ORTEGA’S AESTHETICS: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN SPANISH REALITY AND EUROPEAN AESTHETIC CURRENTS

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Ortega’s philosophy can be conceived as a permanent dialogue between contemporary European spiritual currents and Spanish reality. The following paper tries to justify this statement in the field of aesthetics. We examine the main intellectual periods of Ortega’s oeuvre from this point of view, beginning with neo-Kantianism, moving to his encounter with phenomenology and life-philosophies, adding a touch of existentialist thinking and, finally, reaching the balance of a hermeneutical life-philosophy in his books on Velázquez and Goya.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that, from the very beginning, Ortega’s views concerning aesthetics set out to connect and harmonize the Spanish artistic tradition with currents in central European aesthetics. This goal prevails sometimes in a normative way, sometimes in a descriptive or even a theoretical way. In what follows, we will focus our attention only on the main aspects of this complex theme.

The earliest period of Ortega’s conception of art is characterized by its search for the main points of a given work’s interpretation. Two typical traits can be observed from the very start. On the one hand, during his philosophical apprenticeship (1902–1907), the leading German and French philosophers of the time (i.e., Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Renan and Taine) determine how Ortega understands the formation and significance of art. On the other hand, during this period Ortega already expresses some of the fundamental principles of aesthetics that he will later develop in his most mature works. The theme that came to characterize Ortega’s philosophy is the relation between life and art. This relation will remain important
to Ortega’s philosophy, even when his main focus shifts from the question of art to a concern for the immediacy of life.¹

The Formative Years: Neo-Kantianism

The shaping of a more defined aesthetic profile begins in 1905–1907, when Ortega pursues studies at various German universities and familiarizes himself with neo-Kantianism, one of the dominant currents in European philosophy at that time. With the assimilation of the teaching of Cohen and Natorp, Ortega’s first definite aesthetic theory appears. During the subsequent years, he analyzes Spanish culture and art with the application of neo-Kantian standards. This means that works of art should not be judged exclusively on the basis of subjective taste, but rather on a set of firm rules with universal validity.

Nothing shows this shift from subjectivism towards a well-defined, objective stance better than the change of meaning of two key concepts in aesthetics—or, more generally, cultural concepts—namely, the concepts of Romanticism and Classicism. Ortega’s article, “La ciencia romántica,” appears in June 1906. In this article, the so-called disciplined German and French scientific ethos is sharply contrasted with Spanish Romantic scientism, which is described as something irregular, undisciplined, barbaric and mystical. Ortega’s main point, however, is about evaluation. Ortega does not demand that the Spanish mentality should discard this Romantic stance but, on the contrary, stick to it firmly: “Should German science be a classical science? Agreed: Spanish science will be a romantic one” [¿Que la ciencia alemana es una ciencia clásica? Convenido: la ciencia española será una ciencia romántica].² Ortega’s notion of a “Romantic science” seems to be a hybrid concept which suggests a certain type of science that is not founded on the methodical research of professional scholars, but on the inventions and insights of a few scientists of genius.

However, in his articles written a year later—“Sobre los estudios clásicos,” “Teoría del classicismo”—Ortega pledges himself to Classi-

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icism. This Classicism is conceived in the spirit of neo-Kantian constructivism. In other words, it is not identical with its historical, antique form which can be seen, for instance, in the cultural products of ancient Greece or Rome, because on the one hand it is “the intimate sense of culture [el sentido íntimo de la cultura]”3 and on the other hand “an indefinite improvement of man within the riverbed of history [una mejora indefinida del hombre dentro del cauce de la historia]."4 Thus, for Ortega Classicism now means a general cultural norm that permeates all of European history and that should be followed by Spaniards as well.

This neo-Kantian approach becomes an absolute point of reference during the next few years of Ortega’s work. A synoptic view of European aesthetic norms and Spanish artistic strivings is expressed in a classical way in his essay “Adán en el paraíso” (1910). The point of departure of this meditation is the work of a great Spanish painter, Ignacio Zuloaga.5 The question Ortega asks in this meditation is how Zuloaga’s oeuvre can be analyzed with the help of a neo-Kantian aesthetic approach.

Ortega’s endeavour to create a synthesis has been realized only partially. On the one hand, he makes a good case for the normative means of neo-Kantian aesthetics: this endeavour can be observed clearly, for example, in the conceptualization of art as a human activity. Human existence presents a fundamental problem, an eternal mystery. The solution of this problem is given in one of the three modes of culture: logic, ethics and aesthetics. Echoing the views of his Marburg teachers, Cohen and Natorp, Ortega writes: “Logic, ethics and aesthetics are literally three pre-judices; it is due to them that man maintains himself with ease on the surface of zoology and keeps shaping the culture freely, rationally [Lógica, ética y estética son literalmente tres pre-juicios, merced a los cuales se mantiene el hombre a flote sobre la superficie de la zoología...y se va labrando la cultura libremente, racionalmente].”6 Ortega emphasizes that art is not the realm of fantasy and contingency, but it also contains some necessary implications, in which the special laws of aesthetics must

4 José Ortega y Gasset, “Teoría del clasicismo” (1907), Obras Completas, Vol. 1, 126.
5 Ignacio Zuloaga (1870–1945), Spanish painter, a typical pictorial representative of the generation of 1898, aiming at the spiritual renovation of Spain.
prevail. These laws should be manifested in the choice of subject, as well as in the application of proper style and technique.

