

## Chapter One

# Engaging Existentialism

## Transformative Possibilities and Local Agendas

O my soul, do not aspire to immortal life,  
but exhaust the limits of the possible.

—Pindar, *Pythian* iii

Albert Camus, Epigraph to *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)

Camus's epigraph invites his readers into an "absurd" universe of shaken absolutes, a contingent world that, fearsome as it is, scintillates with possibilities for meaning-making. The philosopher holds out the prospect that life "will be lived all the better" (*Myth* 535) when, accepting the lack of absolutes or givens, we confer meaning on the world in consciousness and good faith. He neatly states that it is "a matter of living and thinking with those dislocations" (532). Simple as Camus's directive may sound, whether or how to embrace the existentialist worldview it announces roiled into axial issues of Western postmodernity at large. For a postcolonial, largely God-anchored Latin America, Camus's clarion calls at once have special purchase and entail special challenges. Existentially oriented Latin American philosophers, essayists, and creative writers of the twentieth century rallied to the challenges of dislocation in all their magnificent complexity. Exploring "the limits of the possible" within the spheres of their own locations, they constructed the maps of meanings and values—a distinctive existentialist spirit, an ethos—that this book investigates.

“Oh *my* soul,” says Camus (emphasis added): trained on individuals in their lived contexts, existentialism lends itself to anecdotes, *petites histoires*, personal stories. I will therefore take the liberty of glossing a couple of the personal epiphanies on Latin American existentialism that gave life to *A Latin American Existentialist Ethos*. The first flashpoint came about several years ago when I was preparing a class on João Guimarães Rosa’s 1962 *Primeiras estórias* (translated into English as *The Third Bank of the River and Other Stories*).<sup>1</sup> As I thought about the crowd that revives the existentialist crusader of the Brazilian author’s story “Darandina” (“Much Ado” in *Third Bank*), a poem by the Peruvian proto-existentialist César Vallejo came to mind. Vallejo’s simple parable, “Masa” [Mass] (*España, aparta de mí este cáliz*, 1939), an inspirational reflection on the Republican struggle in the Spanish Civil War, is a paean to loving solidarity. “Masa” has everyone on earth joining together in heartfelt emotion, “tanto amor” [so much love], to bring a fallen warrior back to life. The poem’s last lines read,

Entonces, todos los hombres de la tierra  
le rodearon; les vió el cadáver triste, emocionado;  
incorporóse lentamente,  
abrazó al primer hombre; echóse a andar . . . (610; ellipsis in original)

[Then, everyone on earth surrounded him; the corpse looked at them sadly, profoundly moved; he got up slowly, embraced the first man; started to walk]

From the unexpected convergence of Guimarães Rosa and Vallejo arose the revelation that much of Latin American existentialism appeals to community and, in the enduring backlash against positivism detailed below, to emotion.

The second flashpoint occurred after I realized that in thinking about Latin American existentialism I had not, ironically enough, taken sufficient account of Mexico, my favorite intellectual haunt. I soon became engrossed in the Mexican existentialist Grupo Hiperión, whose still-antipositivist philosophical investigations unfold two further hallmarks of the Latin American existentialist ethos: identity and ethics. When I then began to glimpse the connections between the Grupo Hiperión and the *literary* works written in its milieu, the flashpoint turned into an exhilarating, runaway experience. As a result, I have centered this book on Mexico, thanks to its dynamic conjugations of both literature and philosophy and of identity, ethics, and community.

Pulsating behind the entire ensemble is a formidable issue, another clarion call that demands consideration. I refer to the fact that the overarching narrative of Latin American literary existentialism, on its own and as it relates to existential philosophy, has basically gone unarticulated. The chapter at hand ventures to frame that narrative in broad strokes. “Engaging Existentialism: Transformative Possibilities and Local Agendas” scopes out key interfaces between European existentialism and Latin American existentialist projects; paying close attention to existentialism’s transformative potency, it traces the developments that the philosophical current was singularly positioned to enable, and *did* enable, in Latin America; it attends to the motors, from philosophy to literature, of Latin American existentialism.<sup>2</sup> The Latin American foundations in place, we move into ever more local terrain: the platforms of the Mexican context and, finally, the specific building blocks of *A Latin American Existentialist Ethos*.

