

## ONE

# Existentialism as Pause and Occasion

### *The Appropriations of el Grupo Hiperión*

**T**he event of existentialism's appearance in Mexico in the 1940s could be credited to a variety of sources: lectures by Spanish exiles and philosophers such as Juan David García Bacca (1901–1992) and José Gaos (1900–1969), who had fled Spain at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War of 1937 (Gaos 1954); the worldwide popularity of the works of Jean-Paul Sartre or Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and even of Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*; or Mexican intellectuals themselves who traveled to France and Germany and brought with them an unwavering enthusiasm for the new philosophical "trend" (Ruanova 1982; Ziri6n Quijano 2004; Hurtado 2006, 2007). But, arguably, what truly announced existentialism's arrival in Mexico was a series of lectures on French existentialism given by members of El Grupo Hiperi6n (the Hyperion group) in the spring of 1948 at El Instituto Franc6s de Am6rica Latina (IFAL, French Institute of Latin America), together with the publication, of the lectures and related essays, in 1948 and 1949 in the journal *Filosofía y Letras* (fall 1948, spring and fall 1949). These texts, by philosophers Emilio Uranga, Jorge Portilla, Joaquín Sánchez Macgr6gor, Luis Villoro, and Ricardo Guerra, will be the subject of the present chapter.<sup>1</sup>

With one exception, Jorge Portilla, I will not touch on the philosopher's life or contributions beyond the IFAL conferences. I will leave that for another time or to other, more capable, narrators. My focus here will be on those conferences and on whatever interpretive strategy was at play in their readings of the French existentialists. With that said, while philosophical historians might consider these lectures mere attempts to abbreviate and introduce French existentialism to a Mexican audience, I argue that it is imperative to approach each essay as a unique *reading* motivated by a certain purpose and aim of vital significance, that is, as an *appropriation*. As Emilio Uranga puts it in his own reading of Merleau-Ponty, "In these lectures on French existentialism we will offer a series of perspectives [*enfoques*] regarding existentialism, *guided toward* . . . the realization of a concrete analysis of the manner of being of the Mexican" (Uranga 1948, 224, emphasis mine).<sup>2</sup> In other words, French existentialism serves as a point of departure, an occasion, for reflection into an intersubjective complex or circumstance that demands its own thinking, its own situated and organic *enfoques*—perspectives, approaches, conceptual matrices, intentions, and so on—that, while occasioned by a reading of and into the existentialist texts, emerge from and are tied to that intersubjective complex or circumstance and are guided toward its own transformative analysis.

Those who participated in the IFAL conferences shared similar presuppositions about the value of existentialism for Mexican life, even if they did not share a defined and determinate *enfoque*. Their philosophical aspirations were representative of an "interpretive community," to use a notion employed by Stanley Fish. As such, they read the existentialist texts through "interpretive strategies" that, while not explicitly laid out in advance, nonetheless filtered or determined their interventions (Fish 1980). Portilla, for instance, recognizes the pull of his interpretive community and confesses the difficulty of reading purely, or objectively. Fourteen years after the IFAL conferences, and while lecturing on another existentialist, albeit a German one, Thomas Mann, he says: "While aspiring to absolute objectivity, any lecturer on [Mann's] work would likewise make a focused selection of themes in which it would be extremely difficult to separate objective from subjective motivations" (Portilla [1966] 1984, 184). Hence, what we get from the readings here discussed, or those that come later, is not a simple summary or repetition of ideas but an interested appropriation (in the sense discussed in the introduction), or an attempt to, as we say, "make one's own."

Why French existentialism? Elsewhere, in a moment of reflection, Uranga explains that in the early 1940s, when the Spanish exile José Gaos first began lecturing on Heidegger, “being an existentialist meant being a Heideggerian” (2013a, 173). However, the appearance of Sartrean existentialism drove the younger generation, thirsty for novelty, to reevaluate their allegiances. Against the protests of their teacher, Gaos, members of Hyperion gravitated toward Sartre and French existentialism because, as Uranga recalls, Sartre offers a “theory of social relations, a pedagogy, a theory of history, an ethics, and an idea of man . . . while Heideggerians break up the matter [*parten el cabello*] in eight parts, to see in which of those is the human person [*el hombre*] going to remain as ‘the guardian of the nothing’ or the ‘shepherd of being’” (2013a, 175). Clearly, the well-publicized awkwardness and elusiveness of Heidegger’s writings had something to do with choosing Sartre, or French existentialism (as Sartre will not be the only French philosopher to be considered) over Heidegger. But it also had to do with which of these two ways of thinking was more suitable for “saving” or “liberating” the Mexican circumstance, or that concrete situation familiar to all Mexicans. In a column for a Mexico City daily, *México en la Cultura*, Uranga is surprisingly blunt: the reason for appealing to Sartre over Heidegger is that the latter’s style is “esoteric,” “hermetic,” “only for the initiated,” and unable to be applied (1949b, 3). On the other hand, Sartre offers a theory of responsibility that can be appropriated for the sake of present crises, and so the choice is made in the latter’s favor. In another column for the same daily, titled “Dos existencialismos” (Two existentialisms), Uranga reiterates the commitment to Sartre’s vision of this philosophy: “[Sartre’s] words, far from disaffecting us, consolidated, as few testimonies had, our path. From then on we knew, not without joy, that the responsibility for a particular task had been recognized. I am not afraid to declare that the word most loved by our generation is precisely *responsibility*. To assume a responsibility almost sounds like a generation theme, a theme that also defines the generation itself” (1949a, 3).

