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JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET’S LEGENDARY THOUGHT**

AN OVERVIEW OF LIFE AS A PHILOSOPHICAL QUERY

CARRIAZO RUIZ, J. R. 2023. *ORTEGA: VIDAS, OBRAS, LEYENDAS* [IN SPANISH]. MADRID: GRUPO ANAYA

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Quede dicha esta idea, que merece meditación para la comprensión del hombre como biografía (Zamora Bonilla, 2002: 616).

Toda vida—decía mi padre hablando de Goethe—es más o menos una ruina entre cuyos escombros tenemos que descubrir lo que aquella persona tenía que haber sido. [...] Mi padre fue poco amigo de los recuerdos (Ortega Spottorno, 2002: 131–132).

Contrary to popular belief, life cannot simply be defined as a mere linear chain of events throughout time. Instead, it should be understood as a complex ensemble of creations, innovations, changes and growth. Therefore, the task of reconstructing someone’s life should not be reduced to the recollection and categorization of events within certain timeframes. In order to do justice to someone’s true identity, a biography should take into account the multiplicity of circumstances that have transpired and, inevitably, shaped someone’s lifetime. The true purpose of a biography, then, is not to enlist different timeframes of a person’s existence—like an ordinary table of contents—it should tell an all encompassing story about someone’s journey and making of their “true” self. In other words, the multiplicity within this “story telling” should be able to reflect a person’s singularity.

Specifically, writing a biography for someone like José Ortega y Gasset—who continuously upheld the philosophical importance of circumstance within one’s self—should not fall short of this requirement. In light of

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this, José Ramón Carriazo Ruiz offers an incredibly detailed and extensive insight into Ortega y Gasset's life in his book: *Ortega: Vidas, obras, leyendas*. With the help of bibliographical sources like personal letters, interviews, articles and books, this biography reveals different lenses, perspectives and dimensions that influenced Ortega's vital projects. Consequently, Carriazo Ruiz is able to portray the evolution of his political, anthropological and philosophical ideologies, as well the circumstances that surrounded and affected it. By doing so, this book depicts Ortega as a much more complex and multifaceted philosopher, whose intellectual production had a profound impact on society. Yet, at the same time, it shows how society's circumstances equally defined him.

Moreover, in order to capture Ortega's identity way beyond the usual interpretations, Carriazo claims he employed three main themes throughout the book. Firstly, the book covers Ortega's multiple "lives": his experiences, projects, adventures... Secondly, it discusses the Philosopher's writings: his books, articles, essays, etc. Thirdly, the biography includes the "legendary Ortega": the myth and character that has emerged due to different interpretations and analyses. Everyone that has heard of Ortega — even Carriazo himself — has gotten to know of Ortega as the legend before truly learning about his life and work. Hence, according to Carriazo, with the help of multiple perspectives and sources, this biography is an attempt to discover the truth that lies beneath the legend. In a true *orteguian* nature — which argues that the human self is not a fully autonomous, self-contained being, which is why it cannot be understood without its circumstance — this biography seeks to understand Ortega's life and self by focusing on his vital context.

In consonance with his philosophical belief that human beings are capable of creating and fulfilling their own vital projects, Ortega lived a life filled with creativity, purpose and drive. As Carriazo accurately depicts in this book, the Philosopher's fruitful life developed and expanded into many branches within its reach. Unsurprisingly, Ortega's lifelong interests were never exclusively philosophical. As a matter of fact, in addition to philosophy, Ortega pursued careers within journalism, politics, and education as well. However, the reason for this wide variety of endeavors throughout his life was his origin. By the time Ortega was born in 1883, his family had already maintained a long history with journalism, politics and academics. As Carriazo states, Ortega was the son, grandson, nephew, father and grandfather of politicians and journalists. Subsequently, it only seemed natural Ortega would dedicate a big part of his life to these two disciplines.

In addition to these “inevitable” interests, Ortega pursued his degree of Philosophy at *Universidad Central* in Madrid. According to Carriazo, Ortega’s philosophical ideologies evolved from Cohen and Natorp’s neo-kantianism — which he acquired during his multiple stays in Germany between 1905 and 1911 — to Husserl’s phenomenology, as well as from scholars like Scheler, Brentano and von Uexküll. By showing Ortega’s discussions, support and criticism towards other philosophers, Carriazo is also able to show how Ortega’s own philosophy was slowly taking form because of his life’s circumstances. Although initially he was captivated by neo-kantian objective idealism — which he considered could solve spanish subjectivism — Ortega eventually distanced himself from it. Slowly, due to his political experiences in Spain, in addition to his own philosophical, scientific and anthropological readings, Ortega would create his own philosophy. In an attempt to avoid falling into any philosophical extremes — like rationalism or vitalism — Ortega’s philosophy emphasizes the junction between the individual and their circumstance. Furthermore, he created the concept of “vital reason,” which, in contrast to absolute reason, is capable of integrating concrete realities with rational thought. As a result, Ortega concluded that human existence is a personal project influenced by social, historical and cultural contexts.

