THE AVANT-GARDE’S VISUAL ARTS IN LIGHT OF SANTAYANA’S IDEA OF VITAL LIBERTY

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Abstract: In the present paper, the author looks at the political dimension of some trends in the visual arts within twentieth-century avant-garde groups (cubism, expressionism, fauvism, Dada, abstractionism, surrealism) through George Santayana’s idea of vital liberty. Santayana accused the avant-gardists of social and political escapism, and of becoming unintentionally involved in secondary issues. In his view, the emphasis they placed on the medium (or diverse media) and on treating it as an aim in itself, not, as it should be, as a transmitter through which a stimulating relationship with the environment can be had, was accompanied by a focus on fragments of life and on parts of existence, and, on the other hand, by a de facto rejection of ontology and cosmology as being crucial to understanding life and the place of human beings in the universe. The avant-gardists became involved in political life by responding excessively to the events of the time, instead of to the everlasting problems that are the human lot.

Keywords: art, aesthetics, Santayana, avant-garde, liberty

Vital liberty and the “penitent” arts

George Santayana (1863-1952), a Spanish-American philosopher, poet, best-selling author, and cultural critic, believed that the culture and art of his day was become increasingly democratic, which by no means meant that they were becoming increasingly liberal. The avant-garde groups—cubists, expressionists, fauves, Dadaists, futurists, abstractionists, and surrealists, to enumerate the most influential—were a part of the process of the democratization of the cultural and political life of the epoch, yet, they did not contribute—despite their claims—to making life more liberal, nor did they make those involved in cultural life much freer than before. Santayana used the term “liberal” specifically; in a note entitled “Liberalism and Democracy” (published in 1969, though written much earlier), he explained that liberalism is individualistic, pluralistic, “respectful towards things alien, new, or unknown; it welcomes diversity; it abhors compulsion; it distrusts custom.” Whereas democracy necessarily provides more or less definite limits to singularity: “It would be a violent tyranny to make majorities absolute if, in a democracy the majority and the minority were not much alike” (Santayana 1969, 260).

In Dominations and Powers (1951), he defined his concept of vital liberty as the “exercise of powers and virtues native to oneself and to one’s country” (Santayana 1951/
Fully exercising vital liberties means activating people’s latent energies and evoking the potentialities of the cultural environment in the name of the moral autonomy of each of them. This includes a better appreciation of their heritages, and an ampler self-fulfillment. The notion of vital liberty refers to the distinct types of excellences that can be realized by those for whom these excellences are the articulations of their deepest needs and passions (cf. Skowroński 2007, 100-102). Santayana strongly rejected the claim that he was interested in introducing his own partisan political concept or a clearly defined vision of a social order; in many places he assured his readers that he welcomed other thinkers’ ways, all the more so if they are complete, coherent, and bear witness to the authentic depths of the creators’ souls.

If any community can become and wishes to become communistic or democratic or anarchical I wish it joy from the bottom of my heart. I have only two qualms in this case: whether such ideals are realisable, and whether those who pursue them fancy them to be exclusively and universally right: an illusion pregnant with injustice, oppression, and war (Santayana 1986, 227).

Santayana appreciated some particular groups, for example the cubists—describing cubism as “by no means an inexpert or meaningless thing” (Santayana 1936, 155); this did not stop him from harshly criticizing it and labeling it “Penitent Art” (cf. *ibid.*). One of the main reasons for this involved a non-artistic and an extra-aesthetic aspect and dealt with the notions of “vital liberty” and “liberalism.” The avant-gardists, Santayana claimed, despite their cognitive, liberal, artistic, and humanistic ambitions, did not contribute to humans’ vital liberties, nor did they contribute to the development and enrichment of the already established patterns of aesthetic thinking. Instead, they manifested their inability to face the cultural crisis of the *fin-de-siècle* and proposed a new and positive cultural project. His skepticism about the avant-garde arts overlapped with his accusation that they lacked an understanding of life and the world; this lack of understanding was caused, among other things, by their ignorance of the naturalistic roots of the aesthetic experience and vital liberty. He defended the naturalistic character of art, or aesthetic naturalism, against those tendencies that would attempt to re-construct the world anew and would see works of art as semi-independent entities with their own norms and rules, with hardly any reference to the external reality. Such was the case, for example, in abstractionism. Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), a leading abstractionist painter and the founder of a specific version called *suprematism*, wrote in his manifesto that “the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth” (Malevich 1915/1926, no page given). In part, such a stance had a political dimension, and Malevich put it this way: “The art of the past which stood, at least ostensibly, in the service of religion and the state, will take on new life in the pure (unapplied) art of Suprematism, which will build up a new world, the world of feeling” (Malevich 1915/1926).

In contrast, Santayana took it for granted that the trends in the arts that ignore the naturalistic background and focus upon “pure color,” “caricature,” and “deformation,” display a helplessness in dealing more amply with real life and in providing a more penetrating experience of the world: