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The Smile of Parmenides

George Santayana in his Letters

ONE doesn't have to read very far in Santayana's letters to become aware that it might be very hard to like this man—that, indeed, it might be remarkably easy to dislike him. And there is no point in struggling against the adverse feeling. The right thing to do is to recognise it, to admit it into consciousness, and to establish it beside that other awareness, which should come as early and which should be the stronger of the two—that Santayana was one of the most remarkable men of our time and that his letters are of classic importance.

To say that they are among the best of modern letters is not to say much, is not to say anything. I can think of no modern collections of letters—D. H. Lawrence's and Shaw's excepted—that aren't deeply depressing in their emptiness and lack of energy, in their frightening inability to suggest living spirit. To find an adequate point of comparison for Santayana's letters one has to go back to the 19th century. Santayana isn't, of course, equal to Keats as a letter-writer, but that one can even think to say that he isn't, is something. I am led to make the comparison not because the letters of Santayana and of Keats are similar in kind but because they are similar in effect. No recent book has taken possession of my mind as Santayana's has, commanding not assent (or not often)

but concurrence—I mean a literal “running along with,” the desire to follow where the writer leads. One of the effects of Keats's letters is to suggest that the writer holds in his mind at every moment a clear image of the actual quotidian world and also an image of the universe and of a mode of existence beyond actuality yet intimately related to actuality and, in a sense, controlling it. I don't pretend to understand Santayana's doctrine of essences, not having read the works in which he expounds it; nor, indeed, do I wholly understand Keats's doctrine of essences, although I do perceive that it was central to his thought. I suspect that the two doctrines have much in common and I recommend the exploration of this possibility to a competent philosopher. But quite apart from any connection that may be found between Santayana's thought and Keats's—it was certainly not an influence: Santayana read Keats in the old 19th century way, and was sceptical of the idea that Keats *thought* at all—what one finds in the two men as letter-writers is the force and seduction of their manner of thought, their impulse to think about human life in relation to a comprehensive vision of the nature of the universe.

It is this that accounts for the exhilaration that Santayana's letters induce, a sense of the mind suddenly freed, happily disenchanted,

active in a new way. Santayana has several times reminded us how close he was to the men of the English late 19th century, how great a part Ruskin and Arnold and Pater played in the formation of this thought. What one becomes aware of from the letters is how close he was to the English Romantics. For the kind of mental sensation he imparts is what the Romantic poets thought of as peculiarly appropriate to the mind, and they often represented it by images of the mind "soaring" or on a mountain peak: it was thus that they proposed the escape from the "bondage" of "earth," the ability to move at will in a sustaining yet unresisting medium, the possibility of looking at life in detachment, from a "height." This is a nearly forgotten possibility of the mind; it is not approved by the hidden, prepotent Censor of modern modes of thought. To look within is permitted; to look around is encouraged; but best not to look down—not realistic, not engaged, not democratic. One experiences the unsanctioned altitude with as much guilt as pleasure.

FOR this pleasure, or the reminder of pleasure, we are of course grateful to Santayana and drawn to him. Yet at the same time there is the easy possibility of disliking him, or at least of regarding him with ready suspicion. It shouldn't matter. It should, indeed, constitute an added charm. Let us just call it "tension" or "ambiguity" or "irony" or whatever name serves to remind us that there is a special intellectual satisfaction in admiring where we do not love, in qualifying our assent, in keeping our distance.

My own antagonism to Santayana goes back to my college days at Columbia. Irwin Edman, as all his students know, was a great admirer of Santayana and was said actually to be on terms of friendship with the great man. Edman had an amazing gift as a teacher. He could summarise the thought of a philosopher in a way both to do justice to his subject and to make it comprehensible to the meanest intelligence. Or, if the meanest intelligence didn't actually comprehend, it certainly had the sentiment of comprehen-

sion. This I can testify to, because, when it came to philosophy, I was the meanest intelligence going. I found it virtually impossible to know what issues were involved; I could scarcely begin to understand the questions, let alone the answers. But when Edman spoke with that wonderful systematic lucidity of his, all things seemed clear. With, for me, the exception of Santayana. Edman could never make plain to me what Santayana was up to.

If Santayana could now be consulted about why this was so, he would very likely explain that it was because Edman didn't really understand him. He seems to have come to think that no Jew and no Columbia man was likely to understand him. And of course Edman's allegiance to Santayana gradually abated and in the essay which he contributed to Professor Schilpp's *The Philosophy of George Santayana* he maintains that the later developments of the thought of the man who had been his master verged on the irrelevant and, perhaps, the immoral. And in the reply to his critics which Santayana makes in the same volume, he permits himself to speak of Edman's objections as showing a "personal animus."