Here emerges a key question posed by Ortega: How does Zuloaga’s art meet these strict requirements? Ortega, at least in this essay, does not really provide an answer. At the end of his study, when he asserts that “the ideal subject-matter of painting is...man in nature [el tema ideal de la pintura es...el hombre en la naturaleza]” and, furthermore, that “to reduce this problem to a national type, for example, is to bring it down to the proportions of an anecdote [reducir este problema a un tipo nacional, por ejemplo, es rebajarlo a las proportiones de una anécdota],” Ortega suggests that Zuloaga is a “barbaric genius” who cannot be squeezed into the strait-jacket of the neo-Kantian concept of art. And when, in his later essays (“La estética de ‘El enano Gregorio el Botero’” [1911]; “Una visita a Zuloaga” [1912]), he could have tried to make the art of Zuloaga fit to the requirements of neo-Kantian aesthetics, he has already passed beyond the neo-Kantian horizon. Of course, there are claims in these later essays that still refer back to the previous neo-Kantian conception, such as the claim that “art is sensibility for the necessary [arte es sensibilidad para lo necesario].” However, this necessity no longer has the neo-Kantian connotations; it now connotes a historical-national necessity: “Zuloaga gives expression to an eternal topic of history for us, with Spanish gestures [Zuloaga nos expresa un tema eterno de la historia expresado con gestos españoles].” The ideal life whose artistic representation is demanded by Ortega remains neo-Kantian in spirit but, at the same time, it begins to change into a historical, national and individual life that is already beyond the neo-Kantian stance. Looking at Ortega’s work from this perspective, his first attempt to reconcile European aesthetics and Spanish reality can be said to cover only the brief period between roughly 1907 and 1911.

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7 Ibid., 75.
New Orientations: Early Life Philosophies and Phenomenology

In 1911, there is a turning point in the development of Ortega's thought; in that year he returns to Germany and gets acquainted with the more recent philosophical and aesthetic currents of this country. These new trends point towards the philosophies of life, on the one hand, and towards phenomenology, on the other. Both of these movements had a strong impact on Ortega.

Among the philosophies of life was the so-called Einfühlung theory (theory of empathy) of Theodor Lipps, according to which (in Worringer's formulation) "aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment." To put it another way, aesthetic enjoyment is that inner attunement and harmony in which human life places itself into self-created artistic objects. The theory of empathy has affinities to that of Kunstwollen, elaborated by Alois Riegl, which denied the previous normative and mechanistic models of art and traced the origin of art back into a fundamental, inner, a priori capacity, namely, the willing of art. Wilhelm Worringer further developed these fundamental insights in such works as Abstraction and Empathy (1908) and Problems of Form in Gothic Art (1911). According to Worringer, the formation of art from its beginnings is due not only to empathy, in which the human and the external world are connected to one another in an intimate harmony. The emergence of art can also be attributed in his view to abstraction, in which this connection between human and world is divided and the artistic creation of the first geometrical forms and shapes are the expression of a basic fear of the external world. At the same time, there remains the foundation of life-philosophy, because fear is a fundamental manifestation of human life, like joy or happiness; both are special modes of Kunstwollen, at least in the sense of aesthetics. Worringer erects a special typology upon this duality, in which Gothic Formwillen is compared to the Formwillen of primitive, classical, and oriental humans.

What is Ortega's stance in relation to these various currents of thought? The answer may be found in his essay, "Arte de este mundo y del otro" (1911). This work perfectly illustrates that Ortega does incorporate current aesthetic teachings accurately but critically,

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11 A normative model of art is based on the representation of ideal beauty; the mechanistic model, on the contrary, discovers the primary task of art in the imitation of nature.
establishing a dialogue with the main authors as he makes use of their teaching from his own perspective.

Ortega corrects Worringer on two basic points. The first concerns cave-paintings. The Spanish philosopher does not accept Worringer’s thesis that art began with an abstract-geometrical style. On the contrary, says Ortega, the style of the first art was “an aggressive and victorious realism [un realismo agresivo y vencedor].”\(^{12}\) If Worringer were to claim that the cave-paintings, being merely natural imitations, do not belong to the realm of art, Ortega makes it clear that there is a real and original Kunstwollen in these creations:

These remnants of a prehistoric, mediterranean art are not manifestations of an infantile imitationism; in those vigorous lines and stains there appears a powerful artistic will; what's more, a genuine attitude in front of the world, a metaphysics which is devoid of the indoeuropean abstract metaphysics, the classical rationalist naturalism and oriental mysticism, respectively [Estos restos de un arte mediterráneo prehistórico no son manifestaciones del imitativismo infantil: una poderosa voluntad artística se revela en aquellas enérgicas líneas y manchas; más todavía, una postura genuina ante el mundo, una metafísica que no es la abstractiva del indoeuropeo, ni el naturalismo racionalista clásico, ni el misticismo oriental].\(^{13}\)

The other correction refers to the typology of Worringer’s Formwille itself. Ortega appreciates Worringer’s efforts to free the theory of art from the exclusive dominance of neo-Classical aesthetics. However, when Worringer—in contrast to those thinkers bound to Classical or Renaissance views of art—wants to rehabilitate the independent Formwille of the North in the area of art, Ortega feels it necessary to outline the peculiar artistic profile of the South. And if the German thinker puts Gothic art at the centre of this transformation, the Spanish philosopher catches sight of its equivalence in Mediterranean art. This parallelism is justified, inasmuch as Worringer does not consider Gothic art only as a historical style but also takes it as a general world-feeling, a Kunstwollen of Nordic-Germans. Similarly, for Ortega, Mediterranean art is the expression of a special worldview.

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\(^{13}\) Ibid.
At the beginning of the essay “Arte de este mundo y del otro” Ortega establishes a dichotomy between North and South: “Here there are two poles of European man, the two extreme forms of the continental pathetic: the materialist pathos or pathos of the South and the transcendental pathos or pathos of the North [He ahí los dos polos del hombre europeo, las dos formas extremas de la patética continental: el pathos materialista o del Sur, el pathos transcendental o del Norte].”

However, this materialism is not the crude materialism of primitive man. It is a worldview that is free from otherworldliness and transcendence. While the Kunstwollen of the Gothic man is characterized by an extasis, a transcendence moving upwards, the Mediterranean way of seeing is just the reverse:

Things, fraternal things. The Spanish love things in their material rudeness, individuality, misery and sordidness; not in their quintessential form, which is translated and stylized and not as symbols of supreme values.... This art wants to rescue things as things, as individualized matter [Las cosas, las hermanas cosas. En su rudeza material, en su individualidad, en su miseria y sordizex, no quintaesenciadas y traducidas y estilizadas, no como símbolo de valores superiores...eso ama el hombre español.... Este arte quiere salvar las cosas en cuanto cosas, en cuanto materia individualizada].

