Ortega and Etymological Man

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Don José Ortega y Gasset was born in Madrid in 1883 and died in Madrid in 1955. World-renowned as the author of *The Revolt of the Masses*, he was the most scintillating essayist of this century, a philosopher of Olympian reach and depth, and a passionately dedicated journalist. Indeed, he tells us he carries three generations of journalists in his blood, going back on both sides of the family, and he somewhat proudly mentions that most of his two dozen major works first saw daylight from the pages of the workaday press.[1]

He began his studies in Madrid but at the age of eight was sent off to a boarding school in Málaga operated by those fabled scholars, the Jesuits. There, six years running, he won the "Emperor" rank as the most outstanding scholar in the school. After graduation in 1897 he spent two more years studying in Deusto, a small town about ten miles from Bilbao, at a Jesuit university. Then it was on to the University of Madrid, where he earned his degree in philosophy and letters in 1902. In this same year his first articles began to appear in the press. In December 1904 he earned his doctorate with a thesis entitled *Terrors of the Year 1000*.[2]

In 1905 we find the 22-year-old in Leipzig, perfecting his studies in Greek and Latin, thinking of becoming a professor of classics, and threatening to study classical philology in the next semester.[3] His interest turned instead to philosophy and science, and he spent the next three years at the universities in Berlin and Marburg, with a glancing blow at Leipzig again. It was during that 1907 semester at Leipzig that he engaged in his first "hand-to-hand combat" with *The Critique of Pure Reason*. It was at the zoo . . .

> that is to say, sitting on a bench in the zoo, in front of the wapiti from Canada, letting loose with his springtime bellowings, threatening the heavens with his damp nose. A little beyond, the elephant, with great patience—"genius is patience"—was permitting an attendant to file down the callus on his forehead. I had read that in India the elephant represents the god of philosophy. The elephant is a philosopher and butts his head against the bars of his cage, which is the most that any creature can do. I also was learning to do it, mounting my onslaughts against the bars of *The Critique of Pure Reason*—in that springtime—while, at the end of the garden, the ducks were chasing each other in the pond amid a great hullaballoo, carried away with their obscene itch.[4]

He was living off the prize money he had won in an academic competition, but the peso had "lost some weight" in crossing the Pyrenees, so that he could afford to

eat only now and then at a cheap restaurant (Aschinger's, an early chain of Automats); mostly he slaked his hunger in the libraries.[5]

In 1908 he was named to the permanent teaching staff at the Escuela Superior, doling out psychology, logic, and ethics. In 1910 he won the competition for the chair in metaphysics at the University of Madrid. He was 27, and unto him he took a wife. The next year he was back in Marburg with his young bride, and there, in flower-filled May ("*en un mayo florido*"), his first son was born, whom he named Miguel, "after a very old friend of mine . . . Cervantes."[6]) One wonders if he and his young family occupied the same garret he had shared a few years earlier, overlooking the town, with Nicolai Hartmann, who, one dreamy day, interrupted his own playing on the cello to say to Don José, "You, my dear Ortega, have intellectual altruism."[7] Hartmann went on to become a professor of philosophy at Cologne and wrote several exceedingly heavy tomes on philosophy, mathematics, biology, Plato, philosophical method, epistemology, *und so weiter.* Perhaps Ortega's early brush with Hartmann's ponderosity started him on the road that led finally, in *What Is Philosophy?*, to his sinking the stiletto once and for all into the heart of Germanic philosophizing.

For he was a Spaniard, with his feet dug in the earth, and to him the airy abstractionism of the German hyperlogicians meant nothing, even though as a scholar he possessed perfect technical mastery of their sciences and systems. With his command of "elegant" Greek and Latin, his knowledge of Arabic (necessary to any serious student of Spanish linguistics), and his complete fluency in German, French, English, and Italian and I know not what other languages, he was nonetheless a son of Antaeus. In the summer he likes to go motoring. He tools around the back country of Spain in an old car that has already been around the peninsula several times.[8] He pays several visits to the caves at Altamira.[9] He perches among the rocks on a cliffside overlooking the sea and writes about the fall of Rome, "like a romantic" (note the pun).[10]

In August of 1911 he makes his way on muleback—as we shall see later, he puts in a good word for muleteers —through the high country of Castile, following the steps of El Cid, as traced by the illustrious scholar Menéndez Pidal from an analysis of the national poem.[11] But one suspects that Ortega, like Macaulay, goes on walks with his pockets crammed with books: stuck on the Cantabrian coast, in the rain, feeling slightly depressed, he gobbles up two whole volumes of French in 24 hours.[12] By 1927 he mentions taking "annual little trips through the back country of France," seeking the smallest hamlets along the least known byways.[13]

He published his first book, *Meditations on Quijote*, in 1913. In 1915 he founded the weekly, *España.* In 1916 the first volume of his *Spectator* essays was published. He spent much of 1916 in Argentina, lecturing, and touring with his 70-year-old father. In 1923 he helped to found the periodical *Revista de Occidente*, a major influence in Spanish intellectual development, and perhaps a riposte to Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes*, which had first appeared in 1918, and which Ortega surely knew and may have studied thoroughly. He had founded the great *El Sol* in 1917. He was aware of the importance of Einstein's work and discussed it at length in the Spanish press; in 1923 he gave the introduction for Einstein's lecture at the student residence, Madrid. Not long afterward, he and Einstein went touring around Spain; we have a vignette of the pair strolling through the streets of Toledo, philosophizing, and trying in vain to enjoy some privacy among the crowds that were already gathering whenever

Einstein's unmistakable physiognomy hove into view.[14]

His hot political writings and his overt political activity made life a bit iffy with the onset of civil war in 1936. He decamped, finding refuge until 1945 in various corners of France, Holland, Argentina, and Portugal. In Estoril, Portugal, he wrote a great part of his *Origin and Epilogue of Philosophy.*[15] Returning home after World War II, he founded the Institute of Humanities in 1948.

In his writings he strove to obtrude himself as little as possible, hoping to engage the reader by direct discourse. This is one of the keys to his marvelous readability. We feel his presence—his wisdom, his all-encompassing erudition, his earthiness and humor—but we don't feel burdened with his biography. In all his vast opus there are scarcely a dozen frankly egoistic passages:

> . . . I am a simple nature, given to meditations, and do not know how to speak except in a low voice, as if into your ear, concerning weighty and ungainly things, which cannot bear any frivolity, because each of them sends a root to touch the very root of our own selves.[16]

> . . . I am no more than a half-cracked dominie living solitary among mountains of granite. . . .[17]

> I understand very well that I am not learned and I very much doubt that I should be called professor.[18]

> Like an authentic hidalgo I have lived my life without two coins to rub together.[19]

> [My life is a Bohemia, in which] I must be, at one and the same time, University professor, journalist, man of letters, politician, coffeehouse debater, bullfighter, "man of the world," something on the order of parish priest, and God knows how many other things.[20]

> [I pass] the whole day shut in a room, buried in the magical cloud of the cigar and with no communication with the countryside but that subtle and metaphorical communication that exists between the leaves of the books and the leaves of the trees.[21]

> [I am an] inveterate reader.[22]

> [I have] no gift for politicking.[23]

> To infect the younger generations with a pure, disinterested love of ideas, to push them beyond the prejudice of faction, to invite them to take part in the universe of knowledge and intellect, this is—as it was at the outset of my literary labors—even today my only task.[24]

That is no overstatement. Ortega's works, from first to last—from Alpha to Ortega, as I can imagine his cracking—are suffused with a passion to open up Spain to the "universe of intellect," and not only for the pure joy of learning, but also in order to give direction to a Spain drifting like a shipwreck on the ocean of life (a favorite metaphor of his), to give spinebone to a Spain that had become "invertebrate" (as he entitled one of his books), to concentrate the people's attention on the work at hand and the theme of the times (another title). It was implicit in this effort that the moorings be found, and not unnaturally Ortega found them in history. The existence of the past, the philosophical attitude towards history, the necessity of history, all these themes appear throughout Ortega's work like a Wagnerian *Leitmotiv* (except that in Ortega the music is better).

Language comes a close second to history as Ortega's most constant concern. Linguist and philologist as he was, Ortega saw language as the repository of the history of its speakers. In his thoughts on language as the spontaneous product of the people he beats Hayek to the punch by a good two generations. Language, also, serves as a paradigm of social collaboration: just as Adam Smith's invisible hand sends the goods whither they are needed the most, so in every people there is an Inaudible Tongue (the phrase is not Ortega's) that utters the

words and the turns of phrase that will best suit that people. All language is metaphor, as Emerson said in one of his lucid moments, and it is Ortega's special insight that the metaphorical systems in a language (and each language has its own systems) express the soul of the people. So the systematic study of one's own language is part and parcel of the effort to regain the *terra firma* after the shipwreck.

