**FOREWORD**

José Ortega y Gasset was doubtless the greatest philosophical essayist of the first half of the twentieth century. But as an essayist, he practiced a type of philosophy that stands outside of the mainstream of what has counted as philosophical writing. Indeed, one might be inclined to think of the essays gathered in this volume as the work of a “soft thinker” or casual philosopher, rather than as the effort of a rigorous intellectual or as the products of systematic reasoning. Likewise, many of his topics, which here would be placed within the broad category of “aesthetics” (i.e., art and culture), stand outside of the most prominent philosophical concerns. He reasons and he writes in a different idiom, one that owes more to the tradition of the philosophical essay than to that of the treatise. His lineage traces back to Francis Bacon and to Bacon’s predecessor, Montaigne, rather than to the methodical thinking of Descartes or to the program of philosophical critique developed by Kant. The writings of his near contemporary George Santayana and the early works of the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács—especially the pieces published in *Soul and Form* (1908) and the highly influential *Theory of the Novel* (1914–15)—are closer kin than Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (1921) or Russell and Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica* (1910–13). But the very ease with which Ortega approaches his subjects can prove disorienting. From the very first to the last, from “The Dehumanization of Art” to “In Search of Goethe from Within” and “The Self and the Other,” these essays seem to be filled with impressionistic judgments, ad hoc claims, and disconnected assertions, leading to weighty declarations that seem unsupported by any systematic method of argument or procedure for gathering evidence. For all these reasons and more, it would be easy to regard this as a collection
of relatively lightweight pieces and simply to pick and choose from their many aperçus the ones that seem most interesting, and leave it at that.

This would be a mistake, and proof of the pudding lies in part in the fact that these essays have hardly been ignored. “The Dehumanization of Art” has drawn a steady stream of attention and has enlightened as many critics as it has rankled. One of my own most vivid memories of the essay is from a conversation many years ago with the Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz. We were speaking about the avant-gardes, and I brought up Ortega’s essay, to which Paz responded that in spite of Ortega’s overall brilliance, he had been “completely mistaken” in his views in “The Dehumanization of Art.” Whether Ortega was in fact mistaken depends as much on one’s opinions about the art that was new in the early part of the twentieth century as it does on one’s reaction to the title of the essay, which has the distinctive ability to mislead. Paz had the advantage of hindsight in judging the essay, as we do. With history behind us, it’s hard to defend Ortega’s pronouncement that the new art had produced nothing of value; and yet it’s entirely possible to understand the deeper principles at work behind the unfortunately phrased distinction between “humanized” and “dehumanized” art. The terms do not mean what they seem on the surface to say, but reading the other essays in this volume can certainly help make sense of them.

For example, the principles underlying the contrast between “humanized” and “dehumanized” art run throughout the wide-ranging essay “On Point of View in the Arts,” which is far less tendentious in its framing. In that essay, Ortega takes us on a guided tour of Western art history, oriented by the principle of what it means to see things through perspectives that range between “close
up” and “far away.” The notion is a schematized one but has shown itself to be remarkably apt and enduring. Similarly, Ortega’s “Notes on the Novel” epitomizes a set of fundamental views about the relationship between lived human experience and the novel as a genre—views that remained current and vibrant at least until structuralism became prominent in critical circles. Now, as critics struggle to reckon with some of the things that structuralism and its descendant movements could not grasp (the qualitative nature of human experience not least among them), Ortega’s essay once again seems relevant. His essay on Goethe, written in honor of the centenary of Goethe’s death, gained sufficient traction in Spanish, in English, and in German to displace some long-held views about Goethe and also to restore the importance of biography in understanding a writer’s work.

A few words about Ortega’s own biography may help shed some additional light on these essays. Ortega did not set out to be a professional philosopher. (His affinity for Goethe, who truly was a polymath, is telling.) Indeed, there is something about the very idea of a “professional philosopher” that is anathema to Ortega’s way of thinking about human beings in the world. Ortega came from a newspaper family. His father was director of El Imparcial, a paper owned by the family of his mother, Dolores Gasset. He grew up as a liberally educated member of the upper middle class and was drawn to participate in politics, which in fact he did during the Second Spanish Republic, in the years preceding Franco’s rise to power. But he also found his way to formal studies in philosophy, earning a Ph.D. from the University of Madrid in 1905 and subsequently taking up postdoctoral work in Germany. Ortega spent the years 1905–7 at various locations in Germany, but most significantly at Marburg, where he was deeply influenced by the
neo-Kantianism of Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp. He studied Kant and the history of philosophy with Cohen and pursued psychology with Natorp. Cohen's engagement with Kant's concept of "experience" was crucial for Ortega's intellectual development, but it was an insight into the importance of "lived experience" that took Ortega well beyond Cohen's commitment to a neo-Kantian transcendental logic. What Ortega grasped was that the vital world of life, experienced from within, was something that transcendental logic was bound to miss. Likewise, he saw that a strictly empirical approach to the world would be unable to give a satisfactory account of experience. Well in advance of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who is better known in this regard, Ortega was fond of saying that human beings have no nature, but that they do have history, which emerges from lived experience.