This love for things in their individuality, misery, and sordidness, is why the best Spanish artists (Cervantes and Azorín, for example) represent simple, trivial things. Velázquez steals the spotlight, by painting the most insignificant thing, the air on his canvases. (It is interesting to note that in this period Velázquez still appears to Ortega as a “thing-painter.”)

In this context, two matters should be stressed. First, this Mediterranean “thing” is by no means the same as the “thing” of “Adán en el paraíso,” analyzed the previous year. In that essay, the “thing” [cosa] was dissolved in pure relations, both in an ontological and an aesthetic sense. What Ortega finds interesting about the “thing” in this essay is its uniqueness, its simplicity, its bulk and its extension. So, however much Ortega emphasizes the continuity between the two essays, his attitude has changed fundamentally within a year. Secondly, the insistence on the “salvation” of things—precisely in contrast to the exaggerated spirituality of Gothic art—expresses Orte-

14 Ibid., 436.
15 Ibid., 446.
ga's desire that things should not vanish in speculative idealism, but neither should they retain the crude materiality of things; the task of Mediterranean Kunstwollen is precisely to sanctify things in their unique, material nature.

Ortega's first book (Meditaciones del Quijote, 1914) contains an even more comprehensive analysis of the Mediterranean perspective. Its importance lies in the fact that, besides life-philosophy, phenomenology is also a strong presence in this book, and we can find the first hints at his hermeneutics as well.16

What are the other novelties of this book? First, there is an even deeper insight into the nature of the thing as such. No longer is the thing an entity resolved in the totality of relations any more, as in neo-Kantianism. Nor is it an immediate, physical presence, as in Ortega's early life-philosophy. He now viewed the thing as a phenomenologically intuited object. Husserl once suggested that phenomenology is, properly speaking, a means to teach man to see correctly. Accordingly, in Ortega's oeuvre, phenomenology is the art of proper vision. When he addresses a real hymn to the things in Meditaciones del Quijote, these are already phenomenologically intuited things: "Let things be sanctified! Love them, love them! Each thing is a fairy that envelops her inner treasures in misery and vulgarity; each thing is a virgin that must be loved in order to make her fertile [¡Sancticadas sean las cosas! ¡Amadlas, amadlas! Cada cosa es una hada que reviste de miseria y vulgaridad sus tesoros interiores, y es una virgen que ha de ser enamorada para hacerse fecunda]."17 The thing as such is no longer pure immediacy, but is identified with the phenomenon, which contains in itself both presence and latency. A classical example for the duality of presence and latency is the analysis of the forest at the beginning of the "Preliminary Meditation." The forest teaches us, says Ortega, that proper seeing never stops at the surface; it takes us to the depth of things as well. Proper seeing is seeing the essence (Wesenschau) in the strict sense of the word. Using Husserlian terms, we can say that seeing is presentation (Präsentation) and appresentation (Appräsentation) at the same time on an immediate, intuitive level. An invisible aspect of an object—for example, the side of an orange that cannot be seen from a certain

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17 José Ortega y Gasset, "Meditaciones del Quijote" (1914), Obras Completas, Vol. 1, 748.
angle—is not a pure privation; it helps to deepen our vision and completes the thing as an object of visual experience. As Ortega writes: “Invisibility, to make oneself hidden is not a feature that is merely negative; it is a positive quality which, falling upon a thing, transforms it, makes a new thing of it [La invisibilidad, el hallarse oculto no es un carácter meramente negativo, sino una cualidad positiva que, al vertérsese sobre una cosa, la transforma, hace de ella una cosa nueva].” At the same time, phenomenological seeing contains a certain ideation, in which hermeneutics also appears: “However, there is an active seeing beyond the passive one, which interprets while seeing and sees while interpreting; a seeing that is looking. For these visions that are lookings Plato could find a divine word: he called them ideas [Pero hay sobre el pasivo ver un ver activo, que interpreta viendo y ve interpretando; un ver que es mirar. Platón supo hallar para estas visiones que son miradas una palabra divina: las llamó ideas].”

The aesthetic fecundity of this new way of seeing can be recognized in Ortega’s essay “Estética en el tranvía” (1916), a rather informal piece of writing. The topic revolves around the main category of aesthetics—beauty. Ortega’s primary question is: In what sense can a woman be called beautiful or ugly? During the analysis, he rejects both the Platonic-deductive approach, in which the beauty of the individual woman is understood as a sharing in the idea of beauty, and the empirical-inductive method, according to which one starts with the concrete face and tries to conceive a certain model of beauty. The real solution, suggests Ortega, lies in a third method, the phenomenological method. Here one endeavours to see beauty right in the face, rather than in some abstract concept of ideal beauty that characterizes that particular, concrete face:

Just as a group of stellar points makes a constellation, the real face that we see emanates from an ideal profile which is more or less coincident with it. The perception of corporeal being and the suspicion of its ideal perfection arises in the same movement of our conscience.... Each physiognomy brings forward, as if in a mystical phosphorescence, its own, unique, exclusive ideal [De la propia suerte que el grupo de puntos estelares se organiza en constelación, el rostro real que vemos de la emanación de un ideal perfil más o menos coincidente con él. En un mismo movimiento de nuestra conciencia surge la percepción del ser corpóreo y la sospecha de

18 Ibid., 765.
19 Ibid., 769.
su ideal perfección.... Cada fisonomía suscita, como en mística fosforescencia, su propio, único, exclusivo ideal].

In this case, we are also confronted with the aesthetic relevance of the Wesenschau. In this sense beauty, as an essence, is not conceived generally, in a mental act, but it can be seen directly in the single phenomenon itself, with the certitude of evidence granted by the senses.

In Ortega’s Meditaciones del Quijote phenomenological seeing and intuition have a serious pedagogical relevance. The Spanish people are considered a Mediterranean people par excellence, but the aspects of the evaluation have been changed. As we have seen, a few years earlier Ortega regarded the mission of the Mediterranean world to be that of preserving the corporality and physicality of things, in contrast to the abstract transcendentalism of the Northern-German world. Now he considers the Mediterranean way of seeing, not even as realism, but rather as a kind of sensuality, appearance, surface and impressionism, which has, needless to say, important aesthetic consequences:

The pleasure of vision, of roaming, of touching the pupil the skin of things with the pupil is the distinguishing feature of our art. It should not be called realism, because it does not consist of the accentuation of the res, the things, but rather in the appearance of things. It would be better to call it semblance, illusionism, impressionism [El placer de la visión, de recorrer, de palpar con la pupila la piel de las cosas, es el carácter diferencial de nuestro arte. No se le llame realismo porque no consiste en la acentuación de la res, de las cosas, sino de la apariencia de las cosas. Mejor fuera denominarlo aparentismo, ilusionismo, impresionismo].

What follows from all of this? Ortega certainly does not think the Mediterranean way of seeing should bow to German-Northern superiority. For the advantage of the Spanish-Mediterranean way of seeing is just the same as its disadvantage: exact, clear and sharp vision. (According to Ortega, exact and clear seeing as such is an obstacle to conceptual abstraction.) However, as far as thinking is concerned, the advantage is on the side of German culture, says Ortega. Its precision and exactitude surpasses the blurred and inexact Southern thinking. The task, according to Ortega, is not for Medi-

21 Ortega, ‘‘Meditaciones del Quijote,’’ 780.
terraneean people to be unfaithful to their proper, natural-born virtue, but rather to try to grow into it: that is to say, to learn to see properly. In other words, the Mediterranean way of being is by no means a kind of natural and unchangeable condition; it is rather a pedagogical program to be realized in the future. That is why Ortega consistently uses the term “Mediterranean culture” instead of “Latin culture”; this last term seems to be too static and restricted for him, because Latin culture is only a kind of simplification and ossification of original Greek culture.

We have now arrived at an even wider panoramic vision. If the Mediterranean way of world-intuition is able to acquire the art of proper—intellectual—vision and can make that vision prevalent in general European culture, then a further step will have been taken towards European cultural unity. That, in Ortega’s mind, was the great aim of his whole life-work: the creation of a European cultural synthesis, a united European spirituality to which the Southern peoples contributed as much as the Northern ones. In Ortega’s case, the synthetic sound, that is to say, the achievement of harmony between the Southern and the Northern part of European culture, remains the same, regardless of neo-Kantianism, life-philosophy or phenomenology.

The Period of Classical Life-Philosophy

World War I and the turbulent years thereafter initiated a fundamental change in Ortega’s philosophy and aesthetics. This change consisted in the fact that, whereas before the war Ortega could still regard the rest of Europe as a cultural and artistic model for Spain, after the war it became clear to him that Spain could not take as a model a continent that was in a state of deep crisis, as Europe continued to be. This state of affairs cried out for a change of paradigm.

What consequences did this have in the area of art and aesthetics? We can say that new fault lines appeared for Ortega. The main distinction lay not between Europe and Spain as before, but between old and new art and artistic sensibility, regardless of geographical-cultural localization. That is the line of reasoning Ortega takes in his book, La deshumanización del arte (1925):

The new art is a universal fact. For about twenty years the most attentive young people of two successive generations—in Paris, London, New York, Rome, Madrid—have found themselves surprised by the ineluctable fact that traditional art does not interest them anymore; what is more, it repels them [El arte nuevo es un
hecho universal. Desde hace veinte años, los jóvenes más alertas de dos generaciones sucesivas—en París, en Londres, Nueva York, Roma, Madrid—se han encontrado sorprendidos por el hecho ineluctable de que el arte tradicional no les interesaba; más aún, les repugnaba.\footnote{José Ortega y Gasset, “La deshumanización del arte e ideas sobre la novela” (1925), Obras Completas, Vol. 3 (Madrid: Editorial Taurus: 2005), 853.}

However, the most radical formulations of the chasm between the old and the new art are found in other articles from 1925, articles in which Ortega claims to doubt the very existence of art: “More or less it should be said: the art of the present day consists of its nonexistence and it is inescapable to begin with this conviction in order to create and enjoy authentic art in these days [Habría que decir, poco más o menos: el arte actual consiste en que no lo hay, y es ineludible partir de esta convicción para crear y gozar hoy de arte auténtico].”\footnote{Ibid., 909. In another passage, he notes that “the artistic landscape of our days consists almost exclusively of precipices [el paisaje artístico de ahora se compone casi íntegramente de precipicios].” “Sobre la crítica de arte” (1925), Obras Completas, Vol. 3, 841.} These lines express the sense of shock the general public felt when faced with the rapid sequence of different “isms” in the arts during the war and into the early 1920s. Ortega, however, did not reject the new art; on the contrary, he made the resolute decision to try to understand it: “It is only possible to do two things with these young people: to shoot them or endeavour to understand them. I have resolutely chosen the second option [Con estos jóvenes cabe hacer una de dos cosas: o fusilarlos o esforzarse en comprenderlos. Yo he optado resueltamente por esta segunda operación].”\footnote{Ortega, “La deshumanización,” 853.}

At this point, the question arises of which European thinkers exerted the most influence on Ortega in these years. We can say that the positions of the life-philosophies have endured; however, this is not the vitalistic version (Nietzsche, Bergson) any more, but those tendencies that have much in common with phenomenology (exemplified by Max Scheler) and with the history of philosophy (Oswald Spengler). In fact, after the death of Simmel (1918), Scheler and Spengler were the leading representatives of German life-philosophy in the twenties; their philosophy had the greatest impact on Ortega during these years.

The influence of Scheler on Ortega’s aesthetics can be observed in the theory of perspectivism. It is therefore no coincidence that in La deshumanización del arte he dedicates a whole chapter to phenomen-
nology and posits that in order to make possible an understanding of the new art, we have to form a new point of view of ourselves. This point of view is “not human” in a traditional sense, because that is the point of view that strives for “empathy” with aesthetic objects. Rather, this view is said to be “inhuman” insofar as the condition of the new aesthetic sensibility is precisely the elimination of customary human elements. Ortega expounds this idea in a number of places. In “El tema de nuestro tiempo,” he explores its philosophical sense. In his essay on “Don Juan,” he treats its pedagogical-aesthetic aspect, and in “Sobre el punto de vista en el arte,” he discusses it in the context of the history of art.

Ortega's attitude toward Spengler is different. Although he borrows a few elements of Spengler’s “morphological” view, he does not accept the German philosopher’s conservative stance regarding modern art. The different interpretation of a famous metaphor—the so-called “metaphor of the quarry”—displays the impasse between the two thinkers very well. Spengler writes in connection with modern art: “What are we to think of the individual who, standing before an exhausted quarry, would rather be told that a new vein will be struck tomorrow—the bait offered by the radically false and mannered art of the moment—than be shown a rich and virgin clay-bed nearby?”25 Ortega, however, critiques Spengler’s stance without mentioning Spengler’s name:

Each style that appears in history can engender a certain number of different forms within a generic type. But there comes a day, when the magnificent quarry runs down. This has happened, for example, with the novel and the romantic-naturalist theater.... As a matter of fact, the possible combinations within them have been run down. For this reason one has to judge as a fortunate circumstance, which coincides with this exhaustion, the appearance of a new sensibility that is able to denounce new and intact quarries [Cada estilo que aparece en la historia puede engendrar cierto número de formas diferentes dentro de un tipo genérico. Pero llega un día en que la magnífica cantera se agota. Esto ha pasado, por ejemplo, con la novela y el teatro romántico-naturalista.... Lo que acontece es que se han agotado las combinaciones posibles dentro de ellos. Por esta razón, debe juzgarse venturoso que coincida con este agotamiento la emergencia de una nueva sensibilidad capaz de denunciar nuevas canteras intactas].26

This allusion to Spengler shows quite well that Ortega’s relation to the European thinkers remains *dialogical*. This means that Ortega does not accept their thoughts unconditionally—although they have a strong impact on him, he has a critical and polemical engagement with them.

The aesthetic essays of the twenties clearly display the shift in Ortega’s thinking. His attention is no longer focussed on problems of style; now he is interested in the *position or status* of (modern) art in general. The shift in his thinking now points towards the *sociology* and *philosophy of art*. Three questions are in the foreground:

1. What is the pure *existence* of the new art?—*ontological* question;
2. How can we *understand* the new art?—*hermeneutical* question;
3. How are we to *evaluate* the new art?—*axiological* question.

Of these three, he deals most extensively with the question of *understanding* and only glances at the others. He sees that a fundamental change has taken place in the way works of art are judged. In place of the dichotomy between liking and disliking art, there is now a dichotomy between understanding and not understanding art. Ortega emphasizes the *ontological* consequences of this *hermeneutical* failure. If the man-on-the-street is obliged to confess that he is unable to understand the work of art before him, the failure to understand not infrequently turns into indignation and he begins to doubt whether the aesthetic object before him is a work of art at all.

Ortega distinguishes two main forms of aesthetic understanding: the *historical* and the *sociological*. Surprisingly, there is no extended discussion of the historical component in *La deshumanización del arte*; this discussion comes in his essay, “*El arte en presente y en pretérito.*” In this piece of writing, he calls attention to the fact that, in order to understand a picture, it is not enough to interpret the picture itself; this sounds paradoxical, but it is true that, broadly speaking, the picture *as such* is only a part of the picture taken in a wider sense: “The picture does not end with its frame. What is more, from the complete organism of a picture there is only a tiny part on the canvas. And something analogous happens in poetry as well [*El cuadro no termina en su marco. Más todavía: del organismo completo de un cuadro sólo hay en el lienzo una mínima parte. Y cosa análoga podíamos decir de una poesía.*]”

That is to say, the *hermeneutical subsoil* of the work of art, the *presuppositions* that the artist takes for

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granted, are not explicitly represented in the work of art. However, in order truly to understand a work of art, we need to understand those presuppositions as well: “The arduous task of the historian and philologist consists precisely in the reconstruction of the latent system of those presuppositions and convictions from which the works of other times emanated [La ardua faena del historiador, del filólogo consiste justamente en reconstruir el sistema latente de supuestos y convicciones de que emanaron las obras de otros tiempos].”

This insight of Ortega is genuinely productive. The focus on understanding presuppositions will be embedded in his oeuvre only in the subsequent decades, partly in his philosophy of language—for example in his Commentary to Plato’s Symposium—and partly in his opinion concerning the hermeneutics of painting that can be seen in his studies on Velázquez. Most surprisingly, this teaching appears in his works before he was thoroughly acquainted with the writings of Dilthey.

The knowledge of presuppositions is of primary importance for the theory of art; it requires a well-grounded historical erudition. However, according to Ortega (at least in the 1920s), a deep gulf had opened up between the past and the present; the continuity with past centuries had vanished. This rift had the consequence, on the one hand, that the historical sense considered the past as past, as a pure relic that had nothing to do with the present, and, on the other hand, that there appeared the thought of the dismissal, the radical negation of the past, mainly on the part of young artists. From an aesthetic point of view, this means that on the one hand, we can see the strengthening of academism, which treats the creations of the past as relics, and on the other hand, we see the modern artistic trends (the so-called “isms”) that radically break with previous artistic traditions.

Beside the historical component of understanding art, there is the sociological one, which has also turned out to be problematic:

In my opinion the characteristic feature of new art “from a sociological point of view” is that it divides people in two classes: those who understand it and those who do not understand it. This implies that one group has at its disposal an organ of understanding that is denied to the other [A mi juicio, lo característico del arte

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28 Ibid., 914.
In this case, the average modern person lacks a proper understanding of the new art, not because he does not have any historical erudition—since the new art is also against historical tradition—but because he lacks that special aesthetic taste and sensibility which is presupposed for the proper understanding of the new art. Therefore, the greatest number of people belong to the masses, who by their very constitution are incapable of understanding the subtle operations of “dehumanized” art. It then follows that the new art is irreparably aristocratic because it speaks only to the small circle of initiated experts.

