

Progression and Integration: George Santayana's "Trilevel Theory" of Literary Creation¹

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Abstract: In assessing the quality of poetry, George Santayana advanced a graded criterion that may be termed a "trilevel theory." Although this conception originally emerged from his reflections on poetry, it came to serve as an overarching framework for his broader literary vision, mirroring his views on some literary elements such as form, matter, and theme. What is especially compelling is the latent unity of Santayana's diverse intellectual roles—philosopher, aesthetician, and literary critic—within this literary structure. His pursuit of aesthetic excellence, advocacy of realism and literary tradition, philosophical commitment to naturalism and rationalism, and his sense of responsibility as an intellectual are all organically integrated within this idea.

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British novelist William Somerset Maugham once remarked with a tone of regret, "It was a loss to American literature when Santayana decided to become a philosopher rather than a novelist" (309). Maugham called attention to a name, though easily overlooked in literary history, that merits rightful recognition: George Santayana. As one of the most eminent intellectuals of the 20th century, Santayana was a figure of remarkable versatility. He was a philosopher, aesthetician, poet, critic, and novelist rolled into one. With seminal works such as *The Life of Reason* (in five volumes), *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, *The Realms of Being* (in four volumes), and *The Sense of Beauty*, Santayana secured an early position as a leading naturalist philosopher and a pioneer of American aesthetics. By contrast, his literary achievements have mainly remained obscure, receiving insufficient attention and recognition. Maugham ascribed this disparity to what he perceived as Santayana's inordinate absorption in philosophical writings. He contended that philosophy diverted Santayana from his literary calling and ultimately curtailed his literary output. Maugham's assertion, however, betrays a degree of misjudgment.

Firstly, despite several shifts in his writing focus, Santayana never distanced himself from

literature. On the contrary, he maintained a deep and enduring passion for both literary creation and theoretical inquiry, as evidenced by the numerous influential works he published. Over the course of his career, Santayana wrote more than 200 poems, including 85 sonnets, 52 elegies and lyrical pieces, and 23 occasional poems. His novel *The Last Puritan*, spanning nearly 600 pages, was met with widespread acclaim upon its release and quickly rose to bestseller status, surpassed only by *Gone with the Wind*. He also authored the philosophical dialogue novel *Dialogues in Limbo*, as well as several influential collections of essays, such as *Soliloquies in England*, *Character and Opinion in the United States*, and *Dominations and Powers*. Together, these works constitute a lasting intellectual legacy. In 1948 and 1949, Santayana was consecutively nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Secondly, Santayana's philosophical engagement did not diminish his literary prowess. Instead, it infected his literary practices with a singular fusion of style. American scholar Irving Singer once pointed out that "[m]ore than any other great philosopher in the English language, Santayana not only harmonized the two types of writing—the literary and the philosophical—but also made harmonization of this sort a fundamental resource in his doctrinal outlook" (2). Although Santayana did not dismiss the significance of the formal and stylistic dimensions of literature, his efforts were primarily oriented toward thematic articulation—more specifically, how literature could be rendered as a medium to convey his philosophical reflections on the objective world, the supremacy of nature, and the ideal morality. Literature, so to speak, had become a variant of Santayana's philosophical ideologies and mirrored his attempt at breaking through the conventional expression paradigm of philosophy. Santayana made it very explicit in the preface to his *Poems* that "as to the subject of these poems, it is simply my philosophy in the making" (xii). Meanwhile, Santayana's philosophical acumen, in turn, nourished his literary production, endowing his works with greater structural complexity and opening them up to broader interpretive possibilities.

Santayana's view of literary creation reflects this very endeavor. From his earliest poetic compositions, he gradually developed a distinctive mode of authorship, which can be described as a "trilevel theory." In his essay "The Elements and Function of Poetry," Santayana delineates three levels of poetry. As he puts it, "the poetry of mere sound and virtuosity is confined to the lower sphere"; at the intermediate level, the poetry "of fancy, of observation, and of passion moves on this intermediate level"; while the highest one "is reserved for the poetry of the creative reason" (273). These three levels correspond to Santayana's reflections on three fundamental aspects of poetry from an interdisciplinary perspective, namely form, literary materials, and restrained imagination. They collectively outline an ascending trajectory of literary creation, implying how poetic creation may evolve from technical mastery to philosophical depth. Although initially formulated in the context of poetry, this trilevel framework later emerged as a central lens through which Santayana approached literary creation more broadly. Within this compositional model, he engages not only with the intrinsic elements of literature but also with the expression of aesthetics, rationalism, psychology, and imagination. This article closely examines Santayana's "trilevel theory," whereby his core aesthetic orientation, authorial stance, and interdisciplinary awareness are elucidated, along with how this framework reflects the interplay of diverse intellectual currents during social transformation.

The First Level: "There Is a Beauty of Form"

The first two levels in the aforementioned trilevel theory are relatively accessible to interpretation, but when addressing the third, Santayana adopts a distinctly philosophical mode of discourse that will likely perplex readers. What he terms "creative reason" signals his advocacy for philosophical intervention in poetry, representing a form of restrained invention and the individualized demonstration of abstract spiritual ideals. This stratified framework also maps onto the progressive evolution of the literary text from simplicity to complexity. The first level touches upon some basic ontological components of literature, such as rhythm, meter, diction, rhetorical devices, and structure. These jointly shape the textual skeleton. The second level concerns the sources of literary material. It explores how the literary subject acquires this material and establishes a dynamic relationship with its object. The third level pertains to the connotation and significance of literature, which involves the literary subject's processing and transformation of materials. This level also marks the stage where written text is converted into literary text and where the value of literature is produced. In this view, Santayana expresses a distinct literary taste and aesthetic propensity, wherein the intangible, extensional aspects of literature become the dominant determinants, while elements such as form and technique—which belong to the ontological level—are relegated to a subordinate position. Santayana opposed the excessive focus of poets on the immoderate refinement of technique, which, he believed, had the capacity to diminish the quality of poetry. He once ridiculed some self-proclaimed authorities who, in their narrow horizon, equated the beauty of poetry to "the frequent utterance of the sound of 'j' and 'sh,' and the consequent copious flow of saliva in the mouth" ("Elements" 266). From the standpoint of its generative context, this critique, which underlies "trilevel theory," reveals his deep concerns and reflections on the poetic landscape of his time. In the latter half of the 19th century, although the impulse to build a national literature was gaining momentum and sparked unprecedented rumbles in the sphere of poetry in the United States, the period had not yet reached its explosive phase. British influence remained deeply entrenched in American verse. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's longstanding prominence as an arbiter of poetic taste further reinforced the nation's cultural infatuation with European cultural norms, particularly British ones. Victorian poetic aesthetics, especially in New England, morphed into what Santayana termed a "genteel tradition," a stylistic posture characterized by formal rigidity and fastidious attention to elegance. While diverse literary traditions such as neoclassicism, romanticism, and transcendentalism coexisted and competed for popularity—and the experiment with various poetic forms (say, lyric, narrative, and satirical) never ceased—American poets were still deeply preoccupied with whether they could inherit metrical conventions from British verse well. The most detrimental consequence of this collective tendency was its displacement of poetic attention away from the deeper dimensions of the art. Santayana's "trilevel theory" was, in essence, a deliberate counter-response to this misdirection.

