

[*The Nation*]MR. SANTAYANA ON THE
UNITED STATES

BY J. MIDDLETON MURRY

ONE of the least comforting features of this not very comfortable age is that it is debarred not only from practising but from appreciating perhaps the rarest and certainly the most valuable of the intellectual virtues, a true detachment. We have long since given up thinking about the things that most truly concern us; we have no time, we are engaged in a struggle, partly for the bare opportunity of life, more generally against a force or a spirit that is too big, too omnipresent for us to define. The struggle against it is so overwhelming, the sweat so blinds our eyes, that we cannot see, cannot pause to distinguish what we are struggling for. Few and far between are the Pisgah-sights now vouchsafed us; our famished glimpses of the jewels of life are so rare that they bewilder rather than encourage us. We have seen with our eye the shipwreck of a religion and a morality in which, for all our scepticism, we obscurely trusted; we have watched a whole system in which our things of price had their place and function disappear into the deeps. In our little boats we scurry about, tugging feverishly at the oars, to rescue fragments of comeliness and virtue, and we forget that their meaning is lost. In the splendid worm-eaten ship that was they had their office and their beauty. Heaped, jumbled, and dripping in our little boats they are only patriotic relics of the past.

Yet, even though we feel obscurely that all is to begin again, we are too deeply involved in the work of salvage to dream of building a great ship once more. We resent those who call to us to pause, to set a course and steer by it.

The waves are too high; the sheer wall of hostile water bears down upon us. To surmount this one monstrous wave, and then the next, is all that we can do — all, we cry, that mortal man can be called upon to do. And we feel toward a master of detachment like Mr. Santayana that he does not understand the perils with which we are surrounded: he appears to us like the Lucretian spectator

*Suave mari magno turbantibus æquora ventis
E terra magnum alterius spectare laborem . . .*

and because we are secretly aware of its truth we are a little hostile to the Lucretian warning which he sounds in our ears — ‘et propter vitam vivendi perdere causas.’

The warning is cold; we are stripped and shivering, and desire that someone should rather cast a cloak about us. We cannot change in a day; we were sentimentalists before the disaster, and we tend to sentimentalize over it now. We want to be the heroes of a romantic tragedy, charming dreamers of a beautiful dream frustrated by the event, not fools who could not see the fact before their eyes. We want to believe in ourselves, but in ourselves as we are. Mr. Santayana also wants us to believe in ourselves; but he coldly points out that it is impossible for us to believe in ourselves as we are. Such a belief is not a belief at all. Belief, like all other good things, must be rational; it must square with the facts and have a repercussion upon actions; it must be a belief in a humane ideal, not in the jostling fragments of twenty incompatible ideals. Rationalize your values, is his message. And if we can overcome our first reluctance, and find a moment's pause in the struggle to follow out the implications of his advice, the sense of a hostile coldness vanishes and we pass slowly into a clear and exhilarating air of the understanding,

where the outlines of things are no longer lost in a circumambient mist and humanity is no longer a sentiment, but a discipline.

This clear air bathes Mr. Santayana's book * on American character and opinion no less than his apparently more philosophical works. The reason is plain; Mr. Santayana has practised his precept, he has rationalized his values, his judgments have a standard, and his vision a background. If it seems singular that he should securely employ the same perspective in examining America as he directs to the estimation of philosophies in *The Life of Reason*, that is only an indication of our modern difficulty in conceiving a comprehensive attitude to life. We have learned to expect from our contemporaries scrappy judgments and unrelated impressions. We are quite accustomed to finding our men of science ethical barbarians, and our metaphysicians sentimentalists. This, we say, with a touch of pride in our voices, is an age of specialization; we might as well be proud of living in an age that gets things done. It does — but what things? But perhaps the greatest curse of the present age is the complacent acquiescence in specialization. In politics, in morality, in art, the left hand never knows what the right hand doeth and we love to have it so. The specialist is the modern witch-doctor, and even the most enlightened of us, like Mr. Wells, bows to his ju-ju with no sense of shame. One of Mr. Santayana's great services to modern society and modern thought is that his writings are a clear and steady protest against this fetish of modern obscurantism.