What, then, is the upshot of Ortega’s quest to understand the new art? His aesthetical convictions distanced him from Spengler, who refused modern art in its totality. Regarding his political and social views, Ortega was a liberal conservative; it is very interesting to observe how his conservative aristocratism can be reconciled with the aesthetic aristocratism of the representatives of modern art. We can say that the eminent, qualified minority, standing high above the masses gives shelter and protection for the minority of the experimentalists, the creative ones. Ortega’s aesthetic taste was presumably not identical with the aesthetic sensibility of the representatives of modern art. But he was able to recognize the new power of creation and the talent in them; that is the reason why he had, in contrast to Spengler, an optimistic stance concerning the future of art. The closing lines of one of his essays are programmatic from this point of view: “European man is all alone, without the living dead beside him; but like Peter Schlemihl, he has lost his shadow. It is always what happens when noon arrives [El europeo está solo, sin muertos vivientes a su vera; pero como Pedro Schlemihl, ha perdido su sombra. Es lo que acontece siempre que llega el mediodía].”31 As we apply this passage to the arts, Europe has lost its shadow. It has lost its own past precisely at the moment when the sun is at its height. The space is now free for an endless creation in Spain as in Europe.

At the Borderline of Existentialism and Life Philosophy

One of the most important events in Ortega’s philosophical and aesthetic development is his reading of Martin Heidegger’s 1927 *magnum opus, Being and Time*. Still more important was the fact that through *Being and Time*, he got to know the philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey. On the basis of Ortega’s study of Heidegger, we can characterize Ortega’s later philosophy as a highly original intellectual achievement in which he establishes a dialogue with the philosophies of Heidegger and Dilthey. In this period, Ortega’s philosophy relies on the premises and categories of life philosophy, which are often saturated with the meaning of the philosophy of existence.

From an aesthetic point of view, this shift manifests itself in a change of focus from the *sociology of art* to *biography*. Dilthey was one of the great masters of biography, as shown in his monumental work, *Das Leben Schleiermachers*. However, Ortega eliminates from the genre of biography the Romantic element and those psychological remnants (Einfühlung) that characterize Dilthey’s philosophy and that make it a genre of *anthropo-ontology* and *hermeneutics*.32 One of the first products of this change is his insightful essay, “Goethe desde dentro” (1932).

In this essay, Ortega applies his new hermeneutical method to Goethe, one of the greatest European creative artists. Goethe is a well-chosen point of departure because, first, we know a great deal about his life, and, second, because

He is the man in whom the recognition first dawned that human life is the battle man has with his intimate and individual destiny, that is to say, that human life is constituted by its own problem of being [Es él el hombre en quien por vez primera alborea la conciencia de que la vida humana es la lucha del hombre con su íntimo e individual destino, es decir, que la vida humana está constituida por el problema de sí misma].33

Ortega writes to his fictitious correspondent in Germany that a biography would be needed which describes Goethe *from within*

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32 By anthropo-ontology I mean a method that, on the one hand, starts from the fundamental position of man in the world (anthropological tenets) and, on the other, tries to explain and analyze human life on the basis of its personal being (ontological tenets).

[desde dentro]. But what does it really mean to describe someone “from within”? Ortega does not accept the traditional psychological biographies whose authors tried to identify themselves mentally with the person in question. Although the Spanish thinker admits that this approach has some advantages, he judges that on the whole it does not grasp the problem to be solved deeply enough. It is here that he definitely departs from the Einfühlung-theory of Theodor Lipps.

What, then, do the words “from within” signify? The kind of biography Ortega has in mind is not about

the within of Goethe, but rather the within of his life, of Goethe’s drama. The point is not to see Goethe’s life as Goethe himself saw it, with his subjective vision, but to enter as a biographer into the magic circle of this existence in order to assist in the tremendous objective event that this life really was and of which Goethe himself was but an ingredient [el dentro de Goethe, sino el dentro de su vida, del drama de Goethe. No se trata de ver la vida de Goethe como Goethe la veía, con su visión subjetiva, sino entrando como biógrafo en el círculo mágico de esa existencia para asistir al tremendo acontecimiento objetivo que fue esa vida y del cual Goethe no era sino un ingrediente].

Ortega conveys the essence of his project in the last lines. By a description of Goethe from within, he means neither a simple empathy in Lipps’ way, nor a pedestrian reconstruction of the world in which Goethe had lived. Doing so would require a customary stereotype of “social background” and the exploration and interpretation of that drama, namely, what his own life meant for Goethe. Life is, in an anthropo-ontological sense, not a biological or psychological process, but a pure event. It is that happening or drama that takes place between someone and his/her world, in which that person tries to realize—or evade—his or her irrevocable life-project or vocation. For example: Goethe travelled to Italy in 1786; this is an objective biographical fact. At the same time, many other people travelled to Italy. What, then, is the real anthropo-ontological significance of this fact? According to Ortega, it is

(a) not what Goethe subjectively thought while travelling through Italy—to describe that would be the task of a psychologist;

34 Ibid., 125; emphasis added to the last eight words.
(b) not what Italy was objectively like when Goethe travelled there—to describe that would be the task of a historian;
(c) it was what it really meant for him, for his own life-project and vocation that he in that particular year, 1786, travelled to Italy. And in this case, the above-mentioned fact becomes fluid, becomes an event that can be inserted into a life-process. But on this occasion, that event already needs an interpretation, it gains a hermeneutical significance.

According to Ortega, this is the task that a real biography should perform. To write this biography of Goethe is beyond Ortega’s scope; nevertheless, he hints at some points of reference. The most important one is that according to him Goethe was disloyal to his own, innermost vocation, because he did not live an authentic life. “It is all too well evident that Goethe’s radical destiny was that of a lark. He burst forth on the planet with the mission of being a German writer entrusted with the task of revolutionizing the literature of his country and, through this, the literature of the whole world [Es de sobra evidente que Goethe tenía un destino radical de alondra. Había brotado en el planeta con la misión de ser un escritor alemán encargado de revolucionar la literatura de su país y, al través de su país, la del mundo].” Instead of undertaking this mission, Goethe accepts the invitation of Prince Karl August and goes to Weimar. Ortega asks his reader to try to imagine Goethe without Weimar, to ask what Goethe might have accomplished if he had refused Karl August’s invitation. A real biography, Ortega implies, deals not only with facts and events, but with the interpretation of possibilities as well.