It is worth noting that Santayana's criticism of the excessive emphasis on poetic form should not be mistaken for a repudiation of form itself. Quite the opposite: form in fact constitutes a central component of his poetics. Santayana's "trilevel theory" partly aims to draw attention to the appropriate degree of valuing form. In the logic of poetic creation, form is arguably an ensemble of rules covering verse style, pattern, meter, rhyme, etc. It also functions as the fundamental framework upon which the modality and texture of poetry depend. R. S. Crane, founder of the Chicago School, similarly underscored the inseparability of content and form in his discussions of

poetic structure. As Crane puts it, “In a well-made poem, everything is formed, and hence rendered poetic” (153), which resonates with Santayana’s view that “verse after all is a form of rhetoric” (*Poems* xi). To Santayana, when properly deployed, form yields not only literary effectiveness but also aesthetic value. In *The Sense of Beauty*, he explicitly states that “there is a beauty of form” and that it is the most “remarkable and characteristic problem of aesthetics” (69). The beauty of form advocated by Santayana lies primarily in the neat and orderly arrangement of internal components, a coherent whole that can swiftly stimulate readers’ perceptual pleasure and further a sense of harmony, ease, and comfort while reading. Such a conviction places him in contrast to modernist poets who are partial to foreground fragmentation, looseness, and irregularity, thereby unsettling the readers’ expectations and leaving them with impressions of obscurity, abstraction, disruption, illogicality, and dissonance.

Santayana’s pursuit of the beauty of form is primarily manifested in his choice of poetic type and how well it suits his delivery of philosophical thoughts. Most of his poems are sonnets, which are classified into two distinct series. The first series focuses mainly on the core principles of naturalism and his religious reflections. The second series, however, marks a thematic change, which Santayana refers to in Greek as “Metanoia.” This change is evident in his expansion of literary concerns to philosophical relationships. He endeavors to reconcile Platonism and naturalism through a literary lens. Santayana asserts that nature forms the bedrock for literature and art, yet the materials drawn from the natural world are inherently flawed—too concrete and rough to embody the ideal. For art to express beauty and the sublime, it must seek the guidance of Platonism, as Platonists, in Santayana’s eyes, “have therefore a natural authority, as standing on heights to which the vulgar cannot attain, but to which they naturally and half-consciously aspire” (*Sense* 16). As he expresses in “Mount Brevent”:

O dweller in the valley, lift thine eyes
To where, above the drift of cloud, the stone
Endures in silence, and to God alone
[...]
There yet is being, far from all that dies,
And beauty where no mortal maketh moan,
Where larger planets swim the liquid zone,
And wider spaces stretch to calmer skies. (Complete Poems 131)

In these lines, the poet juxtaposes concrete elements of nature with an abstract vision of ideal beauty, and forges a connection through the initial apostrophe. Images such as the valley and drifting clouds emphasize the tangible reality of nature and its intimacy with humankind, yet also gesture toward the limitations and constraints that define human existence—confined, as it were, like the valley itself. The exhortation to “lift thine eyes” signals an aspiration to break free from them and a yearning for a loftier, immaterial domain of ideal being. Singer gives a brilliant summary of Santayana’s reconciliation of naturalism and Platonism in literature. He says, “Santayana’s thinking always has its feet on the ground and its head in the clouds” (132).

Santayana’s predilection for the sonnet is mainly because he recognizes its structural capacity to carry and shape philosophical thoughts. This lyrical form, which originated in the 13th century has been widely embraced by poets for its distinctive qualities and gradually earned its reputation

as “the most enduring, the most widely used and most immediately recognizable of all ‘closed’ poetic forms” (Hurley and O’Neil 76). The word “closed” means that the sonnet, compared with free verse, presents a more rigorous pattern and metrical schemes. It indicates a kind of palpable prescriptiveness. But that should not be taken for rigidity or aesthetic stagnation. In the hands of poets such as Petrarch, Spenser, and Shakespeare, the sonnet continually evolved into new variations, which testifies to its inherent flexibility and openness. The space purveyed by the sonnet is neither overly expansive nor unduly restrictive, allowing poets to engage complex themes with relative ease. Coupling two semi-autonomous units, i.e., the octave and the sestet, yields a vertically asymmetrical structure. In the conventional view, symmetry is commonly associated with formal beauty, while asymmetry is positioned in opposition. Santayana, however, challenges it and negates the necessary correlation between the two. He claims symmetry “contributes to that completeness which delights without stimulating,” but it also “produces monotony in the various views rather than unity in any one of them” (*Sense* 75, 76). Although asymmetry may appear irregular on the surface, it can evoke visual variation and dynamic movement. Moreover, the structural division of the sonnet subtly signals shifts in narrative or emotional registers. In this sense, spatial variation corresponds to a transformation in meaning, thereby granting the poet greater flexibility in shaping thematic development. An illustrative case can be found in Sonnet XIV of Santayana’s first sonnet series.

There may be chaos still around the world,
 This little world that in my thinking lies;
 For mine own bosom is the paradise
 Where all my life’s fair visions are unfurled.
 Within my nature’s shell I slumber curled,
 Unmindful of the changing outer skies,
 Where now, perchance, some new-born Eros flies,
 Or some old Cronos from his throne is hurled.
 I heed them not; or if the subtle night
 Haunt me with deities I never saw,
 I soon mine eyelid’s drowsy curtain draw
 To hide their myriad faces from my sight.
 They threat in vain; the whirlwind cannot awe
 A happy snow-flake dancing in the flaw. (*Complete Poems* 97)

Written in standard iambic pentameter, the poem’s octave adopts the “abba abba” rhyme pattern characteristic of the Petrarchan sonnet. However, in the sestet, Santayana departs from the rhyme schemes of Petrarch, Spenser, or Shakespeare, opting instead for “cdd cdd.” Though this alteration may not be a bold act of formal invention, it still reveals his intention to exercise compositional independence, an observable tendency in many of his other sonnets. In the octave, the poet presents two sharply contrasting realms: a vast and chaotic world of external reality and an internal, idealized world of imagination. The former is marked by constant flux, while the latter, is freed from the dominion of time because Cronos (Cronus), the god of time, has been banished. Within this part, Santayana constructs a solitary speaker whose tone recalls, though less despairingly, the self-conscious and inward-looking old man in T. S. Eliot’s poem “Gerontion.”

The aforesaid structural distinction refers to the rhetorical, emotional, or intellectual shift that typically occurs between the octave and the sestet, a transformation traditionally known in Italian as the “volta.” This turn is widely considered the soul of the poem and it is also “the dramatic and climactic center of the poem, the place where the intellectual or emotional method of release first becomes clear and possible” (Fussell 120). This structural transition aligns closely with Santayana’s poetic logic, serving as a necessary conduit for his progression from empirical observation to metaphysical reflection. The last two lines of the octave betoken the poet’s readiness to rethink traditional mythological figures. In the following sestet, his stance becomes more explicit: he consciously eschews the deification of the spiritual domain and reaffirms a steadfast orientation toward nature, unshaken even by coercive external forces. The poet’s gesture represents both a retreat from a disordered world and a defense of the simplicity and purity of the inner life. Operating within the formal constraints of the sonnet, this poem makes conspicuous and compact use of enjambment. With only four end-stopped lines, the poet deliberately delays syntactic closure to simulate the stream of consciousness and generate a sense of textual continuity and cohesion. Santayana’s unique aptitude for uniting form and thought is exemplified concretely in this poem. As a poetic structure characterized by formal rigor and moderate elasticity, the sonnet is an ideal vehicle for conveying philosophical meditations while maintaining a sense of aesthetic order. For Santayana, the beauty of poetic form must be grounded in thought. As he states, a sonnet “in which the thought is not distributed appropriately to the structure of the verse, has no excuse for being a sonnet” (*Sense* 122). Hence, when devoid of intellectual substance, form forfeits its aesthetic legitimacy.

A prevalent misconception to avoid is the reduction of form to mere artistic appearance, a point which Santayana has labored in his works. He conceives of form as an aggregation of various elements and deems that “the manner in which the elements are combined constitutes the character of the form” (*Sense* 77). He further mentions that such aggregation does not occur automatically but is “an activity of the mind” (77). This observation makes it evident that form is not to be equated with a single-dimensional visual impression and that the apprehension of formal beauty requires active engagement from the subject. Among those elements, Santayana assigns particular importance to the rhythm and sound that produce musical qualities. He believes there is “a certain measure and rhythm of waves with which the aesthetic value of the sensation is connected” (87). From Santayana’s perspective, the beauty of form performs a dual role: it elicits perceptual or physiological responses while simultaneously conveying aesthetic meaning. Thus, he moves beyond the visual structure of poetry to explore the internal aural tension, treating musicality as a central mechanism in the construction of formal beauty. Santayana was an avid lover of music from a young age, when he frequently listened to the works of composers such as Bach, Mozart, and Schubert. Music not only provided aesthetic gratification but also stimulated intellectual thought in his literary production. He even regarded musicality as an indispensable precondition for the literariness of language. According to him, if “music were left behind altogether, language would pass into a sort of algebra or vocal shorthand, without literary quality” (*Reason in Art* 50–51). Santayana’s early poem “Cape Cod” exemplifies a seamless fusion of literary artistry and musicality. In this poem of six tercets, the poet enhances the auditory texture through a meticulous design of rhythm and meters, allowing him to effectively transmit visual sensations and psychological experiences to readers. This pervasive musicality, meanwhile, amplifies emotional tension within lines as well. To illustrate,

the first two tercets can be analyzed.

The low sandy beach and the thin scrub pine,
The wide reach of bay and the long sky line,—
O, I am far from home!

The salt, salt smell of the thick sea air,
And the smooth round stones that the ebbtides wear,—
When will the good ship come?

(*Complete Poems* 160)

The distribution of stressed and unstressed syllables, as well as the meter, can be indicated as follows.

da DUM | DUM da | DUM da | da DUM | da DUM
da DUM | DUM da | DUM da | da DUM | da DUM—
DUM, da | da DUM | da DUM

da DUM | DUM DUM | da da DUM | da DUM
da da DUM | da DUM | da da DUM | da DUM—
DUM da | da DUM | da DUM |

Santayana intentionally creates rhythmic variations that correspond to the scenes he depicts. In the first two lines of the first tercet, the placement of stressed syllables primarily aims to foreground the features of specific images, such as the vastness of the bay and the long expanse of the skyline. By inserting trochees into the metric framework dominated by iambs in the first two lines, the flow of the narrative is momentarily disrupted, which mirrors the hassle of traversing the beach and hints at the poet's emotional unease. The reduction of feet in the third line represents a formal change that distinguishes the external landscape from the poet's psychological state, suggesting at the same time a sense of alienation from the surroundings. This sudden brevity indicates a shift in the poet's mood and heightens the intensity of the loneliness that comes with being in exile. In the second tercet, introducing a trochee in the first line not only extends the rhythmic flow but also reinforces the physiological response to the sense of smell. The subsequent anapests create a rhythmic acceleration that evokes readers' associations with the force of the tide, and, through the alternating iambs, it mimics the ebb and flow of waves. The third line begins with a trochee that conveys urgency as a reflection of the poet's intense longing for the "good ship" and hometown. However, the immediate following of two consecutive iambic feet alleviates the emotion and delivers the underlying melancholy, anxiety, and uncertainty behind this yearning. American philosopher Newton P. Stallknecht has captured the existential plight of the poet and argued that the poem's "language, rhythm, and imagery yield fully to the sense of forlorn exile that is sustained throughout" (33–34). A subtle technique that one may not register is the employment of line breaks in each tercet. This caesura brings about a temporary vacuum during the narrative progression and makes it possible to change the focus. It also alludes to the poet's momentary contemplation in the face of natural scenery.

Herbert Marcuse affirms the role of form by stating that it is "an irreversible sequence of style,

subjects, techniques, and rules” and “constitutes the unique and enduring identity” of literature (142). Form provides a means for literary classification and characteristics that differentiate works from one another. Traditionally speaking, form establishes the boundaries and rules for literary production, largely determining the final appearance and features of a work. This sense of certainty brought by form is also a crucial element that Santayana identifies as essential.

The Second Level: Realistic Materials and Literary Expression

At the first level, Santayana essentially attends to the ontological aspects of poetry, which, at their core, concern aesthetic autonomy in literature. His emphasis on form resonated, in some respects, with the tenets of the New Critics in the 1930s. Yet unlike them, Santayana resists the confines of formalism. Rather, he treats form as a starting point for developing a trajectory that moves from internal compositions to external contexts in literary creation. At the second level of his “trilevel theory,” Santayana directs his attention to the interaction between the literary subject and the objective world, mainly involving the sources of literary material and the psychology underlying artistic creation. This orientation reflects both his realist stance and his appreciation of imagination. It also informs his endeavors in other literary types beyond poetry.