In this chapter, my focus will be on the lectures given by Uranga, Villoro, and Portilla. However, I will begin with a brief summary of Macgrégor’s and Guerra’s lectures in an effort to set a tone. The tone, or *mood*, in which I approach my reading of the Mexican existentialists will structure and dictate my focus, or *enfoque*. As a reader of Mexican philosophy, who finds in their readings models to emulate for the sake of saving my own circumstance as a contemporary Latino/a in the United

States, a literal, nonviolent reading holds no value. Thus I spend more time reflecting on those texts that offer more in terms of orientation. Following Stanley Cavell's reading of Ralph Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, I read el Grupo Hiperión, and particularly Uranga, Portilla, Villoro, and Leopoldo Zea, as "philosophers of direction, orienters, tirelessly prompting us to be on our way, endlessly asking us where we stand, what it is we face" (Cavell 2003, 20).

### SETTING A TONE: JOAQUÍN SÁNCHEZ MACGRÉGOR AND RICARDO GUERRA

#### *Unproblematic Readings*

The lecture delivered by Ricardo Guerra (1927–2007) at the French Institute is not without its merits. My reasons for omitting that lecture from a fuller account of what I like to think of as the *inauguration* of existentialism in Mexico has to do with what this lecture lacks, namely, a particular enfoque or perspective. Sure, philosophy, as traditionally conceived and laid out by its long history and by its advocates, cares little about enfoque, so that biography, situation, circumstance, or historical milieu purportedly plays an insignificant role, if any, on its nature and scope. However, I insist that this enfoque is unavoidable, that we are always already entangled in ideologies and prejudices, crises and emergencies, ways of life and epistemological orientations that necessarily structure our interests and color our ideas. To try to go beyond that, to transcend that which is most immediate, seems, to me, an exercise in intellectual arrogance—a stubborn wish to keep philosophy "pure" and "universal," even if universality and purity is a Western invention that, in philosophy at least, seems hard to cash out (more on this in chapter 3).

Guerra's essay is structured as a glossary of Sartrean terms from *Being and Nothingness*. He does an admirable job of defining and textually supporting his definitions. Ironically, the finest moments in the essay treat the significance of the "situation" for a proper articulation of our existential condition. Paraphrasing Sartre, Guerra says, "all of my projects, my choices, can be understood from the point of view of an overall project. . . . This project is free, global . . . fundamental . . . [and] must be continuously reaffirmed" (1948, 307). This project is necessarily embedded in a situation that includes, according to Sartre, "my place, my body,

my past, my position . . . that is, my fundamental relation to another” (309). This suggests, of course, that the reading of Sartre will likewise be conditioned and affected by all of these elements. I am not suggesting that we, in fact, filter our readings of *all* philosophy in this way—say, of Immanuel Kant or G. E. Moore—but existential philosophy, especially of the Sartrean variety, invites such readings, filterings, and appropriations.

### *Macgrégor on Existential Ethics*

Joaquín Sánchez Macgrégor’s (1925–2008) contribution aims to answer the question posed in his chosen title, “¿Hay una moral existencialista?” (Is there an existentialist morality?). The urgency to locate an existentialist morality somewhere in the existentialist literature is due in large part to the common opinion that, taken to the extreme, existentialism would ultimately lead to rampant irresponsibility. If Mexican thinkers are going to offer existentialism as a conceptual matrix for the reinterpretation of their reality and, on this basis, prescribe transformative action for the sake of its future, then the assumption of responsibility for self and circumstance must be a cornerstone of that offering.

As expected, Macgrégor locates the sought after moral program in Sartre’s brand of existentialism. While both Sartre and Heidegger “oblige us to live philosophy in a radical and complete manner” and “animate thinking, turning it into the great business of our lives,” it is Sartre that offers a “practical existential philosophy” (1948, 267–268). This practical existential philosophy is a necessary addendum to an existential description that finds us all in a state of absolute freedom and solitude without God, or lacking a determinate anchor in anything stable and certain. “Every person [*hombre*],” writes Macgrégor, “in arriving at this valley of tears, *can* make of himself what he likes; no one else is responsible for him [*sic*]” (274). Alone, thrown into a miserable existence, the person can very well chose to avoid responsibility. Thus, an existentialist ethics boils down to this: every person is responsible for herself. Macgrégor, with a poet’s pen, paraphrases the Sartrean insight: “If the person is abandoned to her own will, it is best that she aims to rise up and care for her health. She must assume *responsibility*, and an authentic being-in-the-world will reveal itself to her in an instant. Recognizing her latent will power, she will begin a new ‘existence’ whose capabilities will be seen emerging in the very instant of self-choosing” (278). We see here

a faith in an existentialist description of human life. The revelation of thrownness and facticity carries with it a promise of liberation, as those idols (ideologies, institutions, self-perceptions) that control and oppress us are seen for what they are, post facto constructions superimposed on our facticity. Recognizing our “latent will,” we begin to dismantle these idols and reimagine a world for ourselves more conducive to our own human flourishing—to our “health.” And this is the ethical program that Macgrégor finds in his reading of Sartre.

