opinante* [unaware], etc., and *nec* is simply a privative particle like the α of the Greeks. [...] (On this subject I note in passing: *n* is a root characteristic of the negative in Latin, and so as a result in Italian. Hence *non*, *ne*, *nec*, *neque* (see Forcellini), *nihil*, *nil*, *nemo*, *nullus* that is, *non ullus*, as is also said [...] What this *hilum*, a very old Latin word, means the grammarians cannot confirm. "Putant esse," says Festus, "quod [2309] grano fabae adhaeret" ["They think," says Festus, "it's what sticks to the seed of a bean"]. So he doesn't really know what it means, and it wasn't known in his time. [...] I think that it has to mean *matter*, or thing that *exists* (which for primitive men could not be imagined except within the material; extend this thought).

Furthermore, for him the argument needs to be deepened and only few pages later, he adds:

Here we are, then, with this *hil* naked and plain in our hands, and if you pay attention [2311] to what has been said above, and have an inkling of philosophical spirit, you will see how natural and likely it is that since *ne homo*, that is, *nemo*, means *no one*, so *ne hil*, that is, *nihil*, originally meant no matter, that is, no thing [...] Doesn't this etymology seem completely natural? Doesn't it seem then very likely that the ancient and almost unknown *hilum* meant matter, and was the same root as $\upsilon\lambda\eta$ [wood, forest], and *silva*, also used in the sense of matter? [...] Haven't we then, in fact, probably found in very ancient Latin the simple root of *silva*, of $\upsilon\lambda\eta$, etc.? Note that in this case it would be likely that the original and proper meaning of $\upsilon\lambda\eta$, *silva*, etc., among the meanings they actually have, was matter.

³⁴ Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, transl. Kathleen Baldwin et al. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), paging inside the bracket; emphasis in original.

Moreover Leopardi, although not with a clear and rigorous philosophical style, expressed some untimely ideas against the science and philosophy of his time that could have been appreciated by Santayana. His ontology was materialist and anti-spiritualist. He deplored emphatically the science of his time and “the most enlightened philosophers of the most enlightened modern nation” (Leopardi often used superlative adjectives, especially ironically), who were pleased of their spiritualism, grounding it on a concept of spirit, which was fanciful and defined only negatively, “as a substance which is not matter.” For this reason they were unlearned, while children and ancient people, completely unlearned, turned to be more cultured than them.

Furthermore, Leopardi’s materialism left room for sentiment, whose absence in Lucretius was stigmatized by Santayana. Yet Leopardi, unlike Lucretius and Santayana, was unable to accept the idea that matter can be an eternal and timeless entity flowing through different forms and, in spite of finding the etymological root of nothing in matter, claiming that “the principle of everything is nothing,” confessed his anguish of “solido nulla,” “solid nothing,” namely an oxymoron.

Of course Santayana could never accept this nihilistic side of Leopardi’s materialism, and probably this is the reason why, including him among other romantic poets, he stigmatized them as “essentially children of spirit.”³⁵

In this regard, it seems meaningful to me to say, once more, how Santayana’s thinking is far removed from postmodern philosophy by comparing his point of view with Emanuele Severino’s, an influential Italian philosopher closely related to Heidegger. Severino shows a great appreciation of Leopardi’s nihilism. For him Leopardi, far from being a romantic child, is even situated “on the most advanced line that thought can reach by moving towards its essence, and beyond which the West would see, in its essence, the traits of the extreme madness of Nihilism.”³⁶

Turning back to compare Lucretius and Leopardi on the concept of nature, it is true that there is no affinity between them. Suffice it to say that the former sees nature as genitrix and the latter as stepmother. It is also interesting to explore this divergence reading Santayana’s *Three Philosophical Poets*. In particular, turning back to the words of Santayana – when he commented on Lucretius’ naturalism saying that “noth-

³⁵ George Santayana, *Philosophy and Spiritual Life* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1927), 84.

³⁶ Emanuele Severino, *Il Nulla e la poesia. Alla fine dell’età della tecnica: Leopardi* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1990), 41 (my translation).

ing comes out of nothing, nothing falls back into nothing, if we consider substance; but everything comes from nothing and falls back into nothing if we consider things the objects of love and experience" – we can say that Lucretius and Leopardi saw only one side of nature: the first, only the way of substance, the things as they are, the second, the way of the things as they are the object of a disillusioned love. The first was too positivistic for Santayana: "moral mythology" and "ideal piety" were absent from his poetry and, for this reason, Lucretius could not understand the human side of nature, namely the love of illusions and the fear of death. Leopardi felt all that, but he showed "a vision saturated with anguish, narrowed by it," although not distorted, as Santayana also wrote.³⁷ Still, how did Santayana describe the object of such a vision? For him, Leopardi saw "the universal mutation of earthly things, and their vanity, yet also, almost everywhere, the beginning if not the fullness of beauty."