Yet I have no doubt that Edman's account of Santayana was perfectly just and accurate. What stood in the way of my understanding it was a cherished prejudice. The college group to which I belonged, many of whom were more or less close to Edman, resisted that part of his thought which led him to understand and praise detachment. We were very down on Walter Pater, very hostile to what we called "æstheticism," and we saw Edman's enthusiasm for Santayana as of a piece with his admiration for Pater and as a proof of his mere "æstheticism." I have come to think that Pater is a very remarkable writer, much misrepresented by the critics and literary historians. But at the time we took him to be everything that was *fainéant* and disembodied and precious. Santayana seemed to some of us to be in the line of Pater, brought there if only by his prose, which even now I think is only occasionally really good because all too much of it is "beautiful," as the philosophers never weary

of telling us. The famous "perfection of rottenness" which William James said that Santayana's thought represented, was wholly apparent to us, and we did not use the phrase with any touch of the admiration that James really did intend.

In short, what Edman (if I read him aright) eventually came to feel about Santayana after a close study of the later work, I felt out of a prejudice based on hearsay. Against this prejudice not even Edman's lucidity and the sympathy he then had with Santayana's mind could make any headway. When an undergraduate entertains a critical prejudice against a literary or philosophical figure, the last person in the world who can change his mind is his teacher.

MY CASE, of course, was not unique. The feeling against Santayana in America is endemic and almost inevitable. It is indeed very difficult for an American, *qua* American—to use the crow-like expression of professional philosophers—to like him or trust him. Of course among the majority of the academic historians of American culture his name is mud. They hustle him off into the limbo they reserve for "aristocratic critics of American democracy." They find it wonderfully convenient to think of him as the "perfection of rottenness"—he is the Gilbert Osmond of their *Portrait of a Lady*, the Lady being America in the perfection of her democracy and innocence: he is a spoiled American, all too elegant, all too cultivated, all too knowing, all too involved with æsthetic values. Actually they are much mistaken. For one thing, Santayana was very severe in his attitude toward the æsthetic experience—as severe as William James and for rather better reasons. This is one of the remarkable and salutary things about him. He was not in the least taken in by the modern pieties about art; and as he grew older art meant less and less to him, and he thought that it should. As for his rejection of America, it is a good deal more complex, not to say cogent, than historians of American culture usually care to remember. America, it is true, seemed to have affected him ad-

versely in an almost physical way, making him anxious and irritable. But it was to a particular aspect of American life that he directed his antagonism, the aspect of what we, with him, may call its gentility, the aspect of its high culture. And what the academic historian of American culture would do without Santayana's phrase "the genteel tradition" is impossible to imagine. Santayana was ill at ease everywhere in America, but what offended his soul was New England, especially Boston, especially Cambridge. The America of raw energy, the America of material concerns, the America that he could see as young and barbaric and in the line of history he had a tolerance and affection for that were real and not merely condescending. Some years ago the late Bernard De Voto raised a storm of protest and contempt among American intellectuals because he wrote in praise of a certain research on the treatment of third degree burns and insisted that this was a cultural achievement of the first order, that it was an intellectual achievement; he said that it was a fault in American intellectuals that they were not aware of it and did not take pride in it as a characteristic achievement of the American mind. Santayana would have been in agreement with De Voto. In a letter of 1921 to Logan Pearsall Smith, he writes of high American culture as being ineffectual and sophomoric. "But notice:" he goes on, "*all* learning and 'mind' in America is not of this ineffectual Sophomoric sort. There is your Doctor at Baltimore who is a great expert, and *really knows how to do things*: and you will find that, in the service of material life, all the arts and sciences are prosperous in America. But it must be in the service of material life; because it is material life (of course with the hygiene, morality, and international good order that can minister to material life) that America has and wants to have and may perhaps bring to perfection. Think of that! If material life could be made perfect, as (in a very small way) it was perhaps for a moment among the Greeks, would not that of itself be a most admirable achievement, like the creation of a new and superior mammal, who would instinctively suck only

the bottle? . . . And possibly on that basis of perfected material life, a new art and philosophy would grow unawares, not similar to what we call by those names, but having the same relation to the life beneath which art and philosophy amongst us ought to have had, but never have had actually. You see I am content to let the past bury its dead. It does not seem to me that we can impose on America the task of imitating Europe. The more different it can come to be, the better; and we must let it take its own course, going a long way round, perhaps, before it can shake off the last trammels of alien tradition, and learn to express itself simply, not apologetically, after its own heart."