The itinerary I have just sketched out merely tenders an, I hope, helpful orientation to the several threads of chapter 1. As such, it only hints at the true spirit of Camus and of all things existentialist. For beneath even the most technical philosophical aspects lies the passion of existentialism itself and the passions it catalyzes in Latin American writers. To those passionate opportunities we now turn.

### An Engaging Existentialism

In 1999 the renowned French theorist Jean Baudrillard brashly wrote: “We have thrown off that old existential garb . . . Who cares about freedom, bad faith, and authenticity today?” (73). One might well wish away the notoriously abstruse garb of Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophical works, which can obscure the living passions of existentialism. Apart from that and with due respect to Baudrillard, it is easy to deny that the root concerns of existentialism could ever cease to engage hearts and minds. Freedom, bad faith, and authenticity among them, they implicate us on deep, vital levels of our lives. They reach out to the individual as an individual, to the individual trying to forge a life in a world without guideposts, or at least a world that places established, normative guideposts in question. Existentialism of every ilk wants to jolt us into awareness of the choices we make and of our freedom to make them. It wants to shake us out of a mechanical existence, to destabilize us, awaken and prime us for happiness. In the oft-quoted but always compelling words of Camus, “the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” (*Myth* 593).<sup>3</sup>

That existentialism inalienably speaks to the core of our lives and why she believes it does was the message that Simone de Beauvoir strove to convey when in 1947 she published the essay “What Is Existentialism?” in *France-Amérique*. An implicit partner piece to Camus’s *Myth of Sisyphus* and overt companion piece to Sartre’s *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946), Beauvoir’s essay matches the latter text’s humanistic, down to earth register. In chorus with both male giants of French existentialism, Beauvoir lucidly attempts to rescue the maligned philosophy from allegations of pessimism. “What Is Existentialism?” at the same time effectively transmits signature features of Beauvoir’s own bounteous existential program. Too frequently overshadowed by Sartre’s massive feats, Beauvoir’s expansive and grounded agenda will materialize into a heartbeat (a generally de facto but still telling one, as shall become clear) of various projects that my later chapters survey.

Listening, then, for many good reasons to Beauvoir’s seductive rendition of existentialism, we hear her declare the movement “a practical and living attitude posed by the world today” that proposes “a concrete human attitude” (*Philosophical Writings* 324). Existentialism, like Christianity and Marxism, wishes to apprehend “the totality of the human domain” (324). It follows, as Beauvoir states in consonance with her recently published philosophical work *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), that existentialism “strives to hold both ends of the chain at the same time, surpassing [dépassant] the interior-exterior, subjective-objective opposition” (325). Beauvoir’s existentialism then disrupts a pernicious opposition, the all too often competing interests of ethics and politics. She maintains that because the individual “has reality only through his engagement in the world” (325), existentialism seeks “a reconciliation of those two reigns whose divorce is so nefarious to men in our time: the ethical reign and the political reign” (325). Freedom is the prime mover of all such dislocations: “By freely taking his own freedom as an end within himself and in his acts, man constitutes a kingdom of ends” (326). An existential warrior like Camus, Beauvoir revolts against absurdity, avowing that “the task of man is one: to fashion the world by giving it a meaning” (325). A world thus fashioned, she concludes, shimmers with promise, not hopelessness.

Beauvoir’s sanguine apologetics usher us into the appeals of existentialism for Latin America. A recent uptick of interest in existentialism thanks in a significant measure to post-continental philosophy’s more global sights has brought front and center the movement’s relevance to so-called Third World issues.<sup>4</sup> As Lewis R. Gordon, whose investigations of existentialism and Africana thought have contributed to the resurgence, observes: “Existential philosophy addresses problems of freedom, anguish, dread, responsibility,