Morality, and with it the political project of saving the circumstance, of empowering the intersubjective complex that history and violence have defined, comes with the assumption of responsibility: “Wanting to be free, but free to realize his liberty in the midst of a *concrete situation*, always caring for the freedom of the *other*, man negates his constitutive negation and *brings it to bear on* a tireless process of liberation that, if he wishes it to be effective, *must be* for life, since he is the bankrupt debtor of himself” (Macgrégor 1948, 278). In this way, the Mexican existentialists address their generation. If there is a future to be had, it must begin with taking on a vital responsibility for oneself and the care for others. The solemn picture of humans alone in the “valley of tears” is a caricature; the value of existentialism lies in the revelation that one is responsible for one’s future and that one’s future is tied, inescapably, to the future of others, that assuming this responsibility is an act of freedom and a vital necessity. As I will show below, Emilio Uranga, Luis Villoro, and Jorge Portilla focus their readings (their *enfoque*) on this insight. Against critics who charge that existentialism can only lead to radical individualism and nihilism, the Mexican existentialists find an orientation toward a vital project worth having, an insight that can still hold true today as we travel with philosophy farther and faster, more violently yet more sympathetically, into an age of suspicion and terror.

## EMILIO URANGA AND MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

### *A Purposeful Reading*

It is Emilio Uranga (1921–1988) who inaugurates the 1948 lecture series, and in the process provides a prolegomena to any future analysis of the being of Mexican being (it is, presumably, the first lecture of the series

to be delivered at IFAL). His lecture on Merleau-Ponty, far from being exegesis, is truly an appropriation. His reading is motivated, in the fullest sense of the word. As he puts it toward the end of the lecture:

In approaching a study of existentialism we have not done so in order to be followers of a trend [*dóciles a una moda*]. Another motive has guided us. Better yet, an effort or a project: the project to utilize, in the future, which we hope would be immanent, its tools or its conceptual repertoire so as to give a description of the Mexican person. More specifically, the value of existentialism to give a foundation to a systematic description of human existence, but not of human existence in the abstract, but of a situated human existence, in a situation, of a human existence framed in a determinate geographical *habitat*, in a social and cultural frame likewise determined and with a precise historical legacy. (1948, 240)

Straightforwardly, the preoccupation with existentialism will not be without consequence. At this time, in 1948, Uranga foresees a “project” to be realized. This project will be both phenomenological and existential: phenomenological in the sense that it will produce a description of the mode of being of Mexicans, and existential in the sense that it will be in the *spirit* of existentialism, locating the being to be described, that is, “a situated human existence,” in its cultural, geographical, and historical “habitat.” This existentially motivated phenomenological description of Mexican subjectivity and intersubjectivity will appropriate tools and concepts from the repertoire of existentialism and phenomenology, beginning, as does the lecture series, with Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

In the lecture, and subsequent published essay, Uranga restricts his comments to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (a work whose translation into Spanish Uranga would publish nine years later, in 1957). He begins by justifying the turn to French existentialism. Uranga then cites the historical influence of France on Mexican mind and culture, suggesting that while the Mexican spirit has, in the past, been enticed to adopt foreign ideas without question, the experiences of the last century (presumably, the failure of positivism, the 1910 Revolution, etc.) have served to engender within it a critical resolve, capable of resisting the urge to succumb to the temptations of the past. “We want to go to France to study her,” Uranga writes, “not so that she may teach us, but as a motive

for reflection and consideration” (1948, 220). In other words, reading French philosophy gives us an opportunity to read ourselves while we read it; this reading orients and sharpens our *enfoque*. According to Uranga, reading French existentialism is an occasion for thinking, just like reading Mexican philosophy is, for this reader, such an occasion. Uranga stresses this point by invoking Sartre: “Sartre reads Heidegger, and extracts from him a series of theses, and he also reads Husserl and Jaspers, and *reacts* and *contributes*” (220, emphasis mine). “Why,” Uranga asks, “can’t that manner of thinking” motivate *him*?

Before embarking on his “interpretation,” however, Uranga takes a moment to reflect on a certain metaphilosophical question that still preoccupies us today, namely, the question regarding the possibility of a Mexican philosophy. Certain writers, as I point out later (chapters 3 and 5), find the addition of “Mexican” to philosophy as an affront to their efforts at philosophizing; they think that adding “Mexican” somehow degrades philosophy, that what they are doing is *filosofía sin más*—simply philosophy, without apology and without prejudice. This reaction—because it is a *reaction*—has to do with the view that Mexico must continually affirm itself as equal in the pantheon of world cultures. These cultures, particularly Western culture, are thought to insist (in a version of the famous Hegelian argument) that, due to its relatively young history and subservient place in the community of power, Mexico is incapable of philosophizing beyond the immediacy of the given, or beyond the borders of its circumstance, beyond its regions. Uranga admits that this is a “hurtful caricature,” one that paints Mexican philosophers as mere “journalists” reporting on the adventures of thought but unqualified, indeed unprepared, to participate in humanity’s philosophical conversation as equals (1948, 223).