Here, surely, is the perfect dream, the shaping Whitmanesque principle, of the academic historian of American culture. Santayana, it is true, formulates it with a touch of irony and, indeed, on another occasion he avowed his belief that everything good in "the ultimate sense" would come to America from Europe only, and from Latin Europe; and of course he was glad that he would not live to see the new American culture come into being. Yet he had too strong a sense of history, too clear an understanding of cultures, not to be as serious as he was ironic.

NO, IT is not really Santayana's open rejection of America that troubles us about him. His feelings about America go very deep, go to his first principles. That is why they cannot be related to the shabby canting anti-Americanism of the intellectual middle class of England or of the Continent. A good many things may no doubt be said in dispraise of Santayana, but it cannot be said of him that he had a vulgar mind, that he could possibly think as the *New Statesman* thinks. There was no malice in Santayana's feeling about America, nor does he ever give evidence that he had ever been *offended* by America—he had none of the provincial burgher's hurt vengeful pride which led Dostoevsky to write *A Winter Diary* to get in his kicks at France, or Graham Greene to write *The Quiet American*.

What does alienate Americans from Santa-

yana is the principles upon which his rejection of America is founded. That is, what troubles us is not his negations of America, but the affirmation upon which he based his sense of himself as a European. These disturb us, they put questions to us which we cannot endure.

It isn't possible to speak of Santayana as a representative European. To do so would be to give modern Europe more credit than it deserves. But he was, we might say, the Platonic form or "idea" of a European. To the development of this idea America was necessary. It was not enough for him to have been Santayana of Avila in Castille; there had also to be the Sturgis connection, and Boston, and Harvard. Santayana repelled the belief that as a boy in Boston he had lived an isolated and unhappy life because he was of foreign birth. He was, he writes, the lieutenant-colonel of the Boston Latin School regiment, he acted in the Hasty Pudding plays at Harvard, he was devoted—"as a spectator"—to football. Yet he did stand apart; and he was able to look at the culture into which he had been transplanted with a degree of consciousness that was available to no other lieutenant-colonel and to no other leading lady of a Hasty Pudding play. He knew it to be not his culture, and he lived to develop its opposite principle, the idea of a European culture. This was, to be sure, not monolithically European; England, France, Spain, Italy, Greece were all separate to him, sharp, clear entities which had different values for him at different stages of his life. But, in contrast to America, they came together as a single idea, they made the idea of Europe.

If we ask what it was that Santayana thought of as separating him from America, as making him characteristically and ideally European (and a philosopher), the answer is that it was his materialism. He seems to have found it very difficult to convince people that he really was a materialist. No doubt in his more technical works there are grounds for the resistance to his claim that his materialism was basic to all his thought; of these I have no knowledge. But one reason for the resistance is that people don't expect materialists

to compose in highly wrought prose, exquisite and sometimes all too exquisite; we don't expect subtlety and vivacity, supposing, no doubt, that materialists must partake of the dull density of "matter"; we don't expect them to give a very high value to poetry and all fictions, especially the fictions of religions. In 1951 Santayana finds it necessary to write, "Naturalism . . . is something to which I am so thoroughly wedded that I like to call it materialism, so as to prevent all confusion with the *romantic* naturalism, like Goethe's, for instance, or that of Bergson. Mine is the hard, non-humanistic naturalism of the Ionian philosophers, of Democritus, Lucretius, and Spinoza." And he goes on: "Those professors at Columbia who tell you that in my *Idea of Christ in the Gospels* I incline to theism have not read that book sympathetically. They forget that my naturalism is fundamental and includes man, his mind, and all his works, products of the generative order of nature."

From Santayana's materialism comes his detachment. Maybe, of course, if we want to look at it psychologically, it is the other way around—the materialism rationalises the detachment which was temperamental. But certainly the two things go together in Santayana, just as they did in Spinoza, who was perhaps Santayana's greatest hero of thought. The world is matter, and follows the laws of matter. The world is even, he is willing to say, a machine, and follows the laws of its devising. The world is not spirit, following the laws of spirit, made to accommodate spirit, available to full comprehension by spirit. It permits spirit to exist but this is by chance and chancily: no intention is avowed. And the world, we might go on to say, is Boston to the boy from Avila; the world is the Sturgis family to the young Santayana—not hostile, yet not his own, not continuous with him. It is, as he says, his host, and he must have reflected that the word implies not only a guest but a parasite!