Santayana’s position in literature, in essence, is accordant with his philosophical and aesthetic commitments. The English term “realism” denotes both literary realism and philosophical realism. This semantic duality precisely echoes the consistency of Santayana’s thoughts. As a stalwart of critical realism in philosophy, he proposes in his notable essay, “Three Proofs of Realism,” that “knowledge is transitive” (168). In other words, mental activity has corresponding objects in the real world, and the production of knowledge is based on the materials provided by reality. This insight is equally evident in Santayana’s aesthetic propositions. He pithily defines beauty as “pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing” (*Sense* 43). According to this cognitive logic, concrete existence constitutes the primary basis for mental processes. Santayana extends this concern with reality to the literary territory where he specifies two focal points. First, the language of literature must be appropriate to the reality of existence, fully displaying the narrative or descriptive function. As he puts it, for language, “its own dignity and continued existence depend on its learning to express momentous facts” (*Reason in Art* 53). The “dignity” here signifies the utility of language manifested in the successful recontextualization of the world under observation and effective delivery of factual information thereof. For instance, in his widely acclaimed novel *The Last Puritan*, Santayana features a yacht called the “Black Swan,” which serves as a significant symbol of the protagonist Oliver Alden’s failure. To ensure the accuracy of his depiction, Santayana specifically wrote to a friend requesting information about yachts, including types, designs, crew arrangements, and navigable waters. Second, Santayana stresses that literary works must steer clear of artificial or gaudy embellishments and serve as mirrors that reflect reality while simultaneously transcending it to fulfill the public’s inner yearning for the ideal. Therefore, such realism can have an uplifting effect, which fundamentally aligns with his purpose of critically accepting Platonism. He believes that

Literary art in the end rejects all unmeaning flourishes, all complications that have no counterpart in the things of this world or no use in expressing their relations; at the same time, it aspires to digest that reality to which it confines itself, making it over into ideal substance and

material for the mind. (Santayana, *Little Essays* 138).

Although Santayana never went inside the mainstream of American realist literature, he did, as a non-pure literary figure, share some similarities with a bevy of realist writers such as Henry James and Mark Twain which include “their rejection of omniscient narration, their experimentation with point of view and a language appropriate to the central consciousness, their antiromanticism, their moral commitment, their humor and satire, their condemnation of American materialism” (Kolb 15), to name a few. Santayana sought to draw upon the living essence of realist literature to shatter the fancy of idealism cherished by the upper class, as he stated, breaking down the “illegitimate monopoly which the genteel tradition had established over what ought to be assumed and what ought to be hoped for” (*Genteel Tradition* 61). The genteel tradition camp proclaimed its fidelity to artistic seriousness and orthodoxy by practicing literature characterized by its addiction to refined, polite, and morally uplifting themes, often indifferent to gritty or morally ambiguous subjects. For Santayana, realism not only helped dismantle a cultural authority, but also guided readers to project their perceptions onto historical events, individual predicaments, and the tangled web of relationships, all of which are realistic in nature. More importantly, it helped American society reinforce its focus on its own roots, catering to and satisfying the growing public demand for a native imagination.

In terms of literary expression, realism prescribes adherence to the principles of objectivity and historicity. It opposes the overt display of personal emotion, the conspicuous presence of the authorial voice, and the abandonment of true-life tradition. Objectivity entails two main aspects: first, a more neutral and indirect mode of literary expression that disapproves of the aesthetics of expressivism; second, a commitment to a philosophy of verisimilitude in which authors privilege representational techniques. The “neutrality” in expression just mentioned implies authorial respect for the realistic world and a refusal of the explicit effusion of the author’s subjective intent within the work. Santayana generally endorses this objectifying approach by which the literary subject effaces himself. He further elucidates a method for rendering emotion in the text impalpable. As he states, “The thrilling adventures which he [the poet] craves demand an appropriate theatre; the glorious emotions with which he bubbles over must at all hazards find or feign their correlative objects” (*Interpretations* 165). When comparing Eliot’s theory of “impersonality” with Santayana’s approach, a striking similarity emerges. Although there is no conclusive evidence that Eliot was directly influenced by his teacher, it is nonetheless clear that they converge in their treatment of authorial consciousness. Both reject the unchecked expression of personal emotions in literary works. In *Dialogues in Limbo*, Santayana introduces the figure of “the Stranger” as a narrative proxy to engage in the conversation among the souls of ancient philosophers. The Stranger acts as a narrative device to propel the plot forward, yet remains a detached observer, rarely asserting personal opinions or stances. From his first appearance, he voices a desire to stay on the margins: “I might be commonplace and unimportant, and therefore better left in the shade” (22). The Stranger’s retreat signifies the author’s resolve to restrain the self. Friedrich Engels even identified such authorial withdrawal as a defining feature of realist literature and a decisive factor in determining the aesthetic power of a work.

The “observation” mentioned by Santayana regarding the second level or intermediate level of the “trilevel theory” means that the literary creators should base their works on cumulative experience or life’s facts. In this respect, he thinks highly of Shakespeare for setting an exemplary

model in the subtle observations of society, an acute understanding of life, and a profound grasp of the pulse of the time. This prominent quality makes Shakespeare “[ennoble] his stage with actual history, with life painted to the quick, with genuine human characters, politics, and wisdom” (Santayana, *Reason in Art* 70). Santayana resolutely applies the idea to his writings. Let us take *The Last Puritan* again as an example to illustrate this. The novel, at its heart, is a realist novel, with the narrative deeply shaped by the author’s personal experiences in New England, Europe, and elsewhere, larded with rich verifiable historical materials. The authenticity that permeates the novel shores up the author’s metaphors and literary intentions, lends credibility to the constructed historical backdrop and social landscape, and further enhances the portrayal of both characters and their environment.

The fifth part, “Last Pilgrimage,” incorporates World War I into the plot so as to unfold the conflicts between characters on one hand and, on the other hand, capture the collective mentality of Western society during the time of cataclysmic crisis. When Oliver’s cousin Mario expresses his intention to join the war against Germany, Oliver, unable to comprehend, considers it a governmental affair irrelevant to individuals. The two then engage in a fervent dispute over this issue. Mario retorts,

You think it stupid, do you? Your philosophy requires you to find a reason for everything? [...] Is anything in this world arranged as anybody would have wished—the mountains and rivers or our own bodies or our own minds? No: but we have to make the best of them as they are. (501)

The verbal exchange reveals the stark differences in their temperaments. Mario demonstrates a high adaptability to changing circumstances, whereas Oliver frequently finds himself at odds with unforeseen societal disruptions due to his habitual dependence on stability. It is also possible to discern Oliver’s personality flaws, such as rigidity, escapism, and quixotic tendencies, which foreshadow his tragic fate. Through Mario’s voice, Santayana implicitly imparts his life philosophy to readers: the necessity of coming to terms with objective reality, particularly adversity, and proactively seeking viable solutions. The author’s purpose, however, is more than that. The contrast between the two characters’ attitudes renders a telling microcosm of divided public perceptions of war in prewar Europe. In the early stages of the war, what prevailed in the societies of both the Allies and Central Powers was not so much a fear of war as a widespread enthusiasm for it. Mario’s decision, in this light, can be seen as a reflection of the collective convictions and emotional current. After a prolonged period of peace, many young people across Europe harbored a romanticized illusion about war, viewing it as an opportunity to demonstrate courage and attain glory. This widespread sentiment explains the unexpectedly smooth mobilization across countries: according to historians, Germany recruited over 140,000 volunteers within ten days, while Britain enlisted more than 400,000 within a single month (Watson 165). Rooted in historical fact, such a novel not only lends plausibility and rationality to the progression of the narrative but also stands a great chance of triggering an intertextual resonance between the fictional world and readers’ lived reality.