Thus it is that his criticism of America can arouse no complacency in ourselves. We are implicitly condemned by the standards against which America

is measured. It is not really comfortable for an Englishman to read this brilliant analysis of the discrepancy between profession and act in America:

What people have respected have been rather scraps of official philosophy, or entire systems, which they have inherited or imported, as they have respected operas and art museums. To be on speaking terms with these fine things was a part of social respectability, like having family silver. High thoughts must be at hand, like those candlesticks, probably candleless, sometimes displayed as a seemly ornament in a room blazing with electric light. Even in William James, spontaneous and stimulating as he was, a certain underlying discomfort was discernible; he had come out into the open, into what should have been the sunshine, but the vast shadow of the temple still stood between him and the sun. He was worried about what *ought* to be believed and the awful deprivations of disbelieving. What he called the cynical view of anything had first to be brushed aside, without stopping to consider whether it was not the true one; and he was bent on finding new and empirical reasons for clinging to free-will, departed spirits, and tutelary gods.

Nobody, except perhaps in the last decade, has tried to bridge the chasm between what he believes in daily life and the 'problems' of philosophy. Nature and science have not been ignored, and 'practice' in some schools has been constantly referred to; but instead of supplying philosophy with its data they have only constituted its difficulties; its function has not been to build on known facts but to explain them away. Hence a curious alteration and irrelevance, as between week days, and sabbaths, between American ways and American opinions.

Under a light so searching England will not look appreciably better than America, for the light radiates from the central point of Mr. Santayana's rationalization of human life. The inquiry has been already taken down to ultimates, and the chasm which reveals itself between the beliefs of daily life and those of religion and philosophy in America is not bridged in England. At best the irrelevance of British ways and opinions may be a little less obvious.

Indeed, throughout this book we are conscious that American character and

* *Character and Opinion in the United States.* By George Santayana. (Constable. 10s. 6d. net.)

opinion is merely a piece of the general texture of modern-life in which the pattern happens to be more conspicuous. Not that the individuality of America is neglected or diminished — the chapters on the Academic Environment and on William James are masterly renderings of subtle American idiosyncrasies — but it is seen as a type of modern barbarism. Mr. Santayana does not use the word in his diagnosis, but we feel that it is being said by implication over and over again. Mr. Santayana is civilization, conscious of itself, and prepared for its responsibilities; and because we are aware of this we cease to wonder why he did not exchange the barbarism of Harvard College for the amenities of our own seats of learning. We differ in essentials from America only in that we have a little mediæval architecture to cover our nakedness. For barbarism, in Mr. Santayana's view, consists precisely in that philosophy is permitted to be independent of the beliefs of daily life.

In such a condition we can believe anything and do anything. It is curious, though perfectly natural, that this definition of barbarism should seem to us at first somewhat trivial. We feel that it does not vastly matter what philosophy is up to, for we have managed to trick philosophy away into a pigeonhole with biology and psychical research on either side. Yes, murmurs Mr. Santayana, but that is because you do not even know what philosophy is, nor, it must be confessed, do your philosophers. Philosophy, if you remember, is the loving pursuit of wisdom, not of knowledge or facts or ultimate reality, but simply of wisdom; it is the science of the good life. He means morals, sniffs the modern anarchist. But Mr. Santayana does not mean merely morals, he means values. The only true philosophy is a philosophy of values, and its method is to investigate

those things which human beings esteem as precious in their daily life, to separate incompatible ideals and delights, and to decide which will offer the most permanent and satisfying enjoyment.