WHEN Bouvard and Pécuchet gave themselves to the study of Spinoza, Flaubert's favourite philosopher, they felt as

if they were in "a balloon at night, in glacial coldness, carried on an endless journey towards a bottomless abyss and with nothing near but the unseizable, the motionless, the eternal." We do not feel *quite* this as we read Santayana's letters. They are far too full of intended grace, of conscious charm, too full of the things of this world. But the abyss is there, and his dreadful knowledge of it is what Americans fear in Santayana, just as it is the American avoidance of the knowledge of the abyss that made Santayana fear America and flee it. The knowledge of the abyss, the awareness of the discontinuity between man and the world, this is the forming perception of Santayana's thought as it comes to us in the letters. It is already in force at the age of twenty-three—it makes itself manifest in the perfectly amazing self-awareness and self-possession of the letters he writes from his first trip abroad just after his graduation from Harvard. The philosophical detachment is wholly explicit; and we see at once that it is matched by a personal detachment no less rigorous. For Santayana friendship was always of high special importance. He could be a loyal and devoted friend, as witness his constancy to the unfortunate and erratic Frank Russell, Bertrand Russell's elder brother, his predecessor in the earldom; he could be finely sympathetic, as witness his letter to Iris Origo on the death of her only son. But friendship had for him a status in his life like that of art. Art, however lovely, however useful, was not reality; at best it was an element of reality; and sometimes, he said, it interfered with the apprehension of reality. So too he never deceived himself about friendship; its limits were clear to him very early and he never permitted himself to be deceived into thinking that a friend was himself. Nothing could be more striking than Santayana's equal devotion and remoteness to his youthful letters to his friends. He put all his intelligence and all his sympathy at their service, but never himself. It is, in its own way, very fine; but no American reader, I think, can help being made uncomfortable by this stern and graceful self-possession, this rigorous objec-

tivity, this strict limitation, in so very young a man.

And our American discomfort is the more intense, I believe, because we cannot but perceive that Santayana's brilliant youthful reserve is his response to his youthful consciousness of what I have called the abyss. His friend Henry Ward Abbott writes to him out of one of those states of cosmological despair which were common enough among young men even as late as 1887, asking Santayana to consider the problem of life from "the point of view of the grave"; Santayana replies in this fashion: "What you call the point of view of the grave is what I should call the point of view of the easy chair. [That is, the point of view of detached philosophic contemplation.] From that the universal joke is indeed very funny. But a man in his grave is not only apathetic, but also invulnerable. That is what you forget. Your dead man is not merely amused, he is also brave, and if his having nothing to gain makes him impartial, his having nothing to lose makes him free. 'Is it worth while after all?' you ask. What a simple-hearted question. Of course it isn't worth while. Do you suppose when God made up his mind to create this world after his own image, he thought it was worth while? I wouldn't make such an imputation on his intelligence. Do you suppose he existed there in his uncaused loneliness because it was worth while? Did Nothing ask God before God existed, whether he thought it would be worth while to try life for a while? or did Nothing have to decide the question? Do you suppose the slow, painful, nasty, bloody process, by which things in this world grow, is worth having for the sake of the perfection of a moment? Did you come into the world because you thought it worth while? No more do you stay in it because you do. The idea of demanding that things should be worth doing is a human impertinence."

But then, when Abbot continues the question in a later letter, Santayana says, "The world may have little in it that is good: granted. But that little is really and inalienably good. Its value cannot be destroyed because of the surrounding evil."

It is a startling thing for a youth to say, as startling as his exposition of the point of view of the grave, and these two utterances may surely be thought of as definitive of Santayana's later thought. Whatever his materialism leads Santayana to, it does not lead him to a radical relativism pointing to an ultimate nihilism. It does not lead him to a devaluation of life, to the devaluation of anything that might be valued. On the contrary—it is the basis of his intense valuation. Here indeed, we might almost say, is one *intention* of his materialism, that it should lead to a high valuation of what may be valued at all. If we are in a balloon over an abyss, let us at least value the balloon. If night is all around, then what light we have is precious. If there is no life to be seen in the great emptiness, our companions are to be cherished; so are we ourselves. And this, I think, is the essence of the European view of life as it differs from the American. Willa Cather is not in my opinion a very intelligent or subtle mind, but she did show in her novels an understanding of the European attachment to *things* and how it differed from the American attachment. The elaborate fuss that she made about cuisine, about wine, and salads, and bread, and copper pots was an expression of her sense of the unfeeling universe; cookery was a ritual in which the material world, some tiny part of it, could be made to serve human ends, could be made human; and insofar as she represents cookery as a ritual, it is the paradigm of religious belief, and goes along with her growing sympathy for Catholicism, of which the chief attraction seemed to be not any doctrinal appeal it had but rather its being *so very European*. That is, what hope the Catholic religion offered her took its sanction from the European confrontation of the abyss—the despair that arises from the knowledge of the material nature of the world validates all rituals and all fictions that make life endurable in the alien universe.

