

Jose Ortega y Gasset

JULIÁN MARÍAS

IT HAS BEEN twenty-five years since I began to read Ortega. I began reading him in those days when I discovered the fields of Castille in Antonio Machado and in "Azorin"; when I met with the lyric agitation in Juan Ramón Jiménez; when, reading Unamuno's *Tragic Sense of Life*, I found lumps in my throat; when I knew that pressure upon the heart that comes from the pages of Unamuno's *Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*, the book which taught me most about love, back in those five years before I was twenty.

Now in Ortega I found something more: I did not know quite what. There was a tremor, but a serene tremor; there was a

mystifying lucidity, a diamond-like hardness; an extraordinary trick of turning things round in the mind and yet simultaneously retaining them. I began to read Ortega with a confused sense of cupidity: every page gave me a sense of possession, of enrichment. It was not a question of knowing, but of being; reality itself was enriched. I did not then know that what was happening, in the midst of lyric phrases, in the midst of splendid rhetoric, was really my first encounter with *theory*. I neither tripped on Ortega's metaphors, nor did I disdain them; and thus I gained what has come to be the prize of my life.

I met Ortega shortly afterward, in 1932,

at the University of Madrid. "Principles of Metaphysics in accordance with Vital Reason": this was the title of the course to be given by Ortega. When he first walked into the classroom, I studied his face attentively: grave, and yet amicable, furrowed by deep lines, with something of the laborer and of the Roman emperor at the same time. The eyes, clear, penetrating, but without hardness: they did not pierce like steel, but like light. From time to time his face lit up with a smile which was joyous and warm, with a lightning flash of Spanish grace. He began to speak. Perhaps it was his voice which first gave a clue as to who Ortega was; his whole being was in it. Deep, sometimes husky; low dramatic notes at the end of the phrases; filled with expressive shadings. The words seemed to roll between the teeth, emerge from between the lips, destined precisely for each one of us. Words, in his mouth, were more than words anywhere else. Not in vain was Ortega one of the last rhetoricians of our time. His hands, atop the table, were saying their part with sober, elegant, Mediterranean gestures: gravity and grace joined in a gesture.

What Ortega offered in his course on metaphysics in Madrid from 1910 to 1936 was, and it was obvious from the first day, a complete philosophy, and like a great ship, it is one of the noblest in rigging and deepest in draught of any of the vessels which has plied the seas of the West. The "small vessel" of which he spoke in those days, the ship which was to undertake what Plato calls "the second navigation," was a tall Spanish galleon, with baroque ornamentation, its sails billowing before a formidable wind of truth.

In those days Ortega was molding our souls as well as our minds, precisely by means of his example of living thought and philosophic doctrine combined. The word "authenticity," which in so many mouths is merely a word, became for us the watchword of our lives, for it was what we saw in him day after day. The intellectual may not lie, he has no right to it; he may not deceive himself, either in friendship, or in

science, or in politics, or in love; one may not be unfaithful to one's vocation, the voice of which calls us without forcing, which urges us to be free. Those men who, after passing through the hands of Ortega, have lied, have wanted to deceive themselves, have turned their shoulders on their destiny, and they know it; and perhaps some day they will be saved by this very knowledge, for since "life is not made, but must be made by us moment after moment," there is always time, or rather, one is always on time.

At eighteen I was a pensive youth, heavy with meditation, ever disposed to turn my thought to inward abstraction. One day, as I was strolling with Ortega, he told me:

"When one is young, it's necessary to open one's eyes wide; it's necessary to look, look, look; it's necessary to fill the retina with fresh impressions, because later it's no longer possible."

I felt the full import of his words, and realized the risk involved in ignoring the advice. I strove to do as he suggested, and I began simply by opening my eyes and looking about me; very soon the art of looking became my delight: human faces—the only thing which I trust—, people in the street, cities, landscapes, the most humble things, "the numberless things which are immediately around us." Two-thirds of all philosophy which is not scholastic is made by looking.

Ortega made his by looking. "All I offer," he wrote in his first book, *Meditaciones del Quijote* (1914), "*modi res considerandi*, are possible new ways of looking at things." For this reason the first form of his philosophy was *perspectivism*, to which he lent all his metaphysical capacity—to the point where he affirmed that perspective is an ingredient of reality; that, far from being its deformation, it is its organization. Ortega, as he looked around himself, found his concrete *circumstance*. For the moment, the first moment, the palace and monastery of the Escorial in Spain, and the mountains in the background; but not only that: "my body and soul; my beliefs, my ideas, the

past, history, God hidden in the distance. Everything I find and discover, that with which, in a dramatic dialogue, I must make up my life. *I am myself and my circumstance.*" The reabsorption of his circumstance is the concrete destiny of man. Life, biographic human life, is what we do and what happens to us; it is a happening, something given me, but not given me already made, rather which I have to make moment after moment, concretely, because "in comparison with the immediate, with our spontaneous life, everything we have learned seems abstract, generic, schematic. Not only does it seem so: it is. The hammer is the abstraction of each of the hammer strokes."