According to Carriazo, while Ortega’s philosophical knowledge and insight were developing and growing, his involvement in the public world of journalism and politics was equally as important. Ortega’s journey in journalism began very early on, when he started publishing articles on *El Imparcial* — his family’s successful newspaper — during his first stay in Germany. Nonetheless, not only would he collaborate in a variety of journals and newspapers throughout his life — for example, *La Nación*, an argentinian newspaper — he would also embark on numerous other projects where he would either be founder, leader or active participant. Examples of this include: *Liga de Educación Política* and *España; Europa; El Espectador*, an academically and intellectually oriented journal; *El Sol*, a journal with intellectual and political importance within Spain; *Calpe-Espasa*, a spaniard and latin american editorial; and *Revista Occidente*, an academic journal — which Ortega considered his most personal and passionate-driven project — that featured the most groundbreaking thinkers and theories of that time period. At times, many of these endeavors were abandoned due to his personal circumstances, but, after a while, he would embark on another project with different purposes.

A similar thing occurred with Ortega's involvement in politics, directly and intimately related to his involvement in the press. Ortega was profoundly passionate about Spain's identity, history, and future, thus his active participation in Spain's press would also usually be accompanied by his investment and active participation in its politics. According to Ortega, Spain needed to be completely transformed and renewed due to its utter absence of cultural depth. As a solution, Ortega proposed, especially in his earlier years, the Europeanization of Spain, which meant the country needed to pursue Germany's ideals. However, later in his life, he would also insist on the need to incorporate Spain's spirit into Europe's culture. That being said, Carriazo emphasizes the interdependence between journalism and politics in Ortega: his press articles would always serve as an outlet for his political views, judgments, and proposals. Nevertheless, whenever he felt disillusioned and disheartened by the political climate of his country, he would distance himself from politics and, consequently, at times, from journalism as well. Instead, he would then turn to his philosophical reflections and inquiries.

Defined by his ever-changing circumstances, Ortega would manifest his constant ideological and vital evolution in his writings. During his lifetime, he wrote many books—which were usually a collection of already published essays or articles—about philosophy, politics, anthropology, art, etc. Among all of his books, there were some that particularly stood out because of the unprecedented ideas that were exposed. For example, *Meditaciones del Quijote* (1914), his first book, already manifested some of the central concepts in his philosophy, such as: circumstance, perspectivism, and culture. Later on, he published *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (1923), which was centered around the concepts of vital reason and the historical shift between generations. Also, in *La rebelión de las masas* (1930), Ortega offers a cultural diagnosis of modern society through concepts like technology and “mass man.” These works show a slow but steady progress towards what would constitute one of the most influential philosophies of the twentieth century. Undoubtedly, Ortega published many other works that were highly innovative.

Along with his collaboration in international and national conferences—like the ones in Argentina and Uruguay, in which he participated—his writings increased Ortega's acclaim in Spain, Europe, the United States of America and Latin America. According to Carriazo, the Spanish youth already considered Ortega as the revolutionary image of their generation during his mid-twenties. Even so, his prominence grew even further because of his writings and speeches, his political stance, and his presence within intellectual circles at the time. Certainly, because of this, Ortega also

had to undergo a lot of scrutiny, criticism and opposition from many thinkers and intellectuals either because of his philosophical ideas or his political positionings (or lack thereof). Needless to say, Carriazo insists that these widespread and controversial interpretations of his work and his persona would lead to the mythification of Ortega y Gasset. Likewise, future studies into his work and his life would add supplementary layers to this legendary image.

In this biography, Ortega's life is presented in varied, eclectic, even contradictory ways. Perhaps only in this manner is Carriazo able to truly do justice to the Philosopher's life, identity and work. As Ortega himself said: "Porque, no se dude, toda vida es secreto y jeroglifo. De aquí la biografía sea siempre un albur de la intuición. No hay método seguro para acertar con la clave arcana de una existencia ajena" (Ortega y Gasset, 2004/2010: 89).

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