Finally, because language develops through the slow movement of time, like every social endeavor, the systematic study of language will bear down hard on etymology. Among major writers Ortega devotes more attention to etymology than any I have ever read. Paul Elmer More gave a course in classical philology at Harvard, but you can read the eleven volumes of his Shelburne Essays (as I have, with great delight) and never suspect the old boy of such riotous deviationism. Ortega's recurring disquisitions on etymology serve two purposes: to underscore the historicity of language, and to forge a new metaphorical view of life.

Perhaps these few words will serve as a framework for Ortega's comments on history, language, and etymology. I would not make bold to summarize or interpret a stylist so ready in aphorism and ripe with allusion. He is the best speaker of his own thoughts, and I turn the meeting over to him. (As above and throughout, the translations are mine.)

History

ORTEGA REJECTED the Whig theory of history[25] and held a rather Spenglerian view of the life cycle of nations[26] in which the period of liberty is usually brief. He derides the nineteenth-century infatuation with "modernism" on the grounds that modernism by definition is superior to all alternatives, and quickly turns into mere stagnation:

> There are those who find it intolerable that wires have been abandoned in favor of wireless telegraphy. For my part, the die is cast: I am not a modern at all, but am very much a 20th-century man.[27]

Ambling through high Castile on muleback, retracing the path taken by El Cid nine centuries earlier, he explains his attitude:

> Do not take this to mean I am by temperament a conservative or a traditionalist. I am a man who truly loves the past. Traditionalists, by contrast, do not love it: they want it to cease being past and to become present. To love the past is to be glad it is done with, glad that the things that assail our eyes and ears and hands with their rough edges are no longer present but have risen to the more genuine and unsullied life they lead in our reminiscence.[28]

> Life is not only a beginning. The beginning is already here in the Now. And life is a continuation, a survival into the moment that will arrive beyond the Now. That is why life worries under the inescapable pressure of performance. Action—which is merely taking a decision—is not enough. What is needed is to give shape to the decision, to see it through, to bring it to pass. This requirement of having a real effect on the world, beyond our mere subjectivity and intention, is what is wrapped up in the word To Act. It forces us to look for ways to hang on and fashion our future; and then we discover the past as an arsenal of instruments, methods, prescriptions, norms. He who has faith in the past does not fear the future, for he is sure to find in the past the tactics and course and method that will sustain him in the troubled future. The future is the horizon of problems; the past, the *terra firma* of ways and means we stand upon.[29]

> History is man's reality. He has no other. In history he has become what he is. To deny the past is absurd and useless, because the past is man's essence, which keeps returning in full force. The past is not here, and it did not trouble itself to move off so that we might ignore it, but in order for us to integrate it.[30]

. . . man does not have a nature, but he does have a history. Or, what amounts to the same: what Nature is to things, History—the record of things done—is to man.[31]

As history is, above all, the history of communities, of societies—and therefore the history of customs—so it is marked by extreme sluggishness and retardation, by the *tempo lento* of history's universal march, requiring centuries and centuries to achieve any really substantial progress. Homer cited as a proverb already very ancient that "the mills of the Gods grind slowly." The mills of the Gods are historical Destiny.[32]

The past exists not because it happened to someone else but because it forms part of our present, of what we are by reason of having been; because, in sum, it is *our* past. Life in its reality is an absolute presence; you can't say there *is* something if it isn't present, "actual." If, then, there *is* a past, it will exist as a presence working, in us, now.[33]

Just as we have to understand other people in our daily lives, so we must come to terms with a different sort of Others

. . . whom we have never seen but who nonetheless exist for us: family records, old ruins, fading documents, old wives' tales, legends are for us a different sort of signs of other lives that were out of synch with ours, that is, not our contemporaries. We must learn to read these signs without benefit of the Others' faces and gestures and actual movements, and find in them the reality of the Others' lives, the reality of ancestors. Beyond the men who are visible within our own horizons there are a great many more whose lives are latent: they are Antiquity. History is the effort we make to understand Antiquity, for it is the technique of dealing with the dead, a strange variant on present-day social usages.[34]

Man is, above all else, an inheritor. And . . . this and nothing else is what sets him apart radically from the animal. But to be conscious of being an inheritor is to be conscious of history.[35]