Uranga rejects this caricature on the basis that first, it assumes the absolute validity of philosophy as a detachment and separation from vital reality, and second, it forgets that philosophers are members of communities of readers who in the act of reading appropriate and transform what they appropriate for their own purposes. Mexican philosophy is both committed to its circumstance and, unavoidably, informed by the spirit of philosophy itself in acts of appropriation. Uranga cites Jorge Portilla’s call for the sort of violent strategy that will define the philosophical program: “[The task is] to know and soak up [*empaparse*] European philosophy, and [then to] philosophize like [Latin] Americans” (1948, 224). In other words, the reason, according to Portilla and Uranga, for confronting the European text is not simply to repeat what has been said and thought but

to evoke the philosophical urge, to encourage an upheaval of thought that will show what it is like to philosophize like *Americans*.

### *Embodiment and World*

In Uranga's reading, Merleau-Ponty represents the epitome of a new way of thinking that emphasizes embodiment and the unity of the human being with his/her environment. Merleau-Ponty's displacement of disembodied knowledge and his privileging of corporal presence serves as a model for a philosophizing that aims to ground thinking, philosophy, and ideas in a particular space-time. The "self,"<sup>3</sup> in this view, is immersed in a world; the "self" is embodied and, as such, tied to that world in complex and intimate ways; the "self" in the manner of its givenness is capable, Uranga writes, of "giving itself to the world in a definitive manner . . . in emotion" or "distancing itself from it" in fantasy (1948, 226). This means that the human being is, ambiguously, both what the philosophical tradition since Plato has said it was, namely, a being capable of transcending its own flesh, and also what is obvious to anyone who suffers, pains, or loves, namely, inseparable from that flesh. Uranga appreciates this ambiguity: "From this we can approach a more exact characterization of French existentialism as a philosophy of ambiguity, since on the one hand it insists in our engagement and commitment with the world, while on the other it emphasizes our capacity for disengagement or detachment, without ever insisting that either of these can be realized in a pure manner" (227).

Moreover, it is the ambiguity that existentialism reveals, or that it insists upon, that Uranga finds appealing for any future Mexican philosophy, as it holds as suspect any totalizing description of human existence. Totalizing descriptions that have traditionally privileged disengagement and detachment, Uranga will always maintain, must be the product of a purely western prejudice for universality that ignores the *accidental* emergence of human subjectivity in world history. In other words, meta-narratives that stipulate the possibility of a consciousness without a world make this stipulation for a reason, namely, so as to maintain a stranglehold on what counts as purity or truth in the face of the inevitable encroachment of *other* subjectivities and *other* knowledges. What Merleau-Ponty reveals is the difficulty in characterizing human life once and for all, and the necessity of including accounts of how an embodied self interacts with the world and arranges its projection toward a future.

*The Emotional Self*

Merleau-Ponty suggests that the method for existential analysis must be phenomenology. Hence, Uranga reads and appropriates Merleau-Ponty's own appropriation of Husserlian phenomenology toward an analysis, or future analysis, of the being of the Mexican. This analysis will involve a reduction to the essence of Mexican life, to what it means *to be* Mexican: "The originary lived experience [*vivencia originaria*] of Mexican-ness should serve to measure and calibrate the meaning of Mexicanness and to highlight the essential thematic nucleus that words, isolated or in context, poetry or prose, have organized, denominated or expressed" (Uranga 1948, 234). That is, the reduction will take us to the concrete life of Mexicans and not to abstract conceptual descriptions that project this being. For this reason, Uranga finds value in Merleau-Ponty's insertion of emotions into the phenomenological description, as emotions perfectly situate a concrete being in a physical, psychic, and historical circumstance.

A full description of the human being would be incomplete without an account of emotive life. Uranga says: "In emotion the body seeks to transform the world in a nontechnical manner, to transform itself in a magical way. . . . Emotion is body in the world" (1948, 225). In other words, emotion orients one in the world, and allows the world to be as one desires it to be in any particularly designated moment. "We cry and see the world as an exact correlate of our sadness," Uranga says, and "everything is darkness" (225). The implication here is that a change in our emotions can bring about a change in our world. Mexicans, he would go on to say in his *Análisis del ser del mexicano* (Analysis of Mexican being) four years later, are particularly emotional people. However, their emotions are not at all positive (a result, ultimately, of their ontological "accidentality" [more on this in chapters 3 and 5]). In Uranga's *Análisis* he lists some of these negative emotions as "abandon, futility, fragility, oscillation, sadness" (1952, 41). We can gather from this that if Mexicans change their attitudes, or their emotions, then they can change their world. He writes: "Emotion . . . places the world before the body, and bringing about a change of sense in the body it moves toward [bringing about] a new sense of the world" (225).<sup>4</sup>