It is worth further emphasizing that the “observation” is by no means a matter of indiscriminate accumulation or mechanical collage of experiential materials. It involves a process of discernment and selection shaped by the writer’s taste. Santayana conceives of taste as an aesthetic preference or judgement following the apprehension of the phenomenal world. Under its sway, the materials

in the work inescapably bear the stamp of the creators. Santayana cautions creators to consider three critical aspects of taste in their approach. The first one is to address the relationship between the individuality and universality of taste. Either criterion or connotation of taste often varies among individuals because of differences in cognition and environment, while a large public, say, a community or clan, usually shares similar or collective taste on certain matters as a result of social convention or communal sensibilities. In his influential essay "Of the Standard of Taste," David Hume notes, "But though all the general rules of art are founded only on experience and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature, we must not imagine, that, on every occasion, the feelings of men will be conformable to these rules" (232). Hume's argument foregrounds the heterogeneous nature of taste and alerts us to its inapplicability in some circumstances. Santayana, however, places more weight on the linkage between personal and communal taste. He encourages individuals to coalesce their perception of the objective world within the context of the social network because "[a]fter a man has compared his feelings with the no less legitimate feelings of other creatures, he can reassert his own with more complete authority [...]" (*Reason in Art* 117). Such processes of reference and comparison imply the transcendence of individualism in the construction of taste. An author's refined taste guarantees good aesthetic capacity, which, ultimately, bestows upon their works a better reflective function and greater artistic value. From another perspective, this further affirms Santayana's emphasis on the interconnection of things in his realist philosophy, as well as his transcendence of the naturalist position. Much like Georg Lukács's analysis of realism, his literary stance acknowledges that realist works "rest neither on a lifeless average, as the naturalists suppose, nor on an individual principle which dissolves its own self into nothingness" (Lukács, Preface 6). They are expected to portray the aspect of reality "which is permanent and objectively more significant, namely man in the whole range of his relations to the real world, above all those which outlast mere fashion" (Lukács, "Realism" 48). The second point is that personal taste demands the maximal autonomy and independence in aesthetic judgment. Santayana acknowledges that there exists a universal taste, but he opposes the willful transformation of this collective inclination into a self-proclaimed authority that suppresses individual aesthetic creativity. If one tries to maintain a unique touch or governance in literary writings, it is essential to resist that blind conformity to the public consciously. Lastly, Santayana disapproves of equating good taste solely with attention to the sublime, splendid, and refined, such as being obsessed with epic ancient wars, spectacular scenery, or awe-inspiring deities. A proper taste should encompass a more inclusive and expansive aesthetic vision, one that, in addition to embracing objects that evoke a sense of grandeur or profound emotions, also scouts out beauty in simplicity and the commonplace. Even Longinus, who introduced the notion of the "sublime" into the aesthetics discourse, cautioned that an excessive pursuit of sublimity could run the risk of becoming bombastic. Santayana thus claims that the "ability to revert to elementary beauties is a test that judgment remains sound" (*Reason in Art* 120). Yet, such unadorned beauty is often more elusive, as it may lurk in the inconspicuous or ostensibly unappealing facets of daily existence. To uncover this beauty, literary creators must extricate themselves from an entrenched mindset, engage themselves with the diversity of the world, and attend to the details of life, ordinary people, and everyday occurrences. In brief, the value of literary materials to a work and its breadth of vision hinges on the creative subject's taste, which gives an indication of his or her aesthetic capacity.

Faithful representation of life must not sidestep its somber and shadowy aspects, such as

sorrow, death, squalor, suffering, violence, and alienation. In this regard, French critical realists, particularly Romain Rolland and Honoré de Balzac, significantly influenced Santayana. Rolland's revelation of characters' inner spiritual journeys became a key technique Santayana referenced when shaping characters and building narrative tension. Santayana's annotations on *Jean-Christophe* directly showcased his resonance with Rolland. Oliver's idealism, dual anguish—both bodily and spiritual—and recurring conflicts with the world parallel those of Christophe. Another extraordinary writer, Balzac, inspired Santayana primarily in the holistic portrayal of society and the depth of his characterizations. Santayana expresses, "I am lost in admiration of the vast knowledge of various strata of life, and of human wickedness, which Balzac displays. The thoroughness of his presentation is like what I should like to achieve in *The Last Puritan*" (Holzberger, *Letters* 4: 272). Santayana's understanding of life is tinted with palpable anxiety and pessimism, as ventilated in his verse:

For some are born to be beatified
By anguish, and by grievous penance done;
And some, to furnish forth the age's pride,
And to be praised of men beneath the sun;
And some are born to stand perplexed aside
From so much sorrow—of whom I am one. (*Complete Poems* 96)

This self-reflective tone exudes an air of fatalism: the inequities and misfortunes of life are preordained by fate. Though sometimes entertaining, life is, in essence, full of inescapable gravity and pressures. In a speech at Oxford, he described life as follows: "[I]t is a predicament. We are caught in it; it is something compulsory, urgent, dangerous, and tempting" ("Unknowable" 170). This predicament becomes even more pronounced in the modern jungle of crises. Santayana transposes this anxiety into his novels and transforms it into an exploration of the tragedies in the lives of ordinary characters, through which he casts light on how individuals confront and what efforts they make toward self-redemption while being caught in intricate contradictions and conflicts.

Santayana's attention to individual existence started from his study of dramatic aesthetics. In his examination of *Hamlet*, he argues that while the plot structure itself is unremarkable, Shakespeare elevates it with exceptional artistry. The arrangement of both major and minor characters, the exquisite use of language, the nuanced portrayal of psychology and human vulnerabilities, the orchestrating of supernatural phenomena, the incremental intensification of conflicts, and the skillful construction of dramatic effects all demonstrate Shakespeare's peerless genius in literary creation. Santayana sees Hamlet's aberrant behavior and ambivalence after the relentless blows of fate as the natural outcome of manifold pressures and finds in them "a very genuine pathos" ("Hamlet" 52). This authenticity owes much to Shakespeare's ingenious infusion of his penetrating observations about the social and personal fates of his era into an age-old storyline of revenge.

Santayana attempts to convey a comparable pathos in his five-act poetic drama *Lucifer: A Theological Tragedy*. Lucifer, the central figure, stands for a locus where two epistemological worldviews collide: one rooted in Christian creeds, the other in a naturalistic philosophy. Lucifer questions God's authority yet cannot fully relinquish his lingering faith in divine sovereignty.