In closing, it should be emphasized that in this biographical construction, art itself becomes a fact of life—or rather, an event of life. The real development of this hermeneutical-philosophical conception of art was hindered, however, by Ortega’s ten-year-long absence from Spain as a result of Spanish Civil War. It continued during the last decade of his life when Ortega dealt extensively with the oeuvre of the two giants of Spanish painting: Velázquez and Goya.

The Final Balance of Hermeneutical Life-Philosophy: Velázquez and Goya

One of the most significant events in the last decade of Ortega’s life was a thorough analysis of the work of Spain’s two greatest painters.

This is the last great synthesis of the Spanish artistic tradition and current European aesthetic tendencies. Ortega, referencing the hermeneutics of Dilthey and Heidegger, undertakes an independent and comprehensive investigation of the art of these two outstanding Spanish painters.

A striking feature of these writings is the constant critique that Ortega makes of the history of art and historiography, respectively. This critique relates, in Ortega’s view, to the Heideggerian destruction of tradition, the “petrified tradition” embodied in older forms of the history of art and historiography. This tradition, says Ortega, makes the author a prisoner of earlier interpretations that hinder his or her ability to reach more recent approaches. Thus, traditional art history had remained within the framework of a professional outlook and did not have a view toward wider relations:

For one thing, they do not have the slightest idea of what history is and have only an extremely vague, somnambulistic and shaky idea of what art is, what it means “to be a painter,” what those social and collective components are that integrate personal, artistic work, etc. [Por lo pronto, no tienen ni la más remota idea de lo que es historia y sólo una espeluznantemente vaga, sonambúlica y funambúlica de lo que es arte, de lo que es ‘ser pintor’, de los componentes sociales o colectivos que integran la obra artística personal, etcétera].

It is important to note that Ortega’s critique referred not only to the Spanish, but sometimes to the foreign historians of art as well.

What, then, is Ortega’s fundamental intention in these studies? It is the desire to understand, which is of course a hermeneutical striving. Understanding is frequently identified with explanation, and we know quite well from Dilthey’s philosophy that understanding characterizes the methodology of the Geisteswissenschaften, in contrast to the method of description in the natural sciences. The striving to understand, however, does not remain on the level of pure

37 José Ortega y Gasset, “Preludio a un Goya” (1946), Obras Completas, Vol. 9, 760.
38 See the monographs of August Liebmann Mayer, Francisco de Goya (Munich: Bruckmann, 1923) and Carl Justi, Diego Velázquez und sein Jahrhundert (Bonn: Cohen, 1888).
aesthetic speculation, but rather it becomes part of a wider context of *life philosophy*. This method is especially well documented in Ortega’s essay, “La reviviscencia de los cuadros.” Ortega begins to analyze the problem by trying to understand a single stroke of a brush on the canvas. This piece of pigment is seen as referring to ever-widening circles of relative totalities, from the picture itself through artistic style and the analysis of the whole historical period to that final subsoil of which even the painter is unaware: “If we really want to take the leaf, we must carry off the whole tree after its roots have been unearthed. This is the inevitable destiny of everything which is essentially a part of a whole: the former is only what it is in reference to the latter one [Si queremos, de verdad, llevarnos la hoja, tenemos que arramblar con el árbol entero después de desenterrar su raigambre. Es el destino ineluctable de todo lo que es esencialmente parte de un todo: aquélla sólo es lo que es refiriéndola a éste].” (PVG, 622) Evidently, this is—in the form of part and totality—the problem of the hermeneutical circle; however, the latter is treated not only from a narrower methodological perspective, as was done by Romantic hermeneutics,—that is to say, by Schleiermacher and his group who by hermeneutical circle mean basically the formal relation of the part and the whole but rather is to be understood in the context of a real ontology, as in Heidegger’s concept of “hermeneutical situation.”  

In other respects, the connection to Dilthey is also clear. The totality in question is never a previously constructed speculative one, like the totality of Spirit in Hegel’s philosophy, but is rather always a relative and open totality, starting from an atomic-empirical standpoint. The most important consequence of Ortega’s considerations is that art is transferred from the realm of pure aesthetics into the world of *life* and *history*. Maybe this approach has some disadvantages from the perspective of iconology; at the same time, this method opens up wider perspectives of interpretation. From now on Ortega interprets art, the artist, the work of art and the recipient from the standpoint of philosophical *life*, so aesthetics as a whole turns into *applied life philosophy*. It is by use of these insights that Ortega refers to the art of Velázquez and Goya in a masterly way.

Ortega frequently refers to the method of seeing from within. He notes that “for Velázquez...painting is not just an occupation, but a system of aesthetic problems and intimate imperatives [para Velázquez...la pintura no es un oficio, sino un sistema de problemas estéticos y de íntimos imperativos]” (PVG, 648); and, writing about Goya, he

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explicitly says: “So we have to try to see Goya from within Goya himself [Hemos, pues, de procurar ver a Goya desde dentro de Goya].”41 These remarks coincide almost verbatim with points from his Goethe essay written more than twenty years before, illustrating quite well the theoretical continuity. Furthermore, there is another passage in which Ortega is talking about the possibility of trying to imagine Velázquez not being the painter of the king: “It would be as if we imagined a Goethe without Weimar. Here is, certainly, the theme of a wonderful book that should already be written: Goethe without Weimar! [Hubiera sido, pues, como si imagináramos un Goethe sin Weimar. ¡He ahí, por cierto, un tema para un estupendo libro que debía estar ya escrito. Goethe sin Weimar!].” (PVG, 628) The reference to the earlier essay is evident.

