

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

COLORADO SEMINARY

College of Arts and Sciences
Department of Philosophy
University Park, Denver, Colorado 80210

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Professor Jose Ferrater Mora
Department of Philosophy
Bryn Mawr College
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

Dear Professor Ferrater Mora:

You may remember our correspondence of almost nine years ago. I was then trying to entice you to Denver for a quarter or for a semester. I still regret that we were not successful. At that time, you sent me a copy of your book (Man at the Crossroads) and some articles, all of which I have enjoyed greatly, although I fear that I have not responded as I should have.

I am writing now about something else. I am now embarked, perhaps too hurriedly but certainly after too long a delay, on work in Spanish and Spanish-American philosophy. As for the present, I have been working up a seminar on Ortega y Gasset for our Spring quarter. I have been reading extensively in his Obras Completas, and I have several questions I would like to ask you, some of them because I am ill-acquainted with recent continental philosophy.

First, a matter of style. I have reached the place where I can use Spanish fairly well. I can converse and lecture in Spanish reasonably well, and I can read and write with decent fluency. Yet I still do not feel that I read Ortega with genuine fluency. I have more trouble with him than I do with any other contemporary Hispanic writer (or even with Cervantes), other than the indianistas, who of course draw on special vocabularies. I have often heard people speak of Ortega as pedantic. I don't find him so, perhaps because, not being Spanish or learned in Spanish, I don't know when his vocabulary is precise, and when it may be precious. His vocabulary is awesome. But the more I read him carefully, the more I find precision in the overtones of his vocabulary and syntax. Did he force these effects, or did they come with his "natural" discipline? My impression is clearly the latter, but I want to check it with you.

Another point regarding style. It seems to me that Ortega was somewhat less "witty" or playful after a period around 1930, give or take a few years. His later style was no less elegant, but it seems to me that in his later writing he was more concentrated on the ideas themselves and less on the way he phrased them. Am I right? Or is this simply an impression derived from those selected things I have read?

Another matter: I have been disturbed by the seeming lack of interest by my Hispano - American friends in Ortega. I asked a Peruvian friend of mine (a philosopher) about this. His reply was, "Well, Ortega introduced us to the Germans." This disturbed me because it seemed to me that the Peruvians especially ought to steep themselves in Ortega's work. I mentioned this to an Argentinian friend. His reply was that the Peruvian was unfair, but that, after all, Ortega was mainly a literary figure. This disturbed me no less. But now I find that some Spanish

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friends have similar opinions. I am not so much concerned, now, with the Spaniards as with the Hispano-Americans. Do you have some ideas that can help me understand why they are so uninterested in Ortega? I have heard it said, in part by the Spaniards I referred to that Ortega spurned the new world. But I find none of this in his writings. So far as I have read, he is less hard on the new world than on Spain.

Still another matter, one that pertains more directly to Ortega. As I mentioned, I am not at home with continental philosophy. I am not ignorant of it. I just don't know it the way I do North American, English, and, to a lesser extent, Spanish, philosophy. You point out in your book on Ortega (published at Yale) that Ortega is not, strictly speaking, an existentialist. But I am struck by how close he is to some "existentialists" -- at the same time that, so far as I can judge, he anticipated them. I refer particularly to Heidegger and Sartre. You mention in your book that his relation to Heidegger was complex. I'm not asking for a detailed response, of course. But I'd be grateful for some brief remarks. Ortega certainly says that his ideas about authenticity, freedom, and even "what is philosophy" were developed before Heidegger and others wrote about such ideas. And my impression is that Ortega had indeed been working with those ideas for some time. Is this my ignorance, his amor propio, or something else -- or was he as far ahead of the "official" existentialists as I believe him to be?

In your book on Ortega, you suggest a distinction between his "perspectivism" and his "ratio-vitalism", dating from around 1923-24. And yet, Ortega, in What is Philosophy, eludes to perspectivism as still his own theory. And there are other places, although I am not now looking for them, where I'm sure he develops "perspectivism" after 1924. I have also not checked your text. I may be making a problem where there is none. Still, I'd like to have your response to this.

And yet one other matter. One of the things that keeps bringing me back to Ortega is his sense of the concrete. And yet, in a way, it is a vague sense of the concrete. For example, I do not learn from him, or from his editors, why he had to leave the University of Madrid in order to give the lectures on "What is Philosophy?" I admire this in a way, and yet I am bothered. Also, I have not found an identifiable reference to the Civil War in Spain, although Ortega has lengthy observations about World War I.

I made some cryptic notes about "Adán en el paraiso," but my notes are so cryptic, and my memory is so cold, that on the whole I can't remember what I wanted to ask you. The exceptions have to do with "Rubín de Cendoya" and "Valpius," whom I take to be fictitious personages. Am I right? Perhaps I can revive the other questions at another time.

Cordially,


Francis Myers

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