Mr. Santayana devoted himself to this task in *The Life of Reason*, which is the only modern book of philosophy worthy the name, for we can make no secret that we admire and agree with his attitude. We accept him as a champion and epitome of that true civilization, which is an active principle of life. The civilization which he represents is not an institution, but a spiritual possession, a principle of goodness and beauty by which we can direct our own activities and judge the activities of others. Above all, it is a principle of order and measure, infinitely precious in these days of chaos. Not that Mr. Santayana invented it. It is no diminution of his work to say that it is essentially a restatement of the Greek ideal. Some of those who have studied and appreciated the literature of the Greeks may have little to learn from him. But of how many can this be said? Nine out of ten professors of Greek nowadays are barbarians, and the vast majority of readers of Greek need Mr. Santayana to make them understand the import of what they read. But he has done far more than a mere work of exposition; he has shown that the Greek conception of life is completely adequate to modern experience. The principles of rational life which they bequeathed to the world are eternal, for they are organic and implanted in the nature of man. To accept man as he is, not rejecting him wholly as a beast as the cynics do, but to accept him with his limitations and aspirations, his animality and his instinctive, yet so often frustrated reverence for the things of the spirit, to envisage as the end of human life a joy that is en-

during and rational, to realize that this can only be when we have squared our philosophy with the facts, and that these facts include not only cruelty, but the delight of self-sacrifice, the joy of beauty no less than the malice of ignorance — these are the foundations on which Mr. Santayana builds.

If his attitude of mind seems remote to us, it is not because it is visionary or unpractical, but because we live in an age that cares more about doing things than about discovering which things are worth doing. Among its more muddle-headed superstitions is the belief that to be detached is to be hostile and contemptuous: Mr. Santayana's detachment is neither; it is merely the condition of clear thinking. One who has striven so successfully as he to see life whole must needs stand a little further from it than most men. At the pinnacle of the humane virtues the Greek thinkers placed the virtue of contemplation. In Mr. Santayana it is also a culmination of an ordered human life. It sheds its illumination back over the process which it completes and justifies. His humanistic philosophy, unlike other philosophies, has a place for itself; it is comprehensive, harmonious, and persuasive. We could not believe in an advocate of the humanities who spoke barbarously; we can scarcely refuse our assent to one who, like Mr. Santayana, writes with the virile grace and measure which is the mark of his own ideal.

IN THE FACE OF DEATH

BY ARKADY AVERCHENKO

[From a volume of stories entitled *The Evil Spirit*, published in Sebastopol a few months ago. Translated for the LIVING AGE by Leo Pas'volsky.]

DIFFERENT nations have different psychologies. For an illustration look

at the difference in the psychology of the French and the Russians.

The French revolution has left us the following incident:

The kindly French revolutionists one fine day caught in the streets of Paris an abbé by the name of Morie. Of course, a rope was immediately found handy, a noose was made, and the poor abbé was dragged to the nearest lamp post.

'What do you propose to do with me, good citizens?' inquired the abbé with rather natural curiosity.

'We'll string you up on this lamp post instead of a lamp.'

'And do you think there will be more light because of that?' replied the quick-witted abbé with sarcasm.

The crowd which surrounded the abbé consisted of pure-blooded Frenchmen, who were Parisians to boot. The abbé's reply pleased them so much that it was immediately decided by unanimous vote to grant him his life.

This happened in France. And here is what happened in Russia:

In the Kharkoff Extraordinary Commission, where 'Comrade' Sayenko was the guiding and presiding spirit, people were shot every day. This task was usually performed by Sayenko himself. After drinking and doping himself with cocaine the whole day long, Sayenko would come to the prison at night and read off the names of those who were to be shot that night. And all those whose names were read off would sigh deeply, rise obediently from the boxes which served them for beds, and step over to one side. No one ever begged or entreated for mercy. They all knew that it would be easier to touch with entreaty the huge stone blocks of the prison wall than to evoke sympathy from Sayenko's heart.

Once, a day or two before Denikin's