This hint refers not only to the fact that human life should always be interpreted as a phenomenon in the world—as Heidegger says, “Being-in-the-World,” or, as Ortega had put it some thirteen years earlier, “Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia”—it also makes clear that in order to understand a human life, we have to employ, methodologically considered, the imagination, that is to say, we also have to ask what else that particular life could have become. The fundamental difference between traditional biography and hermeneutical life-philosophy becomes manifest at this point. The former sticks rigorously to what has happened, what has actually taken place. However, human life, as bios, is always a life-in-possibilities; it could always have been different in comparison to what it actually became. And actual life itself gains another accentuation if we also take into consideration what else it could have been. As Ortega says: “We do not understand the actual life of our fellow man well if we do not see it in contrast with the line of another possible life that belongs to him.... It belongs to the peculiar human condition that every life could have been different from the one it was [No entendemos bien la vida efectiva del prójimo si no la vemos contrastando con la línea de otra vida suya posible.... Pertenece a la extraña condición humana que toda vida podía haber sido distinta de la que fue].” (PVG, 641)

At the same time, the application of imagination in the analysis of life should not mean that understanding is transferred to the realm of irresponsible fancy. On the contrary, the possibilities the biographer needs to take into consideration are precisely real possibilities of life and not pure illusions. By examining possibilities, Ortega places considerable stress on careful pondering, on deliberation; we must take possibilities into account, we have to make Gedankenex-

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41 Ortega, “Preludio a un Goya,” 818.
periments—these are similar to the factual experiments of the natural scientist—and have to set up hypotheses. In his essays on Goya, he says:

There is no history without data, without confirmed facts. But history does not consist of data. Their mission is, first, to make us imagine hypotheses that explain and interpret them because each fact is equivocal in itself and, second, to confirm or negate these hypotheses [No hay historia sin datos, sin hechos comprobados. Pero la historia no consiste en los datos. La misión de éstos es, primero, obligarnos a imaginar hipótesis que los expliquen, que los interpreten, porque todo hecho es por sí equívoco, y segundo, confirmar o invalidar esas hipótesis].”

With this procedure, Ortega hopes to realize two aims at the same time. On the one hand, the pondering of possibilities, the application of hypothesis, etc., endows the analysis with a liveliness that is out of reach for a traditional biography. On the other hand, these steps guarantee strict scientific character as well. The Spanish philosopher firmly believes in the exactness and truth of historical and artistic knowledge and he thinks that a strict hermeneutical method can give us reliable results in the humanities as well. That is why he sometimes speaks of the algebra of life: “Biography, taken in this sense, loses the pleasant and fluid appearance of a narration and, in spite of the fact that ultimately it remains the same, takes on an analytical aspect that is rather complicated and is finally converted into the algebra of a human life [La biografía, tratada así, pierde su agradable y fluida apariencia de narración y, a pesar de que en el fondo sigue siéndolo, toma un aspecto analítico bastante complicado, convirtiéndose en el álgebra de una vida humana].”

At the same time, this scientific striving in the field of the hermeneutics of life-philosophy calls attention to a fundamental weakness of the interpreter’s method. Namely, he never examines, never challenges the validity of his own starting-point, his own historicity. It seems as if the interpreter himself stood apart from the process of knowing, as if his person lacked those possibilities that he employs so thoroughly during the interpretation. What is missing is the dialogical perspective that Gadamer, in his theory of the “fusion of horizons,” will make a new methodological principle of hermeneutics. So

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42 Ibid., 765.
43 Ibid., 818.
Ortega, in spite of his highly original conception of aesthetics, remains, *in this sense*, a follower of Dilthey’s earlier hermeneutics.

**Concluding Remarks**

Ortega’s investigations concerning the relation between Spanish art and culture and the art and culture of the rest of Europe are really instructive in many respects.

First, and foremost, Ortega’s hermeneutics established a new and up-to-date methodology in Spain in order to interpret the treasures of Spanish art from a European perspective. The application of the new method also had followers among the best art historians: we can think, for example, of the works of Enrique Lafuente Ferrari.44 Second, in these late writings Ortega has made Spanish historians of art aware of the need to revise their common views concerning “Spanish painting” as such. The following lines of his study on Goya are strictly programmatic in this sense:

So I ask, whether in order to give a worthwhile history of Spanish art, it would be fitting to invert the usual approach and to start from this double deed: that Spanish painting has usually been deplorable and, that, nevertheless, in Spain there emerged a few giant painters *[Pregunto, pues, si para elaborar una historia del arte español que merezca la pena no convendría volver del revés la usada y partir de este doble hecho: que la pintura española ha sido normalmente pésima y que, sin embargo, en España han surgido unos cuantos pintores gigantescos]*.45

Third, Ortega stresses that Spanish historians of art should not hesitate to reveal those values that made Spanish painting, during certain periods, a leading artistic power in Europe. Ortega himself provides a good example: his comparison of Velázquez’s *pictorial* production with Descartes’ *philosophical* one is counted as one of the most brilliant results of his hermeneutics. His formal starting-point is that Descartes and Velázquez belong to the same generation—in the area of *thinking* and *painting*, respectively. And he goes on like this: “The disciplines in which the two figures we are dealing with worked, could not be more distant – they are almost on the opposite

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45 Ortega, “Preludio a un Goya,” 762.
poles of culture. However, I find an exemplary parallelism between these two human beings [Las disciplinas en que ambos se ocupaban no pueden ser más distantes—son casi los dos opuestos polos de la cultura. Sin embargo, yo encuentro un ejemplar paralelismo entre estos dos hombres].” (PVG, 651) In this context, Ortega specifies only two elements of this parallel. First, both of them turned against the petrified tradition of their time—Descartes against the scholastic tradition, Velázquez against traditional Italian painting, which had lost its last pictorial possibilities by that time. The second circumstance concerns innovation: both of them accomplished an important reductive turn in their respective fields: “Just as Descartes reduces thought to rationalism, Velázquez reduces painting to visuality. Both focus the activity of culture to immediate reality. Both are of this world and orient themselves towards the future [Como Descartes reduce el pensamiento a racionalidad, Velázquez reduce la pintura a visualidad. Ambos enfocan la actividad de la cultura sobre la inmediata realidad. Ambos son cismundanos y se orientan hacia el futuro].” (PVG, 652)

Sharing an analogy that can summarize Ortega’s significance for Spain may be an appropriate way to conclude this analysis. Just as Velázquez’s painting was perhaps the most important cultural tie between Spain and Europe in the 17th century, similarly Ortega’s aesthetics and philosophy provide the nexus where Spanish reality and contemporary European culture could be united in a most authentic way in the 20th century.

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46 There is much more about this topic in “Sobre el punto de vista en el artes,” Obras Completas, Vol. 5, 160–73.