IF I apprehend Santayana aright, what Miss Cather felt in a very simple way, he felt in a very elaborate way. That is why he was

so acutely uncomfortable in America. Santayana knew that America was not materialistic, not in the philosophic sense and not really in the moral sense. What he says about America's concern with the practical life and with "material well-being" does not contradict this. If anything, it substantiates it.

For if the Americans were truly materialistic, they would recognise the necessity of dualism, they would have contrived a life of the spirit apart from and in opposition to the life of material concern. But for the American consciousness the world is the natural field of the spirit, laid out to be just that, as a baseball diamond or a tennis court is laid out for a particular kind of activity; and what the American wins is not enjoyed as a possession but, rather, cherished as a trophy. The European sees the world as hard and resistant to spirit; whatever can be won is to be valued, protected, used, and enjoyed. But the high valuation of the material life makes, as it were, the necessity for its negation in an intense respect for the life of spirit.

What exasperated Santayana was the American refusal to confront the hard world that materialism proposes, the American preference for seeing the world as continuous with spirit. His animus against Emerson's transcendentalism was extreme, and what he felt about Emerson he felt about all of American philosophic thought, as we see from the brilliant *Character and Opinion in the United States*. The inclusion of the word "character" in that title is significant. One of the things that must especially involve our interest in the letters is what we perceive to be a chief preoccupation of the writer—the concern for character, for self-definition, for self-preservation. This concern is intimately related to Santayana's materialism. Santayana defined himself in the universe by detachment from it. And what is true of him in the largest possible connection is also true of him in smaller connections. Thus, he had no sooner received his first Harvard appointment than he began to think of the moment when he could retire from Harvard, which he did at the first possible opportunity. It was not merely that he was a foreigner, or that he saw

himself as of a different breed from the American academic, or that he could not support what, in an early letter, he calls the "damnable worldliness and snobbishness prevalent at Harvard." It was rather that he needed to define himself by withdrawal.

And how very precise his self-definition is. We see it in the cool self-possession of his dealings with William James. In his early relation with Santayana, James as a teacher is in a very different rôle from that in which we find him in that all too famous anecdote of Gertrude Stein at Radcliffe, when, to Gertrude Stein's having written nothing in her examination book except the statement that the afternoon was too fine for examinations, James replied with agreement and an A for the course. I have never admired James for this—it seems to me that he gave an unfortunate impetus to all the contemporary student cant about how teachers ought to behave, that, for example, they should be *human*. I like much better James's coming down on Santayana for not having done the conventional thing with his travelling fellowship; I like it in part because it gave Santayana the opportunity to stand up to his superior and to affirm himself and to hold himself ready to take the consequences. And this he does in a way that no American youth could have equalled, with a sincere regard for James, with a perfect if not wholly ingenuous courtesy, with the full sanction of his view of the world, an entire readiness to wipe out his academic career before it should have begun. It isn't exactly endearing; it makes the beginning of our sense that we shall not like Santayana at all. But it is very impressive, it is even very fortifying.

THAT sense of himself which Santayana shows in his letters to James was what he saw lacking in American life. His novel, *The Last Puritan*, is, as he says, about a man who, with all the personal and material gifts, "peters out," and the tragedy of this he felt to be so terrible that he "actually cried over the writing of it." He speaks of the petering out of most of the young American poets who