The man of today doesn't pay proper attention to the fact that almost everything we enjoy in confronting existence in some degree of comfort we owe to the past; we must proceed with care, delicacy, and insight in our dealings with the past; above all, we must take it thoroughly into account because, strictly speaking, it is present in all that it has bequeathed us. To forget the past, to turn our back on it, produces the result we may see today: the rebarbarization of man.[36]

Not just the masterworks of classical literature, but all of the classical heritage should be translated and made available to everyone, because we can learn from the lesser lights and second-raters that they, too,

. . . lived, and had their being, and, poor souls like ourselves, hopelessly thrashed about, just like us, in the perennial shipwreck of life.[37]

As civilization becomes more advanced and complex, the methods of dealing with problems become themselves more complex. One of these methods is historical:

Historical learning is a technique of the first water for preserving and nourishing an advanced civilization. Not that it gives positive solutions to the new bunch of living conflicts—life always differs from what it once was—but it avoids the naïve mistakes of earlier times.[38]

Our life, at present, feels larger and fuller than other lives. How could it feel decadent? Quite the contrary: what has happened is that our life, from the sheer feeling of being greater than life, has lost all respect, all concern for the past. So, for the first time, we come up against an era that has made a *tabula rasa* of all classicism, an era that recognizes in the past nothing at all that might serve as a model

or a norm, an era that caps so many centuries of unbroken evolution but seems like a beginning, a dawn, a new departure, a childhood.[39]

Each of us will fulfil in his way the historical mission of his generation. For each generation is, after all, nothing but a definite mission, a set of precisely determined things that must be done.[40]

A people has two pasts: the legendary and the real, or the ideal and the remembered, or the past that is always equally remote from all our epochs and the past that once was present. It is the difference between the epic and the novel. "The epic past is not our past."[41]

Language

THE EPIC PAST may not be our past, but the language of the epics is ours in the sense that today's languages, to the extent that they contain an epic tradition, are largely shaped by the ancient epic systems. We still speak in the rhythms of Beowulf. Epics, in the form in which we know them, are the result of generations of bards who expanded them and through repetition gradually perfected them. Epics, like language itself, are communal productions, and as such the carriers of communal history.

The speech of our own time imposes on us its general structure, and even the greatest literary innovator can create almost nothing in the language itself, as compared to his originality in other aspects of creativity. The conditions and purpose of language make it a communal beast, a stray animal that no one can lay claim to.[42]

. . . language, which is always and ultimately the mother tongue, is not learned in grammar books or dictionaries, but in the talk of the people.[43]

. . . our Spanish language [ponder that phrase! who would speak of "our American language"?], more the creation of muleteers than courtiers...[44]

. . . a peculiarity of the Spanish language worthy of meditation, as is everything that pertains to the common tongue [*lengua vulgar*].[45]

. . . the ordinary man, no great savant but more aware of what really counts [than some intellectual], has gazed shrewdly at his own existence and has left in the vernacular language the precipitate of these insights. We too often forget that language is already a system of thought, of doctrine.[46]

Well now, language is precisely what the individual does not create but finds already established in his social milieu, in his tribe, in his *polis*, city, or nation. The words of the language already have their meanings imposed by collective usage. To speak is, if nothing else, to make do one more time with this customary meaning, *to say what is already known*, what everyone knows, the commonplace.[47]

Race and language are flowing and mutable realities that constantly suffer from interferences.[48]

Consequently, "purism" is out. If language is a stray animal trained up by muleteers and constantly on the move, prodded by interferences, give it its head:

Authentic [*castizo*] is what we call the absolutely spontaneous, the outward sign of the instincts of a species working in an individual, a superindividual spontaneity, which the individual himself is unaware of. So, if you preoccupy yourself with being authentic, you slam shut the gates of authenticity. The purist is the enemy of the pure.[49]

As language is a communal product, we can observe social laws at work in its development. It is natural for men to yearn for private utterance, to create their own terms for things they think their own; but most of our coinages fail to circulate. New words are accepted, however:

Sometimes new words succeed, and society changes this or that usage in adopting the new forms, but most often the individual's attempt fails. So we have in language a paradigm of social action.[50]

Etymology

I HAVE SAID that Ortega is the most etymological of writers. He invokes etymology in support of his argument at the drop of a hat, quite often coming up with fascinating displays of linguistic virtuosity (he did, after all, toy with the idea of teaching classical philology). In this he is not self-evidently superior to scores of erudite Europeans. If I were concentrating on the linguistics of the case, I should offer a few dozen examples of Ortega's word-histories, including many that strike me as fanciful if not completely off base. But what sets Ortega apart from his confrères is that, philosopher that he was, he actually meditated on the place of etymology in human life, with results that form a fitting peroration for this essay.