In my opinion this incompleteness, a sign of childhood for Santayana, was overcome early by him when he went through his *metanoia*, which is my last topic.

3. Metanoia

My concluding remarks aim to show how Santayana's *metanoia* may be understood in the context of "untimely" reflections. After highlighting the similar sense of disillusion and detachment that Leopardi and Santayana experienced at some point in their lives, I will suggest a reading of Santayana's *metanoia* in the light of Foucault's hermeneutics of "the care of self."

Interestingly, Leopardi experienced something similar to what Santayana will call *metanoia*. In *Zibaldone* he wrote that in a space of a single year, when he was twenty-one years old (in the middle of his lifetime) a total transformation took place in him. He felt old, was deprived of his sight and, missing his constant distraction of reading, he began to feel the world bleak, to abandon hope and to reflect deeply on the nature of things. Having lost imagination, he became insensible to nature and wholly dedicated to reason and truth. No more poet, he became a philosopher. One year later, he also wrote that a man of imagination loves nature with a transport of delight:

³⁷ George Santayana, "Leopardi," in: *Essays in Literary Criticism of George Santayana*, ed. Irving Singer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 209.

but, as if his love were simply not returned, he feels that he has no part in the beautiful thing that he loves and admires, he sees himself as outside the sphere of beauty, like the lover who [719] is excluded from the heart, the affections, and the company of the beloved. In the contemplation of and feeling for nature and the beautiful, his withdrawal back into himself is always painful to him. He immediately and lastingly feels that what he admires, loves, and feels does not belong to him.

Santayana's *metanoia* is a well-known theme,³⁸ therefore I want to summarize the suggestive pages that he wrote, highlighting only some points in connection with Leopardi's "change of heart." In particular, Santayana expressed a similar sense of despair for intimating old age when he was thirty,³⁹ he underlined a similar transition from poetry to philosophy, and the same need of withdrawing into himself. Both Leopardi and Santayana belonged to the Catholic tradition, but they were soon disillusioned by religious faith.

Now, focusing on Santayana's *metanoia*, the last point I would like to accentuate is that, although this experience led him to a "disintoxication," which could be understood as a typical form of Catholic *askesis*, it should rather be associated with Epicurean and Stoic *askesis*.

On this matter, Foucault famously exposed "untimely" reflections on the history of the subject in western culture, which gave me some challenging suggestions for understanding Santayana's *metanoia*, especially when he points out the difference among Platonic *epistrophe*, Christian *metanoia*, and Hellenistic and Roman *metanoia*.⁴⁰ The Platonic *metanoia* is a schema of four elements: 1) turning from appearances; 2) turning around the self; 3) recollection; 4) returning to the ontological homeland of essences and truth. Christian *metanoia*, besides being practiced inside the Cloister, is much more than a turning gaze from appearance to truth,

³⁸ See, among others, Joel Porte, "Santayana at the 'Gas House,'" *The New England Quarterly* 35(3) (1962): 337–346; Douglas L. Wilson, "Santayana's *Metanoia*: The Second Sonnet Sequence," *The New England Quarterly* 39(1) (1966): 3–25; Lois Hughson, "The Uses of Despair: The Sources of Creative Energy in George Santayana," *American Quarterly* 23(5) (1971): 725–737; Lois Hughson, *Thresholds of Reality: George Santayana And Modernist Poetics* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977); Lydia Amir, "The Democritean Tradition in Santayana, Nietzsche, and Montaigne."

³⁹ George Santayana, "Persons and Places: Fragments of Autobiography", in: *The Works of George Santayana*, ed. William G. Holzberger, Herman J. Saatkamp Jr., vol. 1 (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1986), 423.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures At the Collège de France 1981–82*, transl. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 210–223.

it is “a sudden historical-metahistorical upheaval of the subject,” which implies “a transition from one type of being to another, from death to life, from mortality to immortality, from darkness to light.”⁴¹ Foucault, hence, claims a third way as a counterweight to Pierre Hadot who, admitting only Platonic *epistrophe* and Christian *metanoia*, wrongly identifies a permanent polarity within Western thought, between Western spirituality and philosophy. This third way is the Hellenistic and Roman conversion and it is interesting, for my topic, because this convergence between spirituality and philosophy – masterly outlined by Foucault for this period – in my opinion is what Santayana also experienced.