Phenomenology, in Uranga's characterization, will return us to the life world and to the complexity of living in that world; it will not alienate us from these in abstractions or detachments far removed from what matters. "To reflect on the things is not to escape them, but to return,

amazed or perplexed, to have contact with the world from which we have emerged, and from which we have distanced ourselves so as to understand, by contrast, its inevitable aspect of contingency” (1948, 235–236). To return, always, to the world and the living person is the concrete destiny of the philosopher. In Uranga’s case, the world to which he returns is that conceptual, material, spiritual, and historical geographical space that is Mexico—to a world where emergencies are real, and where everything is significant, where all the facts, relations, and hopes complete a picture.<sup>5</sup>

### *Lessons*

Uranga’s reading of Merleau-Ponty is itself tasked with making a future phenomenology possible. And this phenomenology, in turn, is tasked with grounding the possibility for an authentic Mexican identity and a genuine Mexican community, one that sees itself in its full historical and ontological significance. “Philosophy,” Uranga says, “is not the reflection of a previous truth, but . . . the realization of the truth” (1948, 238). What is to be realized, or revealed, is that “the phenomenological world is the sense that emerges [*transparece y rezuma*] from my experiences and those of the other; it is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which give meaning unity, assuming my past experiences in my present experiences, assuming the experience of others in mine. The phenomenological world . . . is the foundation of being” (238). Said differently, the unity of meaning to be *realized* emerges from the ground up, from the real lived experience of the community, of the historical, social, and cultural interaction of the I *with* the other.

So what lesson can be taken away, ingested, and deployed from our reading of Uranga’s lecture? Generally this: philosophy, properly understood, is liberatory. But the proper understanding of philosophy-as-liberatory rests on a consciousness of our oppressions and a desire for liberation from them. The appropriation of philosophy must be made for the sake of our own ends, and with our own crises in mind. Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology gives itself as an appropriate tool for liberation, as it invites us to consider the whole of our being-in-the-world in all of its historical, psychological, political, and cultural complexity. In emphasizing our attachments it reveals those that are inescapable (e.g., attachments to our bodies and rootedness in world) from those that are (e.g., perspectives that profess completeness and totality). The

appropriation of these insights justifies actions and thinking that benefit our local projects. Moreover, once appropriated, that is, internalized in our readings and deployed for the sake of our lived experience, these lessons are concretized as tools available to all, applicable to a human condition that transcends the limits of our perspective and that can cross over to unfamiliar worlds.

Mexico, representing such a limited perspective or community, can confront its unique crises—whether they be crises of historical or national identity—empowered by an appropriated sense of universal limitation, with an understanding of necessary and unnecessary oppressions or attachments, that no one can claim to escape. This empowerment through appropriation manifests itself in acts of self-concern, or worry for the vital reality immediately before us. Uranga’s liberatory reading of Merleau-Ponty reveals the conditions for the possibility of overcoming historical oppressions, for instance, colonial representations of Mexicans as overly passionate and thus incapable of the kind of rational detachment that Western thinking preached was uniquely human. Uranga’s Merleau-Ponty shows that this kind of detachment is itself not human; the human is passionate and attached.

Finally, as representatives of communities in crisis (especially of the peripheral kind), moreover, the way in which Mexicans pursue and articulate these appropriations can be applicable to *all* communities—that is to say, other communities in crisis can appropriate these readings. Mexican philosophy, in this way, avails itself to others that occupy a different cultural space and, as is the case with this reader, a different historical moment. Thus, it transcends a provincialism or regionalism and aspires to a human struggle that labors and liberates in invisible spaces beyond a determined purview.

## LUIS VILLORO ON SITUATIONAL EXISTENCE

### *Die Grundfrage*

Luis Villoro (1922–2014), who would go on to become one of Mexico’s most celebrated thinkers, credited among other things as a founding figure in Latin America’s analytic philosophy movement (Bassols 2014), was initially influenced by the existentialism of Kierkegaard (“All existentialism is already in Kierkegaard!” he used to say, according to Ruanova), Gabriel

Marcel, and Karl Jaspers, and was considered by his contemporaries as “the supreme authority” on Husserl’s phenomenology (Ruanova 1982, 206).

Villoro’s contribution to the 1948 spring lecture series at IFAL deals with Marcel’s metaphysics, specifically, the question regarding the possibility of transcendence: how can consciousness reach an object outside of itself? Or, as Villoro puts it: “how to pass from being to entities?” (1948, 291). It is worth noting that this question had been asked by Husserl, in his 1907 lecture series, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, where he named it the *Grundfrage*, or the foundational question for his new phenomenology: “How can the absolute self-givenness of cognition reach something not self-given and how is this reaching to be understood?” (Husserl 1964, 5). That Villoro finds Marcel’s take on this question captivating despite the question having a historical trace going back to Husserl (about whom he was the “supreme authority”) is interesting simply because it is not a particularly fruitful question or one that would yield any significant liberatory insights—or at least, it is not a question that appears to *fit* with the more existential, action-oriented concerns of his contemporaries, such as Uranga or Portilla. A more fitting analysis would have been one that delved into Marcel’s idea of philosophy as “concrete philosophy,” dealing with issues of death, suicide, betrayal, or what he called the “bite of reality” (Marías 1967, 439). It is toward the end of the lecture that the *Grundfrage* seems to yield any significant insights, and we get a clue as to the potential value of Marcel *for* a Mexican reading. This clue has to do with others, or with how a being, enclosed in itself, reaches out toward the other and, as much as possible, apprehends the other. This is the aspect of the *Grundfrage* that so much troubled Husserl. While Husserl stumbled and was unable, in his *Cartesian Meditations*, to give a satisfactory answer, Marcel, on Villoro’s account, provides the answer to how this contact with otherness is possible: it is love. “In lovingly turning to the other,” writes Villoro, “I merely begin on the road that will lead me to my awakening in the total being of the universe” (1948, 294).