embodied agency, sociality, and liberation” (7). Latin American authors did not fail to seize with a vengeance on these enabling positives of existentialism, further lured by certain of its other most consequential staples: the weight that existentialism places on a self-determined existence as versus a predetermined essence, authenticity, commitment, activism, and new ways of envisioning religion. Beyond existentialism’s core note of freedom, it was Martin Heidegger’s *Dasein*—being-there, being-in-the-world—that principally galvanized Latin American thinkers. *Dasein*, a “lived context of concern” (Gordon 10), dovetails not only with Sartre’s notion of human beings in “situation” (i.e., in a particular context) but also with Spaniard José Ortega y Gasset’s influential “I am myself and my circumstances, and if I do not save them, I do not save myself” (*Meditaciones* 77). A transnational watchword, *Dasein* offered Latin Americans both a mandate and *modus operandi* for inquiring into their own specific, lived contexts. Famously emerging for Sartre from the contemplation of an apricot cocktail, phenomenological existentialism had attuned the French philosopher to the thing in itself (Beauvoir, *Prime* 112); for Latin Americans, existentialism grew into a means of taking the measure of their own possibilities, of assuming the “practical and living attitude” that Beauvoir’s situated existentialism champions.

It is therefore symptomatic that one of the first Latin American formulations of an existential philosophy, devised by the Argentine Carlos Astrada (1894–1970), quickly grasped and capitalized on *Dasein*’s emancipatory promise. Astrada, who had studied with Heidegger, injected Heideggerian thought into Argentina starting with *El juego existencial* [The Existential Gambit] (1933). The Argentine philosopher’s “humanism of freedom,” elaborated in various works, views man as forging his essence from his existence in a concrete sociohistorical setting.<sup>5</sup> The humanism of freedom then proposes to rescue and affirm the “full man,” an individual who activates his full *humanitas*, the entirety of his immanent human capabilities. Astrada’s version of existentialism accentuates not only its drawing power for Latin Americans in situation but also its role in paving the way for subsequent activist Latin American modes such as liberation theology.

More to our purposes, Astrada’s existential “humanism of freedom” stood on the cusp of a movement that would soon permeate and energize the hemisphere’s philosophy. Surfacing in the 1930s when students of Heidegger like Astrada returned home, Latin American existential philosophy reached its apogee in the 1940s and 1950s. From initial hubs in Argentina and Mexico, it spread to the Caribbean, Central America, and other parts of Latin America.<sup>6</sup>

Elements integral to the Latin American philosophical and political context dramatically enhanced the magnetism of existentialism for these various locations. Existentialism initially gained traction in a philosophical milieu dominated by reactions against a formidable European import, positivism. Not confined to philosophy, positivism infiltrated Latin America during the nineteenth-century period of nation building as an organ of the state and as a developmental program intended to launch post-Independence nations into modernity. The “order and progress” positivism’s motto heralds gave it enormous currency for post-Independence Latin America, and the European import maintained a tenacious grip on the maturing nations. One thinks of the positivist Porfirio Díaz’s thirty-one-year dictatorship of Mexico (1876–1880, 1884–1911) and the positivist Getúlio Vargas’s regime in Brazil (on and off from 1930 to 1954), the longest of any Brazilian president. In Latin America, positivism largely equated to the anti-metaphysical, anti-religious, mechanistic philosophy of the French Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte’s positivism debunks religion and metaphysics as obsolete, inadequate vehicles to knowledge. It replaces them with determinism, empiricism, and the enshrining of reason. Everything was to be subordinated to, reduced to, science. And science entails laws, regularities, discipline, logic, materialism, the scientific management of the state. In keeping with its scientific, hegemonic ambitions, Latin American positivism sought to exile religion and displace the Catholic church.<sup>7</sup>

A soul-numbing positivism of alien origins soon became anathema to Latin American thinkers. Around the start of the twentieth century, in a colossal defining moment for Latin American philosophy, a tidal wave of Latin Americans formed by positivism disowned it. The revolutionary surge of antipositivism that fanned out through the former colonies included works by the Argentine Francisco Romero and Alejandro Korn; the Brazilian Raimundo Farias Brito; the Mexican José Vasconcelos and Antonio Caso; the Peruvian Alejandro Deústua; and the Uruguayan Carlos Vaz Ferreira (Gracia and Millán-Zaibert 18–19). Altogether, they constituted the first generation of *professional* Latin American philosophers, the “first in their several countries to dedicate themselves wholly to philosophy” (Sánchez Reulet xiii). In other words, antipositivism both mobilized hemispheric activity and spurred the genesis of modern Latin American philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