In particular, Foucault analyzes a series of expressions characterizing this conversion that are: “withdrawing into the self”, “retiring into the self,” “installing oneself in the self as in a place of refuge, a well-fortified citadel, a fortress protected by walls.”⁴² Interestingly, Santayana used similar expressions. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that the main feature of this third form of *metanoia* is not a turning away from appearances to truth through recollection, or a retrieval of self which leads to another world, but a transformation of a subject’s mode of being inside the world – moving from that which does not depend on him to that which does – in order to defend, to equip, to possess and to master the self.

In a similar vein Santayana wrote: “Enjoy the world, travel over it, and learn its ways, but do not let it hold you. Do not suffer it to oppress you.”⁴³ Foucault writes of a liberation within an “axis of immanence” and we know how Santayana was in tune with this axis reminding us, for example, of his doubt about the connection between Platonism and spirituality,⁴⁴ even if he also spoke of his *metanoia* as a Platonic transition.⁴⁵ Finally, in comparison with Christian *metanoia*, the Hellenistic and Roman *metanoia* not only is experienced within the axis of immanence, but it does not imply a death of oneself and a rebirth in a different self. It does not imply repentance. Indeed, for Santayana, repentance is something to be avoided.⁴⁶

These points are crucial, I think, in understanding his *metanoia*. Even if sometimes Santayana seems to feel the same sense of renunciation

⁴¹ Ibidem, 211.

⁴² Ibidem, 85.

⁴³ Santayana, *Persons and Places*, 427.

⁴⁴ Santayana, *Platonism and Spiritual Life*, 1.

⁴⁵ Santayana, *Persons and Places*, 423.

⁴⁶ Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*, 21.

and rebirth of Catholic *metanoia*,⁴⁷ he is quiet alien to it. This is, *inter alia*, revealed by his expressed claims. In addition to stating that he gradually substituted his Augustine with Lucretius, in *Persons and Places* he writes that he put aside Catholicism while making progress “on the primrose path of Epicurean wisdom.”⁴⁸ Moreover, I think it is interesting to underline two key elements which separate Santayana from Catholic *metanoia*. One of them is the worry that Catholic rituals, with their “rich paraphernalia,” could “encumber the spirit with other-worldliness”; what is more, a worldliness “transferred to a future world, and thereby doubly falsified.” The other element is Santayana’s choice for a philosophical life. Describing the human and social religious enthusiasm of his sister Susana, he concludes: “She couldn’t *live* her religion as I *lived* my philosophy.”⁴⁹

As to the similarity with Epicurean wisdom, again I refer to Foucault, who focuses on *phusiologia*, the knowledge of nature which Epicurus prescribed in order to achieve the most perfect serenity.⁵⁰ The knowledge of the things of the world, of the earth and the sky, the most speculative knowledge of physics, according to Foucault, is “modalized in *phusiologia*” in such a way that this knowledge becomes an effective and efficient component in the subject’s transformation of himself.⁵¹ And the particular language of this *phusiologia*, for Epicurus, is *parrhesia*, for Lucretius *veridica dicta*, namely true and free words.

I conclude with a final, important point of Santayana’s timely/untimely philosophical life, recalling what he wrote in “A General Confession”:⁵²

If Democritus or Lucretius or Spinoza or Darwin works within the lines of nature, and clarifies some part of that familiar object, that fact is the ground of my attachment to them: they have the savour of truth; but what the savour of truth is, I know very well without their help.

An overconfident stance? Or rather, the truth acquired by his own care of self?

⁴⁷ Santayana, *Persons and Places*, 423.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 426.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 425–426.

⁵⁰ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 243.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 242.

⁵² Santayana, “A General Confession,” 12–13.

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Summary

An interesting trend of recent scholarship on Santayana's thought is focused on his criticism of modernity and brings him together with the major figures of postmodern philosophy, especially with Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Rorty. In my opinion, while the criticism of modernity certainly offers a relevant key to understand Santayana's philosophy, it should be rooted first and foremost in some cultural and philosophical linkages that Santayana himself makes explicit throughout his writings, namely, a classical Latin author such as Lucretius, and a modern author such as Giacomo Leopardi. Answering the question put in my title, it seems to me that, ultimately, Santayana is a timely/untimely philosopher, if his concepts of rationality and spirituality can be viewed and understood within the framework labeled by Michel Foucault as *epimeleia heautou* or *cura sui*.

Keywords: postmodern philosophy, reason, naturalism, substance, metanoia