### *The Situation*

Despite its richness in detail, however, the lecture on Marcel gives little indication of an original reading. Villoro’s thoughts on the subject of existentialism would come a year later, in the fall 1949 issue of *Filosofía*

y *Letras* with the article “Génesis y proyecto del existencialismo en México.” The title, “Genesis and Project,” alludes to the origins and to the future of existentialism in Mexico, and it is to this that Villoro attends and to which I now turn.

In line with that enfoque proposed in Uranga’s lecture on Merleau-Ponty, Villoro stresses the situational character of philosophy in the 1949 article. According to Villoro, philosophy emerges, always, in a concrete situation; and it emerges as a response to that situation, to its crises and its needs. He writes:

No spiritual manifestation, as impoverished as it may be, appears as an isolated event, explicable from itself. It is always given in a concrete situation from whence it must be explained. The situation gives us the comprehensive horizon of a historical moment on which individual projects and endeavors can emerge. But, at the same time, a situation can only be understood in terms of a future that organizes it and a past that it overcomes. . . . The appearance and *partial* acceptance of existentialism in our midst responds to a concrete situation that we can only understand by taking into account [the situation’s] double temporal dimension: its projection toward a future and its positive negation of the past [*negación superadora del pasado*]. (1949, 233, emphasis mine)

Here, again, existentialism is read as justificatory of the urge to return philosophy to the realm of the concrete. It vindicates a grand gesture for particular interests, and Villoro, in tune with the other lecturers, sees it as the only sort of gesture that his (and his community’s) interests deserve. This gesture, philosophy itself, is occasioned by his reading and executed on the basis of that “partial acceptance of existentialism” upon which *los hiperiones* have anchored their hopes. That it is a partial acceptance has to do with the nature of those readings as acts of appropriation, which a wholesale acceptance of doctrine would invalidate.

Returning to the passage cited: an interest in his own historical existence leads Villoro to focus on the philosophical description of “concrete situations,” the geopolitical, geographical, and historical realities in which people converge, live, die, and labor, and which are the sites of and for the varied manifestations of spirit. One such manifestation of spirit is, of course, philosophy. But philosophy’s appearance in Mexico should not be taken as an “isolated event,” or as something that appeared

without reason or purpose and responsive only to itself. The situation itself demanded and required its appearance, as existentialism is, according to Villoro's reading, a philosophy that can make sense of the temporal particularities of the situation. The situation, as a concrete human reality, is the accumulation of items that project toward a future. But, Villoro suggests, only existentialism equips one to look to the past in a positive way, negating that which is not vital and retaining that which is.

Existentialism, as a philosophy of human existence, thus appears to make sense of a concrete reality. Again, it is not adopted in a fanatical fashion, simply because it is the fashionable thing to do, but because of the manner in which it gives itself to a philosophical understanding, as simultaneously making sense of a situation through radical descriptions while gesturing toward effective action.

### *Imitation or Limitation?*

A common urge among Latin American philosophers, particularly in Mexico, concerns the need to rebuff the notion that their philosophy is a mere echo or an unimaginative imitation of European philosophy (we see this in Uranga's reading, above). This notion has its historical precedent. Leopoldo Zea reports that this was indeed the case during the eighteenth century when Scholasticism was in vogue and to a lesser extent during the nineteenth century with the adoption of Positivism as a social and political ideology (Zea 1952). The idea that philosophy done in Mexico and Latin America can only be imitative has proved stubborn even to this day,<sup>6</sup> articulated as it is in the belief that Latin American philosophy, by virtue of colonialism and conquest, is (by historical and linguistic necessity) an offshoot of Western philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, the emergence of existentialism in Mexico was met with similar criticism.

