

Morris Grossman on Santayana

Originally presented at the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy meeting, The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, 7 March 2013

I. Art and Morality

An undeniable thematic unity runs through the last forty years of Morris Grossman's work, in which he explored the importance for philosophy, art, and life of preserving the tension between that which may be unified and that which is disorganized, random, and miscellaneous. He examined this tension in literature, artistic performance, economics, statecraft, and human rights; in religion, drama, sculpture, philosophical methodology, biography, and human attitudes toward mortality; in the work of Gotthold Lessing, Lewis Carroll, Peirce, Tolstoy, James, Sartre, and Beardsley; and most regularly in the work of George Santayana. And though Grossman believed that irony was a way to express and preserve this tension between that which may be ordered and that which remains outside of a settled schema, it is not especially ironic that he achieved thematic unity in attending to that which resists assimilation. The coherence of his work supports his belief in the need to take seriously both the refined and the intransigently crude in experience. He sought, following George Santayana, to "stand in philosophy exactly where [he stood] in daily life,"¹ and his irony served his honesty.

Grossman described his theme as the tension between art and morality. Art elevates and intensifies certain moments, it consummates life activity and unifies experience; but life is full of moments of irrelevance, interruptions, and dead ends that resist aesthetic arrangement. Art arrests the sense of change and yields moments of unguarded enjoyment and peace; but soon shifting circumstances compel evaluation, decision, and action, and yield wariness and weariness. Art, vital and composed, may seem to transcend the confusion and tedium that mark much of our experience; but for Grossman, art cannot be definitively separated from the rest of life and so a tension remains. Art may relieve or rejuvenate us, but distracting and oppressive experiences remain operative. To discard unaesthetic experience risks dishonesty and estrangement from ourselves; hence, the significance of tragedy, which Grossman characterized as "a reconciliation with those moments of life that resist a coming together in some organizing purpose" ("Art and Morality," 22).²

Art and morality never fully correspond. According to Grossman, the best art acknowledges the impossibility of complete assimilation and final perfection and retains a sense of tragedy. It neither retreats to an irresponsible aestheticism nor surrenders to the demands of animal life, whether through alienating routine or dissolving sensation. The best art preserves the tension between the aesthetic consummation of experience and the press of morality understood as the business of navigating conflicts, making choices, and meeting needs. And so the best artists acknowledge the recalcitrance of life, of impossible choices and irredeemable loss by leaving, in Grossman's words, "loose ends, ambiguities, and elements of randomness, as tribute and echo and reminder of what life is like and what needs to be done" ("Art and Morality," 24).

II. Grossman on George Santayana

Grossman's concern with the tension between art and morality was intimately related to his reading of George Santayana. The best philosophy, like the best art, preserves the tension between what can be ordered and what resists assimilation, and Grossman read Santayana as an exemplar of this virtue. The tension between art and morality may be understood in more general form as the relation of honest, deep feeling to decisions about how to act. In more specific form, it concerns the relation of dialectic and drama in the practice of philosophy, and it was in terms of dialectic and drama that Grossman articulated the tension as it appeared in Santayana's works. The best philosophy, the most honest, does not get lost in the vortex of dialectic and achieves dramatic containment of the inescapable variety of perspectives or voices, just as the best art achieves a reconciliation with a variety of unaesthetic moments. Grossman read Santayana as "embracing . . . multiple attitudes" and employing "logic and art, dialogue and analysis, irony and seriousness, with interchangeable abandon" ("Drama and Dialectic," 213).

Of course, others have noted similar tension or multiplicity or irony in Santayana's work. Saatkamp has written that for Santayana "the reflective life is a polarity between embodied interests and reflective imagination" and that "wisdom is possible so long as one's self-knowledge reflects the polarity of poetic freedom and vested animal interests."³ Sprigge wrote, "Santayana strives to do justice to insights which are usually only developed in opposition to one another."⁴ Santayana's attempt to acknowledge and contain a variety of views sometimes has been reflected in commentators' remarks regarding a particular issue, as when Kerr-Lawson, writing on whether spirit provides evolutionary benefits, noted that "Santayana never makes clear whether or not he adheres to or would adhere to such a doctrine. . . . he does not seek to take a clear position."⁵ Munitz claimed to find three distinct positions in Santayana's account of spiritual life and wrote, "[i]t is by continually shifting from one to the other, sometimes in the course of a single paragraph, that Santayana is able to leave the whole discussion in solution, as it were, and thereby claim for the entire presentation the virtues that in fact come from only some of its part."⁶ Furthermore, Hodges and Lachs have remarked on the irony in Santayana's accounts of his realms of being⁷ which they believe was intended "to let the air out of the grand metaphysical systems of the past."⁸