do not escape to hibernate in Europe. And petering out was, it seems, the fate of most of his Harvard friends—it was not that they were worn out by American life, nor that they were hampered by economic circumstances, or perverted by bad ideals; it was that they did not know how to define themselves, they did not know how to grasp and possess; we might say that they did not know how to break their hearts on the idea of the hardness of the world, to admit the defeat which is requisite for any victory, to begin their effective life in the world by taking the point of view of the grave. Perhaps the whole difference between Santayana and America is summed up in an exchange between him and William Lyons Phelps. No two men could have been more worlds apart than Phelps and Santayana, but Santayana liked Phelps—he was American academic life, and American kindness, he was all the massive excitement of the Yale-Harvard game, which Santayana relished, making it a point always to stay with the Phelps when the game was in New Haven. When *The Last Puritan* appeared Phelps was distressed by the book and Santayana had to deal with his objection that he did not “love life” and also with the objection that there were no “good people” in the book. To which Santayana replied, “I don’t think you like *good* people, really, only sweet people—like Annabel [Mrs. Phelps] and you!” The sentence seems to me momentous in its definition of American life. In that life sweetness is an academic trait, and very lovely and valuable it is. But we find it very hard to imagine that definition of character which is necessary for the strain of what Santayana calls goodness.

As for Santayana himself, his effort of self-definition had, in some ways, an amazing success. He was manifestly not a sweet man, although there are some engagingly kind letters to people whose defences he knew to be weak, students, young philosophers, old friends who suddenly called themselves to mind after half a century. That he was a good man has been questioned and the question seems to me a very reasonable one—there is certainly something deeply disquieting about

his temperament. But there can be no doubt of the firmness of his self-definition; there can be no doubt that he did not peter out. The surrender of hope that he made at an early age, the admission of defeat that many interpret as an essential cynicism or even as a kind of malevolence may not be life-giving to most of his readers; but it was a regimen that preserved him in life in a way that must astound us. He lived to be nearly ninety, and up to the end there is no intellectual event that he does not respond to with full alertness and full power and full involvement. His comments on Edna St. Vincent Millay make a definitive estimate of her; a few years later he is no less precise about Faulkner. He absorbed Freud far better than most intellectuals and his essay on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* deals in a remarkable way with Freud’s materialistic assumptions that would make Santayana sympathetic to him. He is much interested in the poetry of Robert Lowell, and also in the stories of Somerset Maugham, the point of his interest in the latter being his “wonder at anybody wishing to write such stories.” In general he is responsive to the modern element in literature—he was fascinated by Joyce and captivated by Proust; but he says he has no enthusiasm for D. H. Lawrence, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche: he has had from Aristotle all they can give him. The vivacity and cogency of his mind never abate.

IN THE letter to Abbot which I quoted earlier he had written that “the point of view of the grave is not to be attained by you or me every time we happen to want anything in particular. It is not gained except by renunciation. Pleasure must first cease to attract and pain to repel, and this, you will confess, is no easy matter. But meantime, I beg of you, let us remember that the joke of things is one at our expense. It is very funny, but it is exceedingly unpleasant.” The ironic smile at the universal joke never left the face of his writing, but neither, I think, did the sense of how unpleasant the joke was. The smile drove philosophers to distraction and

led some of them to say that he wasn't a philosopher at all—maybe a poet. "If you took [my lucubrations] more lightly perhaps you would find them less aggravating," he wrote to Professor Lamprecht. He himself thought a smile might say much—in a letter to Father Munson he speaks of the impor-

tance in his philosophic life of a passage of Plato's *Parmenides* "about 'ideas' of filth, rubbish, etc., which the moralistic young Socrates recoils from as not beautiful, making old Parmenides smile. That smile of Parmenides made me think." Of Santayana's smile we feel it does no less.

The Birth of Tragedy

AND me happiest when I compose poems.
 Love, power, the huzza of battle
 are something, are much;
 yet a poem includes them like a pool
 water and reflection.
 In me, nature's divided things—
 tree, mould on tree—
 have their fruition;
 I am their core. Let them swap,
 bandy, like a flame swerve
 I am their mouth; as a mouth I serve.

And I observe how the sensual moths
 big with odour and sunshine
 dart into the perilous shrubbery;
 or drop their visiting shadows
 upon the garden I one year made
 of flowering stone: to be a footstool
 for the perfect gods
 who, friends to the ascending orders,
 will sustain this passionate meditation
 and call down pardons
 for the insurgent blood.

A quiet madman, never far from tears,
 I lie like a slain thing
 under the green air the trees
 inhabit, or rest upon a chair
 towards which the inflammable air
 tumbles on many robins' wings;
 noting how seasonably
 leaf and blossom uncurl
 and living things arrange their death,
 while someone from afar off
 blows birthday candles for the world.

Irving Layton

IRVING LAYTON (1912-). *Montreal. Teaches in Montreal. His books include: Here and Now, Now is the Place, The Black Hurtsmen, The Cold Green Element, and The Bull Calf.*