Villoro addresses the issue right away. "Philosophy in (Latin) America is seen, frequently, as a collection of imported doctrines from Europe with little to no connection to the New World. There is nothing more false than this simplistic notion" (1949, 234). Appealing to a shared vision of embodied reason and philosophy's rootedness, Villoro affirms the view that the encounter with, or the *reading* of, a philosophical doctrine or philosophical text will always be filtered through that embodiment or that rootedness. He argues that "the rejection or acceptance, the transformation or application, of a foreign doctrine is always conditioned by

an attitude that the thinker takes in respect to the reality in which he/she lives” (234). The attitude one takes toward one’s own reality, in other words, informs our *enfoque*, that which filters our readings and our overall experience of any “foreign doctrine”—or more generally, of any doctrine that is *other* to my immediate experience. This qualification is meant both to combat the charge of imitation and also to affirm the notion that no reading will be untouched by the experience of the reader; to paraphrase Portilla once again, one must first drench oneself in those ideas that have captured something fundamental about human existence, which for historical reasons will be European ideas, and then philosophize as Mexicans because that is the only way to proceed. Thus, by “attitude” Villoro has in mind a state of being from which one cannot easily flee; an attitude, in this case, would be a state of being in which one is committed to a *version* of the world laid out in advance, perhaps implicitly, that demands attention and response. Such commitment will surely influence a reading, as we transform what we read to meet our needs and our emergencies. As Villoro puts it: “In the manifestation of the distinct European philosophies in our American soil, we must consider . . . the project of the thinker, bound [as s/he is] to his or her concrete situation” (1949, 234).

Existentialism is thus appropriated, transformed, and applied in accordance with certain vital needs that the young Mexican philosophers encounter when looking at Mexican history, culture, and society. The road to this acceptance, at that time, went through Heidegger (recalling Uranga’s statement above that, in the beginning, Mexican existentialists were Heideggerian). The reason for this, again, was José Gaos, who, in courses given between 1942 and 1947, read and taught Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, reportedly line by line. For this reason, Villoro recalls, “few academic courses have left their imprint in Mexico as profoundly as those five ‘Heideggerian’ years” (1949, 237). And likewise, few philosophy professors have impacted Mexico as profoundly as José Gaos.

### *Philosophy in Suspicion: Villoro’s Gaos*

José Gaos’s “existentialism,” or rather, his understanding and appropriation of existentialism, certainly influenced the direction of study for the Hyperion group, for which Gaos served as a mentor and most ardent critic. Gaos’s philosophy of existence begins with the recognition that

philosophical metanarratives cannot stand the test of time; in other words, “truths” are never stable and, as history testifies, one truth will supplant another in its course, to the point that “[all philosophers] are right and none of them are” (Ruanova 1982, 19). In this way philosophy itself has proven to be an unreliable source of certainty. As Villoro understands it: “the historicity and relativity of philosophy . . . tosses us into the stubborn inquisition of that which deceives us: philosophy” (1949, 238). In other words, we constantly find ourselves questioning philosophy and in the process affirming its central place in human life; we are condemned to philosophy, just like we are condemned to freedom, and as such we are “condemned to failure.” Those who flee from this sentence need not worry about truth; those who face it, who challenge it, are philosophers. “The philosopher,” continues Villoro, “is the man who stubbornly maintains himself solely in the interrogation, in the always searching and never finding” (238). Thus, Gaos characterizes philosophy as *soberbia*, or “arrogance,” that “vital urge that manifests itself . . . as mere desire for intellectual superiority” (Valero 2012, 14). Because philosophy itself, with its long history of failures and rewrites, requires such an arrogant commitment from those who pursue it, philosophizing demands withdrawal, a stepping-away from existence. As Villoro puts it, “philosophizing involves the negation of the community and the immersion in the immanence of the subject” (1949, 238). Existence, in this view, is opposed to the rational. Reflection distances one from immediate lived experience, and thus negates community as one goes within oneself in acts of reflection, thereby forgetting the circumstance (the crises and emergencies) that surrounds one.<sup>8</sup>

Gaos’s existentialism, therefore, stresses the perpetual search for truth, albeit a truth that is not found, or has not been found in the history of this search. Moreover, by pointing out the arrogance required for the philosophical life, it suggests that the philosopher is interested not in the transformative power that such a search and such a life can have on self or community but only in *finding* this truth for its own sake. What was needed was a conception of the philosophical that undercut the selfishness, or arrogance, inherent to the philosophical life, and retuned thinking to the service of a common purpose—or at least, to the service of transformation and transformative action. “Finally,” writes Villoro, “in January of 1949, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s visit to Mexico contributes . . . to the diffusion of French existentialism” (1949, 241).

The arrival of Merleau-Ponty in Mexico City was, at least for the sake of philosophy, a welcome event. In fact, his arrival was front-page news. Not surprisingly, and quite telling, the photograph of Merleau-Ponty's deplaining that accompanies the published report pictures the French philosopher flanked by Villoro and Uranga, happily welcoming one of philosophy's dignitaries (Uranga 1949c). The event of Merleau-Ponty's visit not only signals the recognition of the Mexican existential project by one of two people whose recognition mattered to the Mexican philosophers (the other being Sartre), but it also vindicates the Mexican existentialist project as an original effort and as a significant contribution to existentialism itself. In fact, according to Uranga, Merleau-Ponty offers to dedicate some issues of *Le temps moderne* to philosophy in Mexico—something that never materialized, as Merleau-Ponty left the journal just as Hyperion disbanded (in the early 1950s). But what attracted the Mexican thinkers to Merleau-Ponty was not so much his physical presence but rather his philosophy of action, a manner of thinking that could be appropriated and deployed to confront the needs of a community under siege by the oppressive forces of history. Merleau-Ponty encourages, Villoro writes, a "conscious project of self-knowledge that gives us the grounding for a subsequent self-transformation" (1949, 241). Merleau-Ponty's philosophy affirmed itself in, and regarding, the ambiguity of everyday existence, rather than declaring its failure, as Gaos's skeptical approach seemed to do. Merleau-Ponty's existentialism, that is, promised self-transformation and self-knowledge, and with this, the possibility of an authentic community.