Grossman differed from many commentators in taking Santayana's refusal to take one position, his embrace of multiple attitudes, and his irony as substantive. Grossman maintained that "we cannot understand [Santayana] if we approach him dialectically, if we attend to his words for their coherence and consistency only. There is no substance to Santayana apart from his style, and his style (to put it another way) is no mere gloss upon a substance." ("Santayana: Style and Substance").⁹ So, unlike Munitz, who detected shifting views in Santayana and suspected rhetorical legerdemain, Grossman read Santayana not as a deceiver but as a preserver of tension between dialectic and drama (except, as Grossman noted, when "like us ordinary mortals, [Santayana] squirms to shake loose from, rather than to embrace, dialectical dilemma" ["Drama and Dialectic," 215]). Grossman responded not by trying to nail down Santayana's real position on an issue but by carefully surveying the seemingly contradictory or inconsistent claims and acknowledging them as

significant in their variety. On Grossman's reading, Santayana's irony was not merely negative, not only a tactic for puncturing bloated systems, but an expression of Santayana's "binocular vision"¹⁰ ("Interpreting *Interpretations*," 254).

Binocular vision, according to Santayana, is the ability to see both the outlines and the solid bulk and perspective of things, and it is requisite for fully seeing reality. Grossman elaborated the notion in his explanation of how Santayana's work expressed observations resulting from binocular vision:

Santayana often does two things at once that can't be properly or, rather, can't dialectically be done at once. He describes the nature of beauty on the one hand and expresses what he understands by the sense of beauty on the other. He characterizes spirit as a category in an ontological scheme addressed to the nature of things, and he also conveys the sense of a spiritual life, spirit seen and felt inwardly. And he often does these things in close and unexpected juxtaposition. . . . it is at the core of Santayana's constant procedure to try to reveal what something is by analyzing it and also to convey his idea of it by intimation, by expression, and by dramatic art" ("Drama and Dialectic," 214).

III. Dialectic, Drama, and Irony

Grossman remarked on the tendency of many Santayana scholars toward a "traditional, orderly, sensible, analytic" approach as they attempted to identify the serious argument buried in the literary style and to tease out the genuine doctrine and discard the embarrassingly inconsistent or confusing parts. This tendency inspired Grossman, in what he called "a spirit of corrective misprisioning," ("Interpreting *Interpretations*," 250) to emphasize even more the irony and drama in Santayana. And so Grossman articulated his rules or axioms for reading Santayana:

- 1) There are no contradictions in Santayana.
- 2) Everything in Santayana is ironic or dramatic.

If contradictions seem to be discovered in a text and 1) is threatened, use 2) to put things aright. Axioms, I think, should be like friends [to each other]: not consistent, not independent, and willing on occasion to help each other out" ("Interpreting *Interpretations*," 252).

Grossman's axioms, of course, contain the very tension he observed in Santayana's work, but this is not intended to mystify, nor is it a game (which ultimately reproduces a dialectic structure). It is a simultaneous analysis of Santayana's thought and an expression — perhaps exaggerated — of the experience of considering his ideas. To understand how Grossman's axioms illuminate Santayana's writings, it will be helpful to consider what Grossman meant by drama, dialectic, and irony.

According to Grossman, drama is "deliberately controlled presentation of contrary viewpoints, or, as in soliloquy, presentation of a single viewpoint with the implied sense that it is one among several. The philosopher stands behind them not as statements that he asserts but as opinions or attitudes or sentiments that he deploys" ("Drama and Dialectic," 216). Dialectic is "the logical elaboration of viewpoints and a consideration of statements that are entailed with respect of their consistency" ("Drama and Dialectic," 216–17).

Renouncing some dialectically refuted claim, say, one entailing a contradiction, can *seem* necessary; but Grossman maintained that such renunciation was optional. He thought it “possible to embrace the contradiction and to make it advertent, sustain the contrary viewpoints dramatically, and acknowledge the variety and paradox in one’s being” (“Drama and Dialectic,” 217), and he thought Santayana showed how this could be done. To explain this, Grossman distinguished “contradictions-in-discourse,” which are statements taking the form A and not-A; and “contraries-in-sentiment” which are modal statements taking the form “I affirm A” and “I believe not-A” (“Drama and Dialectic,” 218). With the latter, modal attitudes become passionate, eclipsing any particular statements. Contradictions and contraries enjoy a variable and shifting relationship, with conversion happening sometimes openly, sometimes subtly. Grossman contended that the subtle shifting “constitutes much of our mental life” (“Drama and Dialectic,” 219).¹¹