> Etymologies are of interest not only to linguists. Through them we can unveil situations actually experienced by man. In them these situations remain preserved *in the full freshness of life*, like the flesh of those mammoths preserved for thousands of years in the Siberian ice fields and suitable for the nourishment of present-day man.[51]
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> . . . to have an etymology is something not exclusive to words nor even peculiar to them, for all human actions have an etymology: in all of them, custom intervenes more or less, and the customary deed, being a human act transformed into a mechanical imposition by society on the individual, survives, by inertia, adrift, without anyone's knowing how long it has been going on. The act loses its meaning because of its very customariness, through the usury of usage, and at the same time keeps changing its form until it arrives at absolutely unintelligible vestiges. Words do not have etymologies because they are words, but because they are usages, customs. But this obliges us to acknowledge and declare that man himself is constituted, by his inexorable destiny as a member of a society, *the etymological animal*. Accordingly, all history would be nothing but an immense etymology, the grandiose system of all etymologies. And that is why history exists and why man needs it, for it is the only discipline that can reveal the meaning of what man does, and, therefore, the meaning of what he is.

1. *Meditación del Pueblo Joven y Otros Ensayos Sobre América* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1981), 93. All references are to works of José Ortega y Gasset. **2.** *Espíritu de la Letra* (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1985), 11-12. **3.** *Ibid.*, 23 n. **4.** *El Tema de Nuestro Tiempo* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1981), 27-8. **5.** *Ibid.*, 28. **6.** *Idem.* **7.** *Tema de Nuestro Tiempo*, 17. **8.** *El Espectador, Tomos V y VI* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1966), 47. **9.** *Ibid.*, 56. **10.** *Ibid*, 194-5. **11.** *Ibid.*, 16. Also *El Espectador, Tomo I* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1966), 55. **12.** *Espíritu de la Letra*, 155. **13.** *El Espectador, Tomos VII y VIII* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1966), 49. **14.** *Tema de Nuestro Tiempo*, 199 ff., 203 ff. **15.** *Origen y Epílogo de la Filosofía* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1980), 63 n. **16.** *Meditación del Pueblo Joven*, 11-12. **17.** *Ibid.*, 14. **18.** *Ibid.*, 28. **19.** *Ibid.*, 186. **20.** *Tema de Nuestro Tiempo*, 14-5. **21.** *El Espectador, Tomos III y IV* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1966), 219. **22.** *La Rebelión de las Masas* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1984), 218. **23.** *Tríptico* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1964), 11. **24.** *Espectador I*, 9. **25.** *El Espectador, Tomo II* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1966), 59. **26.** *Origen y Epílogo de Filosofía*, 107 ff. **27.** *Espectador I*, 31. **28.** *Ibid.*, 55. **29.** *Tríptico*, 126-7. **30.** *Rebelión de las Masas*, 25-6. **31.** *Historia como Sistema* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1971), 55. **32.** *El Hombre y la Gente* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1980), 215. **33.** *Historia como Sistema*, 52. **34.** *Hombre y Gente*, 163. **35.** *Ideas y Creencias* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1968), 45. **36.** *Ibid.*, 43. **37.** *El Libro de las Misiones* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1965), 158. **38.** *Rebelión de las Masas*, 113. **39.** *Ibid.*, 67. **40.** *Tema de Nuestro Tiempo*, 49. **41.** *Meditaciones del Quijote* (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1984), 188-9. **42.** *Espectador I*, 96. **43.** *Hombre y Gente*, 226. **44.** *Libro de las Misiones*, 142. **45.** *Hombre y Gente*, 116. **46.** *Ideas y Creencias*, 34. **47.** *Origen y Epílogo de Filosofía*, 66. **48.** *Espectador II*, 135. **49.** *Espectador I*, 211. **50.** *Hombre y Gente*, 253. **51.** *La Caza y los Toros* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1962), 22 n. **52.** *Hombre y Gente*, 207.