NEAR POETRY

MR. GEORGE SANTAYANA

By Aleister Crowley

AN Enthusiast told the editor of PEARSON'S a little while ago that the sonnets of George Santayana were better than those of Alfred Douglas.

I admire Mr. Frank Harris; I have said so, but he was admitted to the Bar in Lawrence, Kansas, and the East Wind seems to have wafted to him something of the spirit of adjoining Missouri. He has to be shown. This spirit of inquiry is deplorable; it is going to interfere with the capitalist, and the Night Court, and Saint Sumner himself—all, in a word, that I have loved and trusted—unless something is done to put the lid on. However, he has asked me to explore Santayana; he really wants to revel in those sonnets which are so much better than "To Oscar Wilde" and "Alas! That Time Should War Against Distress." And so do I. With childlike faith and eagerness I clutch the precious volume. By some error of the printer or the binder —doubtless!—the poetic masterpieces are omitted—we must do the best we may with what we actually find.

Mr. Santayana is at least not one of these miserable fakers who strut and crow upon the dung heap of the Poetry Society—as if genius went in herds! He is a gentleman and a scholar; he has considerable mastery of his medium. His thought is refined, quiet, reflective, if not original or profound. I like the metaphor in the third sonnet of his first series:

"Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine
That lights the pathway but one step ahead
Across a void of mystery and dread."

That is true. That is well put. That creates a clear image. That is musical English. That is poetry.

Still, there needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave, to tell us that," and the poet goes on to exalt "the tender light of faith" as the one safe guide. But we abandoned faith long ago as a will-o'-the-wisp, leading us into the mire. It is a marsh gas, a corpse-candle. Our remedy is to replace the smoky torch of our little knowledge by the electric light of full knowledge. We are not going back to Jack-o'-Lantern, but onward—to the Sun!

I am sorry to say that even such imagery as that quoted above is very rare in Santayana. Poetry depends upon sublimity of idea—God made visible by magnificence of metaphor. Mr. Santayana's metaphors are mostly "cliche's" — journalistic commonplaces — hack phrases. "Mine Eyelid's Doorway Curtain," "My Nature's Shell," "The Mirror of Thy Placid Heart," "The Crown of Olive Let Another Wear," "Add Thy Drop of Sorrow to the Sea," "The Flickering Colours of Thy Soul," "The Heavy Chain That Binds Me Fast," "The Flesh-imprisoned Men," "Clouds of Snow Crossed His Sky of Joy." Nobody can possibly complain of any of this; but there is nothing to strike the imagination or to stir the soul. It is good academic stuff; it might win the Chancellor's Prize at Cambridge, or the Newdigate at Oxford; but it does not transfigure the world before one's eyes, as it is the property of great poetry to do.

Nor does Mr. Santayana work out his images in detail. Take this sonnet, the work of another poet, and note its excellencies:

TO THE DEAD POET

"I dreamed of him last night, I saw his face
All radiant and unshadowed of distress,
And as of old, in music measureless,
I heard his golden voice and marked him trace
Under the common thing the hidden grace,
And conjure wonder out of emptiness,
Till mean things put on beauty like a dress
And all the world was an enchanted place.

"And then methought outside a fast-locked gate
I mourned the loss of unrecorded words,
Forgotten tales and mysteries half said,
Wonders that might have been articulate,
And voiceless thoughts like murdered singing birds.
And so I woke and knew that he was dead."

This I think a great sonnet, and it is free of "Miltonic inversion," and "poetic licenses," and all those wretched subterfuges by which inferior technicians excuse their incompetence. Mr. Santayana has nothing like such a mastery of English; too often he ends a sonnet with an epithet—"The thought divine"—"with laughter sweet"—and he constantly Teutonizes by postponing the principal verb to the end of the sentence, which is (to me) a peculiarly offensive weakness.

Poets nowadays seem not to know that poetry needs excuse. Why not use prose? Because in poetry emphasis can be made clear by cadence; and if you are going to labor your style, to have difficulty in finding rhymes, in getting your grammar right, in putting your words in the proper place, you are simply not a master of the language. The poet needs a thousandfold the technical skill of the essayist; if the "rules" hamper him, he is still in the student stage. The "rules" help the master to get an effect which he could not get without them.

"Hardly a glimmer to chasten the gloom;
Hardly a murmur of Time at his loom,
Nothing of sense but the poppy-perfume."

The cadence, the collocation of sounds, suggest the mood of the opium-smoker, as the mere words do but imperfectly. Mr. Santayana has not this quality in any full measure. There is no atmosphere in his work. Keats, for example, could hardly write a line without saying far more than the words. "In a drear-nighted December" is a very storehouse of memories; "No hungry generations tread thee down" is a compendium of all man's tragic thought; and it is simply jotted down without strain, artificiality or affectation, because Keats was a master of language. You cannot paraphrase Keats without losing the soul of him; you could translate Santayana into Cherokee without serious damage to the original.

One rather agrees with the lady to whom he showed them, when she said (Sonnet XXXVI): "I like the verses; they are written well."

DAY

Waking one morning
In a pleasant land
By a river flowing
Over golden sand:—

Whence flow ye, waters,
O'er your golden sand?
We come flowing
From the Silent Land.

Whither flow ye, waters,
O'er your golden sand?
We go flowing
To the Silent Land.

And what is this fair realm?
A grain of golden sand
In the great darkness
Of the Silent Land.

James Thomson.