With the distinction articulated, one can understand dialectic as aiming to eliminate contradictions-in-discourse through suppression and drama as aiming to domesticate contraries-in-sentiment through different methods that allow for the contrary sentiments to be expressed. Grossman wrote that “[d]rama, by gradually voicing contradictions so that they can be retained as contraries, gathers up and disciplines the mind’s centrifugal and disruptive tendencies. It saves us from contradiction while preserving those very impulses and emotions that tended, or actually gave rise, to the contradiction” (“Drama and Dialectic,” 146).

Drama does its work in different ways, and Grossman considered three—dialogue, soliloquy, and irony—each of which is significant in Santayana’s work. Dialogue resolves contradictions and preserves contraries with an emphasis on the temporal character of drama, since the voices must wait for each other speak. Soliloquy is a special case of dialogue that leaves other voices implied. Irony was the dramatic device of most interest to Grossman, and he characterized it as “drama at its greatest compression” (“Drama and Dialectic, 219).

Irony, for Grossman, is not merely a way of meaning the opposite of what is stated. If it were, there would be little point to it; nothing would be gained over literal statement. But something *is* gained that could not be achieved through dialectically legitimate literal statement: namely, voicing of perspectives that have been dialectically renounced. Irony, by explicitly stating something unlikely, inconsistent, or absurd and simultaneously implying something further and different, intentionally joins what dialectic would sever. In doing so, irony performs a dramatic function: the explicit voice faces an almost overwhelming counter-voice intimated by the context. This simple irony is, according to Grossman, dramatically one-sided. “But in writing that is pervasively ironic, where the ironies accumulate and the mind behind them ranges, the dramatic scope is enlarged” (“Drama and Dialectic,” 220). The result is not a set of statements uttered and a set of statements meant; rather, there is shifting emphasis with something asserted later denied, something valued later dismissed. Grossman likens the shifting emphasis to modulations in music (a phenomenon he treated at length in an essay entitled “Music, Modulation, and Metaphor,” [33–56] which considered the inadequacy of technical analysis to capture the experience of music). Pervasive irony results in “the characteristic uncertainty of drama, which deliberately causes our allegiance to waver and fluctuate and which

avoids any singular and final triumph” (“Drama and Dialectic,” 221). No voice is completely vanquished and no voice dominates absolutely.

Irony cannot be promoted or refuted by dialect. The dialectician cannot be coerced into acknowledging irony and is never unreasonable in rejecting ironic implications. According to Grossman, irony and drama more generally are “psychological primitiv[e]s”: “they can contest for the scene only by option, by persuasion, and force; they must counter dialectic as vital, and never merely as reasonable, alternatives” (“Drama and Dialectic,” 221).

Just as drama may check any particular voice and prevent it from becoming absolutely dominant, so may human life may check both drama and dialectic and prevent either from becoming absolutely dominant. Too much dialectic diminishes one’s being by silencing voices struggling to be heard; on the other hand, the failure to contain voices threatens confusion of one’s being. Dialectic pursued relentlessly would fall into irrelevance because it lacks a criterion for its own application. Reason alone cannot determine what to reason about and left on its own would simply carry out its elimination of inconsistency without discrimination until variety and possibility are shorn from our natures. The danger here, of course, is that consistency and stability of human nature do not entail consistency and stability of enviroing conditions. Drama taken to the extreme, on Grossman’s view, leads to the overwhelming of reason by rhetoric and things like “Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous extravagance” (“Drama and Dialectic,” 224). “Human diminution and confusion are the respective pitfalls” of excessive dialectic and excessive drama (“Drama and Dialectic,” 224).

IV. Interpretative Strategy

Acknowledging the tension between dialectic and drama furnished Grossman with an interpretative strategy, which led him to diverge from other Santayana scholars. Where others saw implausibility or failure, Grossman saw controlled ambiguity and dramatic containment. Consider criticisms of Santayana on pure spirit and love.