But as one looks, things appear in their *connection*, and this is *theory*, reason, and that is why philosophy seems "the general science of love." And the truth is *alétheia* or *apocalypsis*, "discovery, revelation, or more properly, unveiling, the taking away of a veil or cover." The conceptual, the concept, is the normal organ of profundity, not something subtle destined to supplant material things, to dislodge the intuition, the impression of reality; rather, "the concept will be the true instrument or organ for the perception and seizing of things," "an organ or apparatus for the possession of things," "literally an organ with which we capture things."

And confronting the easy irrationalist opposition between reason and life, Ortega affirms that reason is a vital, spontaneous function, of the same lineage as seeing or touching, that "reason can not, need not aspire to substitute for life"; the mission of reason and of the conceptual is to link objects and impressions, make with them a world in which, and with which, we can make our life. And therefore culture, for Ortega, appears as certainty, corroboration, steadiness—*tò asphalés*: "Culture is not all of life, but only the moment of certainty, of steadiness, of clarity." And thus, "man has a mission of clarity upon the earth, he carries it within himself, *it is the very root of his constitution.*" From thence springs

the postulate of Ortega's method, *vital reason*: reason without which life is not possible, for life is choice, decision, justification, reason; reason which is life itself, the vital connection of the impressions through which the objects in my circumstance appear to me.

All of this—and many other things besides—occurred to him in 1914, as he looked on the Escorial, "our great stone lyric," with its surrounding sierra, and described in vital terms what a forest is. In 1914, no one else had thought out any of the ideas of this order, which today form a decisive part of our manner of understanding reality.

From that time until the time his life was extinguished, in forty-one years of creative effort, Ortega constructed a philosophy which, if I am not mistaken, has carried speculation to a new level of intensity and to a basic radicalism not formerly reached. Life as "radical reality," in the double sense that it is what is left when all ideas, theories, and interpretations are suppressed, and that it is that in which all the other realities "radicate," or come to pass; life as a "chore," as my manner of dealing with things, as election, invention, project, or vital program—in its profound form, *vocation*—; the suppression of realism and idealism, justifying their partially correct conjectures; the thesis that man is *forcibly* free, therefore responsible, and that life is intrinsically moral; the evidence that man does not possess a "nature" in the sense that objects do, but rather possesses a *history*, and an unreal structure, which is only realized circumstantially. And all this carried him to an idea of human life which is not "existence," nor *Dasein*, nor "subjectivity," nor "man," nor the "I," but radical reality: the I with all things, the I doing something with things in order to live; something which I once called "the real organization of reality," in opposition to its abstract and merely theoretic organization.

Ortega's metaphysics is not ontology, because being is not *reality*, but only an interpretation of it, though without doubt the

most illustrious of history. While a large part of contemporary philosophy proposes to set out from *Dasein*, or "existence," in order to reach being and fall back on one form or another of ontology, Ortega invites us to transcend all theory—including the theory of being—in order to attain a *radical certitude concerning radical reality*. And this is for him *metaphysics*.

We should add two things more. First, that Ortega has made his philosophy as he looked at the world from his own inimitable point of view as a Spaniard and a European in the twentieth century, from his concrete historic situation. For this reason his entire life has been—and it was he who said so—service to Spain; and today we see clearly that, precisely for this reason, it was service to Europe and the entire western world. The other word which should be added is that all this is only a minimal part of what is represented by the public work of Ortega; and that the latter, in its turn, is only a portion—perhaps the smaller portion—of the totality of his work. When in 1953, as Ortega marked his seventieth birthday, I organized a course to study his significance, I ventured to say that I considered him "a

great thinker of the second half of the twentieth century"; I was referring to his fecundity and to his possibilities; but, in addition, to the fact that his most profound and systematic works have yet to be published, and from them I expect a radical renovation of the entire field of philosophy, including what until today we understand by "the philosophy of Ortega."

In the face of "classicism" as insincerity, which he so much disdained, Ortega defined the truly classic man as the one with whom we must do battle after his death. And once he wrote: "The consciousness of shipwreck, of being cast away, when it becomes the truth of life, becomes also the salvation. For that reason I believe only in the thoughts of castaways. It is necessary to hail the classics before a tribunal of castaways so that they may answer there certain peremptory questions with reference to the authentic life." Now that Ortega is dead, the time has come when we must do battle with him; and he must and will reply to the peremptory questions of the castaways, who are the men of this epoch, ourselves, if we are sufficiently authentic to put the questions to him.