Ultimately, he sinks into a void during hesitation and perplexity in the face of competing beliefs. Still, the drama reads more as an emulation of classical tragedy, remaining somewhat removed from real-world tragedies. In *The Last Puritan*, Santayana presents the misfortunes of ordinary people through a much more realistic lens and broadens the representational scope of tragedy. From the protagonist Oliver and his father Peter to his friend Jim, each meets a tragic end driven not by a single cause but by the cumulative effect of multiple internal and external forces—pain, stress, misjudgment, and accident—operating with varying intensity. Peter, for instance, in his youth, accidentally caused the death of a night watchman at a boarding school, an incident that condemned him to exile under the weight of immense psychological guilt. Lost and disoriented, he ended up in drug addiction and died. From the standpoint of narrative construction, such fictional misfortune, in a quasi-documentary style, usually breeds or foreshadows turning points and climaxes of the plot because it generates the overt fluctuations in the narrative's progression as a latent driving force. This narrative trajectory is in tune with the ordinary logic of life, indicating that the tragedies depicted in the novel could plausibly occur in the real world and that anyone might find their counterpart in these fictional characters in reality. To Santayana, it is this fidelity to lived experience that enables a work to elicit resonance, empathy, and recognition from readers. He notes, "[M]any tragedies and farces, that to a mind without experience of this sublunary world might seem monstrous and disgusting fictions, may come to be forgiven and even perhaps preferred over all else, when they are found to be a sketch from life" (*Sense* 160). Despite an undertone of pessimism, Santayana does not lapse into nihilism or deny the meaning of existence. His emphasis on the tragic dimension of life arises from two principal motivations. Socially, he aimed to awaken the upper class to myriad tensions in the vast and complex social organism. This group, long immersed in utopian ideals and detached from the lives of the underprivileged, had already become insensitive to gritty reality. As for individuals, he does not view tragedies as synonymous with complete failure. His intention is to illuminate the value of one's struggle against adversity and the possibility of surmounting it. A kindred idea can be found in the canonical Chinese philosophical text *Tao Te Ching*, which instructs that misfortune and blessing are interdependent. By affirming a spirit of tenacity and resilience, Santayana aspires to help people attain the elevation of spirit and the fortitude to survive. As Santayana himself puts it, "first we suffer, afterwards we sing" (157). This succinct statement also encapsulates the gist of his life philosophy.

The Third Level: Creative Imagination and the Regulation of Imagination

In the "trilevel theory" previously expounded, Santayana characterizes the highest level of poetry as a form of creative reason—an insight that points to a pivotal stage in literary activity—the processing and production of the raw materials from the real world into fully realized literary works. It suggests that advanced literary practice is inherently bound up with philosophical reflection. At this stage, both the writer's subjective initiative and the literariness of the text become more conspicuous. Although Santayana tags himself as "a realist about the facts and suspicious of all desiderata and utopias" (*Persons and Places* 33), this does not mean that his creative work is confined to mere factual representation, nor that he disavows the generative power of imagination.

In Santayana's literary design, imagination also occupies a crucial position. Within the

frameworks of psychology and psychoanalysis, imagination is understood as a higher-order cognitive capacity that enables the formation of mental images, scenarios, and representations independently of external sensory input. Imagination may take the form of reproduction or reconstruction of prior experiential materials, or it may conjure mental visions and imagery that defy conventional logic and reality, as Henry James aptly notes: “Some of the flowers of fiction have the odor of it [reality], and others have not” (172). A thing that one should pay heed to is that imagination is not tantamount to fancy. Ralph Waldo Emerson considers their distinction “a problem of metaphysics” (1623). According to his classification, the two differ both in features and functions. Fancy is “superficial,” “willful,” and “joins by accidental resemblance, surprises and amuses the idle, but is silent in the presence of great passion and action” (1623–1624). Imagination, however, is “a perception and affirming of a real relation between a thought and some material fact” that “expands and exalts us” (1624). Emerson elevates imagination above fancy by making much of its cognitive function and its magnitude in spiritual elevation. The occurrence and extent of imagination are germane to the intentions of the imagining subject. Kendall Walton, based on this link, introduces “spontaneous imagining” and “deliberate imagining,” the two modes that “are often combined in a single imaginative experience” (14). Under incidental circumstances, an individual may naturally generate imaginative visions in response to external stimuli. For instance, a falling golden leaf might evoke an entire autumnal scene in one’s mind. Alternatively, imagination can be purposively initiated, reflecting what is often termed its propositional character, a quality frequently observed in artistic acts such as architectural design or novel writing. The subject may also consciously transform spontaneous imagining into a deliberate one, as when a poet transforms their sudden inspiration or emotion into verses. Through the act of imagination, an invisible connection and dynamic interplay emerge between external objects and the imagining subject, as well as between the subject’s body and mind.

Santayana’s acute sense of the deficiencies of realism prompts his emphasis on imagination. He admits, “Truth and realism are therefore aesthetically good, but they are not all-sufficient, since the representation of everything is not equally pleasing and effective” (Santayana, *Sense* 27). Realism’s commitment to verisimilitude adeptly captures the textures of life and reminds readers of the correspondence between fictional and real worlds, yet it simultaneously narrows the spectrum of literary expression and modes of representation, and inhibits the reader’s dynamic involvement with narrative development. René Wellek once voiced similar concerns about the restrictive effects of realism’s objectivity on some key literary elements, such as style, expression, and technique. These restrictions especially manifest in excluding imaginative dimensions, as he states: “It rejects the fantastic, the fairytale-like, the allegorical and the symbolic, the highly stylized, the purely abstract and decorative. It means that we want no myth, no Maerchen, no world of dreams” (241). While this rejection does not entirely stifle imagination, it greatly constricts the space where imaginative possibilities can emerge. Consequently, the fictional world is rendered more stable, and its plot trajectory more predictable. A scholar has commented that realist literature often features invariable narrative tracks where “the plot might develop in the same homely unromantic way in which events usually proceed in kitchens, backyards, bathrooms, dark hallways, and slum streets, sequential developments in which drabness asserts itself” (Slattery 57). However, as the collective psyche of modern society grows increasingly volatile and fluid, such stability and uniformity in literary style begin to appear discordant. Santayana writes in the epilogue to *The Last Puritan*: “If I had been absolutely true to life, half my possible readers wouldn’t have understood

me. I wasn't composing a philological document in which future antiquarians might study the dialects and slang of the early twentieth century" (570). The "half" of his potential readership he refers to is not the traditional but the modern one with different horizons of expectation—one that demands bolder themes, innovations in narrative form, expanded imaginative space, and deeper, more frequent engagement between text and reader. What Santayana seeks to clarify is that literary reflection and representation of life should not be equated with a simple chronicle of daily occurrences. While historicity or authenticity is undoubtedly essential, it must not come at the expense of imagination, as such neglect would sap literature of its vitality. For Santayana, it is the synergy of imagination and reality that constitutes a creative continuum. Imagination, in particular, fulfills multiple functions: it prevents writing from becoming a mechanical recording, refines or reshapes the raw materials of experience, and crafts worlds marked by both breadth and depth. In a letter, Santayana once shared with a friend that his defense of his stance resembled a rowing competition, a metaphor through which he also conveyed his attitude towards its stakes. He said, "[I]f we don't win the race for a realism that makes room for the imagination, we shall at least not upset the boat" (Holzberger, *Letters* 2: 245). In Santayana's eyes, the adversaries in this "race" included empiricists, idealists, and other philosophical groups who wielded significant influence over societal ideologies. He was intent on changing this milieu, though fully cognizant of the substantial difficulties involved. In correspondence with his close friend Ward Thoron, Santayana enclosed a poem that obliquely articulated his view on the intricate interplay among creation, reality, and imagination.