James Gouinlock expressed reservations about Santayana’s speculations on liberated consciousness, or as Santayana called it “pure spirit,” and in particular Santayana’s claims that spirit, freed from the partial perspectives and material concerns of animal existence, loves the love in all things and “necessarily worships . . . that eternal beauty, which lies sealed in the heart of each living thing.”¹² Gouinlock doubted that the object of this love could be the innate life activity in an actually living thing. He saw nothing lovable in the eternal beauties in the hearts of murderers and could find no help in the notion that what is loveable is their possible beauty “because their possible beauty (whatever that might be) is in stark contrast to their actual deformity.”¹³ For Gouinlock, this entails that “we do not love them as real beings. Hence, we do not love the love in all things.”¹⁴ Gouinlock added that “what one loves is not really characteristic of the alleged being; one loves something else entirely — an essence, for example — and imputes it to a natural being.”¹⁵ But, if spirit loves the love in things, then the object of spiritual love cannot be an essence because according to Santayana’s ontology essences, which are non-existent and impotent, do not love. Gouinlock wrote, “[i]f the object of love were essence only,

then living beings would not be objects of love” and spiritual worship would lose reference to the world of existing things.¹⁶

This seems consistent with Irving Singer’s criticism that Santayana’s notion of spiritual love is no love of actual persons. Since it is a love of ideal forms it can be only an idealization of actual persons. Santayana does account for instinctual erotic attraction as a pursuit of material goods or a love of things. But Singer wrote, “Santayana does not understand, or recognize fully, . . . the fact that a love of persons cannot be explained as either a love of things or a love of ideals.”¹⁷ Interpersonal love, according to Singer, is both “a vital attachment” and “a bestowing of values that may create a unique and sometimes beneficial oneness” for which Santayana cannot account. This results, claimed Singer, from a failure of Santayana’s attempted synthesis of materialism and Platonism, of matter and spirit.¹⁸

But on Grossman’s view such a synthesis was not Santayana’s aim. Rather Santayana’s ontology, by being both a generalized account of all being and an arbitrary construction held in suspension, was a dramatic containment of contradictory impulses. The ontology is an example of Santayana’s “double seriousness” and “controlled ambiguity” (“Ontology and Morality,” 235): he was serious about the optional nature of his system and serious about using it to pursue wisdom. The resulting tension is apparent in Santayana’s puzzling over the existence of spirit, which translates as the tension between pure spirit and spiritual life. Grossman cited evidence for Santayana’s indecision in manuscripts “with the word *exists*, on occasion, written and then crossed out” (“Spirited Spirituality,” 241), and so took as autobiographical Santayana’s claim that the subtlest form of distraction for spirit is “when it torments itself about its own existence.”¹⁹ It is a problem that on Grossman’s reading must persist for Santayana: “It is as though Santayana could not, in good conscience, escape the horns of his own dilemma” (“Spirited Spirituality,” 241).

On Grossman’s view, Santayana recognized the necessary tension that lies between an intellectual description of spirituality and the human pursuit of the spiritual life, and this includes recognition of the tension that lies between love of ideas and love of existences. Santayana himself articulated the heart of Gouinlock’s and Singer’s cases against him when he chided spiritual love with these rhetorical questions: “Shall we detach our love altogether from existing beings and platonically worship only universal Ideas of the Beautiful and the Good? This might be wisdom or spiritual insight, but is it love? And can such sublimation really be professed without hypocrisy?”²⁰ According to Grossman, Santayana sought clear definition of elusive things like spirit and love, but also sensed the inadequacy of “pseudo-precision” (244) in dealing with what needed to be experienced. “This caused the wavering and the drama” (244), wrote Grossman, and Santayana preferred “to live with the paradoxes and the drama as over against a vacuous and nonhuman clarity” (“Spirited Spirituality,” 245).

Santayana was both extremely self-aware and an able dialectician. To discount his conflicting views as carelessness or confusion risks a serious misreading. Grossman found the evidence overwhelming that Santayana was dramatizing conflicting perspectives and wrote that “[t]o isolate one of Santayana’s voices to the neglect of other voices, or to present one voice as contradicting another voice, is a failure of criticism” (“Spirited Spirituality,” 246).²¹

Of course, this all may sound too pat and suspiciously impervious to argument, at least from the perspective of dialectic which would mistake Grossman's dramatic approach as illegitimate means to the dialectical goal of clarity. But drama seeks to preserve uncertainty and conflict in ways that open up possibilities in actual living, and so Grossman did not see his own work as the last word. In correspondence late last year Grossman responded to favorable referee reports on a manuscript in the following way:

I am left with a dilemma. What do I do with so much praise of me? I (too) am an ironist, and a contrarian, and at the core of my temperament I want to argue back. 'Oh, maybe I have some good lines, here and there. But I keep piping the same tune, and who wants to keep hearing it? And some sentences remain obscure, even unclear, despite all my rewriting. And how do these chapter efforts, separately and together, compare with the majesty of great philosophy? Too much philosophy is published these days that doesn't merit wide attention. Aspiring is not enough!'²²

I could do more of this, and even be nasty, as I have been in some of my reviews of others. But what is the point? To help get my book published or to continue to remain, to the very end, my self-deprecating and dubious self? Maybe I shouldn't be part of the process!

Is there anything else I can say, or have I said enough?²³

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Notes

1. George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (New York: Dover, 1953), vi.
2. Throughout this essay, citations refer to *Morris Grossman's Art and Morality: Essays in the Spirit of George Santayana* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), unless otherwise indicated.
3. H. Saatkamp, "Hermes the Interpreter," *Overheard in Seville: Bulletin of the George Santayana Society* 3 (1985): 25.
4. T. L. S. Sprigge, "Ideal Immortality," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, (Summer 1972): 225.
5. A. Kerr-Lawson, "The Supervenience of Spirit," *Overheard in Seville: Bulletin of The George Santayana Society*, 24 (2006): 28–29.
6. M. K. Munitz, "Ideals and Essences in Santayana's Philosophy," in *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1951), 207.
7. M. Hodges, and J. Lachs, *Thinking in the Ruins: Wittgenstein and Santayana on Contingency* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 88.
8. Hodges and Lachs, *Thinking in the Ruins*, 91.
9. Morris Grossman, "Santayana: Style and Substance" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature, Cleveland, OH, 12 May 1978).
10. Santayana used the phrase in his review of Bertrand Russell's ethics. He wrote that "there is nothing, next to Plato, which ought to be more recommended to

the young philosopher than the teachings of Messrs. Russell and Moore, if he wishes to be a moralist and a logician, and not merely to seem one. Yet this salutary doctrine, though correct, is inadequate. It is a monocular philosophy, seeing outlines clear, but missing the solid bulk and perspective of things. We need binocular vision to quicken the whole mind and yield a full image of reality. Ethics should be controlled by a physics that perceives the material ground and the relative status of whatever is moral. Otherwise ethics itself tends to grow narrow, strident, and fanatical” (G. Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine* [London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1913], 115).

11. Taking as an example Santayana’s conflict regarding the existence of spirit, Grossman wrote that “[a] scrutiny of the texts, and an examination of early drafts, shows an astonishing series of oscillations — statements to the effect that ‘spirit exists’ and ‘spirit doesn’t exist.’ . . . these alternative and contradictory statements can be traced to powerfully conflicting sentiments and value orientations in Santayana” (“Drama and Dialectic,” 143). If Grossman is correct that the shifting between contradictions-in-discourse and contraries-in-sentiment “constitutes much of our mental life,” then perhaps another way to describe it is as the experience of conflicted feelings yielding some contradictory claims that seem to sum up, more or less, the conflicted situation followed by a feeling of resoluteness that seems to lead to more or less effective action until conflicted feelings, more or less continuous with the earlier situation, become troubling and inhibit confident action.

12. George Santayana, “Ultimate Religion,” *Obiter Scripta*, ed. Justus Buchler and Benjamin Schwartz (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), 296–97. Quoted in James Gouinlock, “Ultimate Religion,” *Overheard in Seville: Bulletin of the George Santayana Society* 16 (1998): 7.

13. Gouinlock, “Ultimate Religion,” 7.

14. Gouinlock, “Ultimate Religion,” 7.

15. Gouinlock, “Ultimate Religion,” 7–8.

16. Gouinlock, “Ultimate Religion,” 8.

17. Irving Singer, *George Santayana, Literary Philosopher* (New Haven, Connecticut and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 109.

18. Singer, *George Santayana*, 109.

19. George Santayana, *Realms of Being* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1942), 742.

20. Santayana, *Realms of Being*, 782.

21. Grossman wrote “[i]t sometimes passes as scholarship to go behind the backs, or into the unconscious, of philosophers and to presume to reveal them, as it were, to themselves. We are pleased if we can show that they missed some important implication of what they said, or indeed that what they said here was contradicted by what they said there. Such an approach is sometimes useful and sometimes even appreciated. I do not myself find many such opportunities in Santayana. What he said here might indeed contradict what he said there — but not for want of remembrance. As I have indicated, his repeated *deliberate* juxtapositions of conflicting viewpoints ought to remove all doubts about such viewpoints when they are spread out and not juxtaposed. They ought also to keep us from presuming logical carelessness on Santayana’s part” (“Spirited Spirituality,” 170).

22. But see Grossman, “Spirited Spirituality,” 167–68.

23. Morris Grossman, personal email message, 6 December 2012.