The notion of experience is the pedal tone that keeps all the essays in this volume resonating in the same key. "The Dehumanization of Art" is certainly the most famous, but potentially the most misleading of all of these. It may mislead because Ortega seems both to be explicitly critical of the "new art" and yet also driven to understand it. When the "Dehumanization of Art" was published in 1925, Ortega was forty-two years old. The art he references was produced beginning roughly twenty years earlier, which is to say during Ortega's young adulthood. But the "new art," the art of the avant-gardes, was not predominantly Spanish peninsular art (though some was Catalan), and it was not something for which Ortega felt a natural affinity, however significant he might have found it. In characterizing the "new art," he gives voice to sentiments that were seldom recognized among the proponents of the avant-gardes, though widely held elsewhere—for example, that the "new art" was elitist, difficult to understand, and inaccessible to ordinary people. The new art
troubles him, but he also uses it as a lens through which to understand some basic things about art itself.

Indeed, among the most memorable and enduring passages of this essay is a thought-experiment in phenomenology, the principle of which revolves around the idea of aesthetic “distance,” that is, being emotionally or experientially near to or distant from a particular event (he chooses the example of a tragic scene). The framework matters more than the particulars. The examples proliferate throughout the essays in this volume. To be wholly engaged with something in the world in ways that range from emotionally “near” to emotionally “distant” is an idea that resounds with the essay “On Point of View in the Arts” and with many other, later ideas about art and aesthetics. The contrast between near and far runs parallel to the contrast between the “realist” novel and the “self-conscious” novel, and to the distinction between “looking at” a scene as if through a clear window, and looking at the window-panes and frames, through which one sees the scene beyond. Ortega suggests that the more “modern” the art, the more it distances itself from lived experience, and the more art itself is foregrounded. Indeed, he goes so far as to opine that the “new art” declares the infiltration of lived experience to be taboo.

And yet, in spite of resistances rooted in matters of taste and shaped without the benefit of hindsight, Ortega faces the fact that the new art had come to displace the old. Paintings like Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907) may have been disturbing for the ways in which they treat the human form, but that is not what “dehumanized” means, and Ortega recognizes that such works cannot be dismissed out of hand. He understood the broad cultural significance of the new art and recognized that it had something important to say about the contemporary historical age. In these
essays, he honors a commitment to the principle that art can be a source of insight into historical truth in ways that other approaches to history (e.g., positivism) cannot. Modern art may well appear to have divested itself of “lived experience,” and yet it remains aesthetically valid and historically truthful. It tells a truth about modern experience even in spite of itself, and the core of this truth lies in irony: while art may liberate itself from direct contact with the rough ground of experience, it nonetheless remains self-consciously aware of that distance. This is not so much a resistance to experience as it is a new kind of experience, one that anticipates what much later thinkers would describe as the “decentering of the subject.” If one were to re-title the subject of the essay today, it would be about “post-humanist” art.

“The Dehumanization of Art” is the most notorious essay in this volume because of the controversies it has stirred, but it would be unfortunate to overlook the others. They are in many ways explorations of contrastive cases—which where the arts are engaged with lived experience rather than distanced from it—even as they grapple with difficulties presented by the modern world. The example of the novel is a case in point. Ortega’s essay takes as its starting point the problem we have come to know as the “end of the novel,” which is to say the apparent exhaustion of a form that once seemed absolutely central to the arts. The problem is pivotal to understanding the core of the novel as a genre. That core lies not in anything related to plot (though some minimal action is of course necessary for any novel) but in what Ortega calls the characters’ “pure living.” This “pure living” is not that of a Kantian being “in itself” but rather more like Heidegger’s “being in the world.” “Pure living” indicates not just that one exists, but how one lives, which necessarily happens in some milieu. At its best, the novel works toward, not from, definitions of character; it shows rather than stipulates,
and if and when it cannot show, it is bound to fail. Ortega’s essay on Goethe is wholly complementary to what he has to say about the purpose of the novel. Literary history and the history of philosophy have rendered Goethe abstract. Ortega re-creates him as the leading character of a novel that is his life (his biography).

One may reasonably wonder why we should turn to art at all if lived experience is the point. Doesn’t all art stand at some remove from lived experience? Isn’t art always involved in giving form to experience, which results in something other than experience itself? These are perennial questions, and the answer to them stands at the very core of this volume. Ortega states it explicitly in the essay on point of view in the arts. Art is nothing without form, and by virtue of form, art gives us a more ample and complete view of things than can be obtained through our ordinary intercourse with them. It is, in the end, something that humanizes us.

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