From its cleft point there springs an inky rill
 Whose twisted stream, with intersecting flow,
 Shall trace the ways my feet & fancies go.
 They do not go together, for my feet
 Wear the gray flagstones of an Oxford street
 And wake the ivy-muffled echoes thrown
 [...]
 The world is wide: it is not flesh and bone
 And sun and moon, and thunderbolt alone.
 It is imagination swift and high
 Creating in a dream its earth & sky—
 [...]
 Come, mad ambition, come, divine conceit,
 That bringest nature down at fancy's feet,
 [...]

(Holzberger, *Letters* 1: 66–67)

The "it" in the poem's opening line refers to the quill in the poet's hand, while "the stream of ink" holds both concrete and metaphorical connotations. It denotes the literal ink and a figurative current of thought as well. The poet's creative impulse proceeds along two paths as he states in the third line: one driven by real-life experience, the other freely constructed by the unrestrained imagination. The "gray flagstones" and "echoes" symbolize the diverse experiential materials gathered through vision, hearing, and other perceptual faculties. Implicit in them is the poet's unswerving faith in immersing oneself in real life and honoring the tangible substance. Through

his scrutiny of the era, Santayana diagnoses a collapse of human imagination for which he lays the blame on the twin encroachments of materialism and nihilism. Santayana thus warns people not to be consumed by worldly desires symbolized by “flesh and bone,” but to extend their apprehension of the world into the realm of the spirit. By employing imagination, individuals attain the power to liberate themselves from customary dependence on facts and to create a transcendent world that stands apart from concrete reality. The apostrophe and repetition in the poem’s final two lines precisely accentuate the pressing demand for imagination. The piece voices not only the poet’s personal wish but also his expectation for society at large. The call to “bringest nature to the feet of imagination” does not deny the importance of the objective world but clarifies its role as a bedrock which provides foundational support for the uplifting movement of the latter. A footnote to this letter explains that this poem “could be a parody of the prevailing German philosophy, as exemplified in Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea*” (Holzberger, *Letters* 1: 67). Santayana and Schopenhauer converge on certain aspects of imagination, both affirming the catalytic effect of phenomenal entities and intuitive sensations on imaginative processes and believing in imagination’s ability to widen cognitive boundaries. In Schopenhauer’s words, imagination “extends the mental horizon of the genius beyond the objects that actually present themselves to his person, as regards both quality and quantity” (186–187). Yet Santayana departs from Schopenhauer in one crucial respect: he does not categorize the imagination of subjects, nor does he believe imagination to be exclusive to geniuses. Instead, he treats it as a more broadly accessible human faculty.

Santayana’s conception of imagination partakes of William James’s pragmatism. Apart from its creative potency, he also recognized its practical utility. “From these two benefits, the practical and the imaginative,” he writes, “all the value of truth is derived” (*Sense* 28). When discussing the interaction between mind and physical object, he introduced the notion of “concretion in discourse.” As the term suggests, concretion implies a solidification of states, qualities, or attributes, marking a loss of fluidity and variability. Santayana describes a specific cognitive habit: individuals are prone to synthesize recurring similar sensations into generalized experiences and form fixed abstract ideas that are misconstrued as axioms with maximum applicability. For instance, frequent encounters with red, round apples—though varying in hue, size, or shape—often lead to an automatic linkage of apples with redness and roundness, overlooking other colors or forms. Admittedly, concretion in discourse is to some extent conducive to the discernment and summarization of general features and underlying essences of phenomena; it, however, also may engender the ossification of mind, fixation with universalities, and ignorance of particularities. This cognitive rigidity is a warning sign of the decline in the subject’s intellectual dynamism and sensitivity to heterogeneity. In terms of social advancement, concretion easily gives birth to dogmatism, which is detrimental to innovation. As for artistic creation, it not only predisposes the narrative modes and expressive forms to mediocrity, but also hampers the production of knowledge. Imagination, as a feasible means, can effectively counteract the adverse effects of this phenomenon in that it enables us “to draw on past experiences, recombined in unique ways, so as to create new alternatives and possible futures” (Zittoun 143). The use of “conceits” by metaphysical poets usually achieved dramatic effects through pursuing non-traditional associations. Hemingway’s iceberg principle, which invites readers to participate in constructing textual meaning according to their own interpretations, bestowed his works with a striking openness. These cases all vividly demonstrate imagination’s capacity to break through the confines

of established conventions, thereby preventing concretion in discourse.

Another pragmatic value of imagination, for Santayana, is “to express the universal self, the common and contagious element in all individuals, that rudimentary potency which they all share” (*Interpretations* 11). Explicitly speaking, imaginative impulse must guide the subject to contemplate and aspire toward universal principles, human ideals, and grand visions—such as beauty, the cosmos, morality, classical civilization, collective psyche, and the essence of life. This purpose directs imaginative efforts towards the abstract realm of community. In Raymond Williams’s opinion, “community” is an inclusive term which encompasses, besides various forms of collective organization, “the quality of holding something in common, as in community of interests, community of goods,” or “a sense of common identity and characteristics” (39). Over time, its connotations have grown increasingly expansive. In other words, community underscores the overlaps, commonalities, the shared, and resonances among diverse material and spiritual worlds and individuals. Santayana applies this idea to the broader worldview and argues that “the most disparate and unrelated worlds would still be a multitude, and so an aggregate, and so, in some sense, a unity” (*Three Philosophical Poets* 27). He greatly admires Lucretius’s poetry, which, while attentive to reality, also presents vast imagination and a simple concept of community. Lucretius does not limit imagination to a single experience or particular scope, but perceives the imperceptible unity behind the world’s varied appearances. He delves into fundamental issues shared by all of humanity, including the origin of the world, the cosmos, the soul, and life and death. The reason why Santayana places a premium on commonality in the imaginative process is that he attempts to pilot the cohort of writers of his time to turn the spotlight on themes that concern the entirety of humanity, rather than specific regions or groups. By appealing to broadly shared values, he prompts readers to connect themselves with collective issues and further to pursue the ascent of spirit and moral goodness. This effort also represents his “corrective remedy” for the materialistic and anxious mentality of the American people during a period of transformation. In *The Last Puritan*, Santayana presents Oliver and his uncle, Nathaniel, as two negative examples of people who lack a sense of communal imagination. Oliver is so shackled by the Puritan responsibilities and the weight of moral obligation that he is powerless to project his imagination onto the world around him. His attention habitually gravitates towards the divergent beliefs and stances of others and his conflicts with the world. As a result, he struggles to discern common ground with others and remains mired in the anguish of imaginative discord. As the novel observes, his frail imagination “wasn’t lordly and firm enough to set up a second world over against this one, and positively believe in it” (Santayana, *The Last Puritan* 15). Nathaniel, who is more radical, categorically denies the possibility of communal imagination. He maintains that “they [human beings] remained for ever separate and solitary in their thoughts” (43). When Nathaniel learns that Peter has played baseball with a horse-car conductor, he regards it as not only incredible but indicative of Peter’s moral decline. At the heart of Nathaniel’s creed lies an obsession with wealth and material possessions, which give rise to a bigoted pursuit of personal interest and an intense aversion to different ideologies held by other social strata. By skillfully disclosing the link between the two’s imaginative limitations, their character flaws, and their existential morass, Santayana shows that a community is not merely predicated on the assembly of sameness but on the acceptance—and indeed the imaginative inclusion—of heterogeneity.