In reading Villoro's existential analyses, one thing becomes clear: his appropriation of existentialism is, indeed, partial. Like Uranga or Macgrégor, Villoro does not get tangled up in the minute details of the existentialist argument; rather, he allows a focus and a concern to guide his reading. The enfoque settles on the value of developing and nurturing a situational consciousness, and on the possibilities for liberation and transformation that this consciousness makes possible. Transformation is possible, then, when one comes to terms with past, and present, situations in acts of sublation; transformation is possible when the situation is seen as an embodied situation, requiring communion with and acknowledgment of other situated beings; and transformation is possible when reason is demystified and placed in the service of life. With these transformations a genuine future—one that is not burdened by a totalizing past—becomes possible.

JORGE PORTILLA'S READING OF *NAUSEA**The Novel*

In Jorge Portilla's lecture "La náusea y el humanismo" (Nausea and humanism), Portilla reads and interprets Sartre's *Nausea* and "Existentialism Is a Humanism." He appeals to a familiar enfoque, namely, one that puts into relief that which can be deemed useful or applicable, that can be appropriated "in light of the circumstances of our actual world" (Portilla 1948, 244). What ends up fitting the criteria is Sartre's description of, and apparent advocacy for, the notion of contingency as *the* phenomenologically revealed description of human existence. Portilla seems to read contingency in a state of awe and offense: in awe, because it is the description that comes "closest to existence," designating "that which has no reason to exist" (249); and in offense, because if contingency means that human existence is absurd and "outside the space of reasons" (*mundo de las razones*), then human existence is not bound to any rational laws (249).

Hayden Carruth, in his introduction to the English edition of Sartre's *Nausea*, explains that it is a novel about coming face to face with "a radically meaningless existence" (Sartre 1964, xvi), where necessity and stability break down in the experience of brute, naked, individual reality. In this breakdown, the only thing that remains is uncertainty and contingency where, Antoine Roquentin thinks, "anything, anything could happen" (106). Roquentin himself says: "The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*" (176). Portilla, who approaches Sartre's texts in search of something meaningful for himself and his "actual world," reads Roquentin's sentiment as an affirmation of the radical thrownness of life. To be there, Portilla says, is "to be present and reduced to an absolute solitude" (1948, 259).

Portilla is a faithful reader of Sartre. *Nausea* takes place, he writes, "when there is an immediate contact with existence in an originary manner, in such a way that at that moment we capture its essential contingency. This contact cannot be achieved by will, or in a conceptual or philosophical way; it must be a *real, lived* experience" (1948, 249). However, Portilla continues, some, or most, flee their contingency by either denying it or by affirming a universality that they can, in some way, assume. The flight from this "fundamental experience" has led some to create or "invent a necessary being or uncaused cause [*causa de sí*], necessarily existent and

existing necessarily; they have invented God” (250). In this way, God is, according to Sartre, an imaginative construction, a veil that hides what is most fundamental about the human experience. In other words, the *only* way to cope with absolute solitude and the radical contingency of life is to invent God.

It is at this point that Portilla hesitates before a verbatim recital of Sartre’s views. The notion that God is an invention brought about by a fear of uncertainty, Portilla says, is a “hypothesis of Sartre’s that we find debatable” (1948, 250). Although he follows this by assuring the reader that his intention here is to “explain Sartre, and not to refute him” (250), his hesitation invites one to wonder what that refutation would involve, as he does not return to “refute” Sartre again either here or in any published text. The closest he comes to *refusing* Sartre is to say that “there is nothing . . . from a philosophical treatise to falling into vice and wretchedness, that cannot be interpreted as a flight from contingency” (250). That is, the argument denying God’s existence can be made against anything else that pretends to refocus one’s attention away from the terror of contingent facticity. I will return to this in chapter 2, but for now, it is enough to point out that Portilla’s hesitation has to do with his belief that contingency, in essence, *demand*s ordering principles, and that God represents such a principle, along with reason or “logos.” The necessity of God is not contradicted by the contingency of human existence. Chaos, in other words, demands reason.

Portilla’s hesitation and refusal manifests reading’s natural pretention to infuse one’s personal beliefs into the text or its context. Hesitating before a “hypothesis” that evidently offends is clearly another way in which the text *occasions* reflection, and the way in which the text bears on a reader’s circumstance. But now, I am reading into Portilla’s reading, or nonreading, and, in the process, exemplifying the instability (contingency) of the reading-relation.

### *Contingency*

Existentialism has fetishized contingency. The revelation that contingency is everywhere at play serves as a justification for irresponsibility, since in a world without an underlying or supervening order everything is allowed and no one is held accountable. When personal action is thought *not* to cohere with a higher will (a social, cultural, or divine will), then