René Descartes once made a vivid comparison between the philosopher and the poet with regard to acquiring knowledge. He writes, “We have within us the sparks of knowledge, as in

a flint: philosophers extract them through reason, but poets force them out through the sharp blows of the imagination, so that they shine more brightly” (4). By juxtaposing the terms “extract” and “force out,” Descartes captures the explosive power inherent in imagination. The philosopher’s method may seem prosaic, but it operates with reliability and solidity. The poet’s approach, though passionate and luminous, exposes the risk of losing control. Santayana adopts a dialectical stance toward the faculty of imagination. On the one hand, he acknowledges the vital role of imagination in intellectual activities; on the other, he expresses deep concern over the perils of excessive or skewed imagination. As he warns, “The part played by imagination is thus indispensable; but obviously the necessity and beneficence of this contribution makes [sic] the dangers of it correspondingly great. Wielding a great power, exercising an omnipresent function, the imagination may abuse a great force” (*Interpretations* 11). This apprehension reflects a critical issue: the moderation and regulation of imagination. Santayana calls for a restrained imagination that purges excessive passion, vacuous lyricism, and nebulous expressivity to achieve inner balance and aesthetic harmony. To counter this risk, he advocates turning to ancient Greek culture for help.

Following Matthew Arnold’s perspective on “Hellenism,” Santayana exhibits a strong affection for ancient Greek culture that he positions as par excellence among human civilizations and the cradle of many Western traditions. The wisdom of the ancient Greeks was marked by a profound commitment to dialectical inquiry and reconciliation. They excelled in seeking unity amid diversity, deriving knowledge from the empirical world, and upholding a delicate balance between freedom and order. Their intellectual tradition privileged moral sincerity and the courage to ponder grand questions. Together, these qualities constitute the rational and intelligent core of Greek thought. Cultural historian Richard Tarnas commends ancient Greek imagination for embodying self-regulation, equilibrium, and harmony. He describes it as “an intrinsic unity of immediate sense perception and timeless meaning, of particular circumstance and universal drama, of human activity and divine motivation” (17). Edith Hamilton believes that the Greeks “were the first intellectualists” (16). The rational base of ancient Greek culture determined its balanced and harmonious aesthetic attributes. In a similar vein, Santayana designates the role and function of this classical rational spirit within cultural systems as the defining standard for an “ideal culture.” Yet, after its expansive ascendancy in the 19th century, rationalism met an unprecedented crisis in the 20th. People appeared to follow in the footsteps of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and others, increasingly diverging from the rationalist tradition. Yeats’s declaration “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” aptly captured the disintegration of order and the collective spiritual lethargy precipitated by the eclipse of the rational spirit. In response to these conditions, Santayana sought to exalt the rational tradition in art to temper the fervor of imagination and passion in the creation, thereby steering the artist’s intellectual orientation and counteracting the growing dominance of irrational currents. In his definition of art, he clearly articulates the modulating role of reason, stating, “Any operation which thus humanises and rationalises objects is called art” (*Reason in Art* 3). This account frames the two defining traits of art. Humanization highlights the human reactions to external objects that encompass both sensory experiences and affective associations, typically non-systematic, fragmented, and disordered. Rationalization, by contrast, involves the process by which the subject examines, regulates, and guides these responses at the cognitive level, and then recasts them as abstract, systematic, and conceptual expressions. Clearly, per this definition, the ultimate completion of art is contingent

upon the role of reason.

In Santayana's view, another function of reason is to assist the production of thought universally accepted as the core and essence of literary works. His elegy "To W. P." eloquently illustrates how measured imagination, grounded in reality and directed by rational reflection, manifests literary meaning. This poem, a suite of four sonnets, progresses from the metaphorical depiction of a friend's passing in the first, to the expression of grief and memories in the second, to a meditation on the value of life in the third, and finally to a renewed mourning of the friend in the fourth. Through a technique of gradual transition, the poet skillfully effects a shift in thematic focus and an elevation of meaning. Although the poet utters the sorrowful cry, "[w]ith you a part of me hath passed away" (*Complete Poems* 126), he refrains from intensifying this grief with more desolate imagery. Instead, in the third stanza, he redirects his imaginative focus and tempers his emotions to a restrained level. The friend's death, though a profound blow, becomes a catalyst for philosophical reflection on life under the guidance of reason. The poet recognizes the constraints imposed by the vicissitudes of environment and fate on the individual. In contrast to the finitude of life, he suggests, the boundless value of life's meaning assumes greater significance. Santayana firmly believes that only by ascending to a higher plane of reflection can one enter the eternal realm of the spirit. In this realm, as he writes:

For long ago I taught my thoughts to run
Where all the great things live that lived of yore,
And in eternal quiet float and soar;
There all my loves are gathered into one,
Where change is not, nor parting any more,
Nor revolution of the moon and sun. (126)

After he reflects on life, the poet, in the concluding sonnet, moves toward a state of serenity. The word "chime" implies that the earlier acute grief has transformed into a subdued yet sincere remembrance. This poem also exemplifies how Santayana arrives at a profound understanding of life's value through the rational exercise of imagination. Irwin Edman once stated, "Intellectually he might be called the last Greek" (lv). Edman's high regard for Santayana is partly due to the latter's literary vision, which artfully inherits the ancient Greeks' classical balance and dialectical artistry. Santayana himself once declared, "Sanity is a madness put to good uses; waking life is a dream controlled" (*Little Essays* 146). Evidently, restraint and regulation are central to the literary philosopher's creative aesthetics. For him, the elements of form, reality, imagination, and reason must be harmoniously arranged and held in mutual tension, so that together they establish the structural depth, spatial resonance, literariness, and enduring value of a literary work.

Conclusion

In Santayana's "trilevel theory," the creative process unfolds as a progression from the outermost layer, form, to the innermost, intellectual essence. It commences with form as a foundational and stable creative framework, and proceeds by incorporating materials drawn from the objective world. These materials are subsequently refined through the imagination, then moderated by rationality to curb the excesses of subjective expression, ultimately yielding

works of profound intellectual depth. This concept also reflects Santayana's self-adjustment after observing social and literary currents. His meticulous scrutiny of form demonstrates his resistance to aestheticism in literature and his steadfast commitment to traditional literary stances. His emphasis on objective reality aligns philosophically with his naturalist stance and, in literary terms, supports the rise and development of realism. By advocating for the confluence of literary and rational discourses, Santayana not only aspires to innovate in theme and content but also offers a robust critique of radicalism and the growing disarray in society caused by rapid social changes.

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