From this genesis, this watershed moment, sprung potent structures of feeling that created bridges to existentialism and Latin American identity. “Structures of feeling,” in fact, obtains quite literally here insofar as against the absolute dominion of logic, reason, and science, antipositivists advocated emotion and a comprehensive approach to human existence. Revealing the

cracks in a positivism that presented itself as a totalizing system, against absolute knowability and the devaluation of religion the antipositivists pitted the mysteries of the spirit and spirituality. As Aníbal Sánchez Reulet notes: “From various sides, and in different tones, they criticized the scientific concept of reality, the naive progressivism, and the dogmatic narrowness of the positivists,” to defend, instead, “the rights of human freedom” (xiii). Antipositivism’s robust endorsement of human freedom slides into line with that of existentialism, creating improbable bedfellows. Unnatural as a partnership between existentialism’s placing of God in question and an assault on positivism’s discrediting of religion may seem, existentialism so zealously opposed positivism’s valorizing of reason and determinism as to allow the burgeoning trend to make common cause with antipositivism. Hence, naturalized into the territory of Latin American philosophy, existentialism would serve as a latter-day weapon in the war on positivism that continued to ripple vigorously through the twentieth century.

The ripple effect gained momentum from the role of antipositivism in triggering Latin American self-definition. Perhaps most important, José Enrique Rodó’s essay *Ariel* (1899) channeled antipositivism into a pilot yet singularly long-lived crystallization of modern Latin American identity. The Uruguayan Rodó takes the title, narrative frame, and central symbols of his book-length essay from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Setting the essay in the aura of a bronze statue that depicts Ariel at the moment he is freed from servitude, Rodó rewires Shakespeare’s scenario into a multiplex drama of resistance. The Uruguayan writes in the wake of the Spanish American War that saw Spain lose its colonies and under the specter of mounting US imperialism. Rodó accordingly looks to North America as the menace over against which Latin America must urgently assert its identity; he revamps Shakespeare’s uncouth Caliban into the US and the pure, airy spirit, Ariel, into Latin America. As this characterization might suggest, for Rodó the US represents the embodiment not just of imperialism but also of positivist ideologies. Throughout *Ariel*, teacher Próspero exhorts his pupils to free themselves from the ways of Calibán, or “Nordomania”: utilitarianism and sensuality without ideals, materialism, and idolatry of capitalism, science, and progress. Rodó’s antipositivist script, a cultural nationalism, denominates the superior humanism of the Greeks, Christian spirituality, leisure, idealism, love, and honor as the salient values of Latin America. In casting Ariel as “the noble and soaring element of the spirit . . . the ideal to which human selection aspires, erasing from superior man the tenacious vestiges of Caliban” (24), Rodó urges a life ruled by the spirit.

Again, the stakes considerably higher now thanks to the coupling of spirituality with identity politics, an inherent disconnect between existentialism and Latin American philosophy looms. How to reconcile a mode of thought premised on existence with one premised on (a God-given) essence, nevertheless, was not a Gordian knot, an intractable dilemma. For one thing and almost needless to say, there is no single existentialism but manifold existentialisms. There are existentialisms that speak to the left and the right, the revolutionary and the conservative, the atheist and the believer. Predictably, the abundant strains of Christian existentialism flourished in Latin America. European Christian existentialists Søren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, and Max Scheler exercised a particular attraction for Latin American philosophers.<sup>9</sup> From the first and onward, despite the addition of Sartre's entire corpus to the Vatican Index of Prohibited Works in 1948, existentialism won fervent Latin American adherents.

For another, Latin American existentialist philosophers entered into sinuous, impactful negotiations with Christianity. Religious and nonreligious existentialists acceded to the entrenched purchase of Christianity in their countries and redeployed theology in the humanistic, ecumenical form of values. They combated the moral wasteland of positivism, "an ethical dead end" (Gracia and Millán-Zaibert 17), by reterritorializing, *transvaluating*, Christian theology into the secular realm.<sup>10</sup> Jesus Christ's ministry of love and ductile theological axioms like the Golden Rule of doing unto others as one would have them do unto oneself lent themselves to an all but unimpugnable earthly credo. Argentine creative writer and essayist Julio Cortázar, a high priest of secular Latin American existentialism, enunciates the crux of the phenomenon in his *Teoría del túnel* (1947; in *Obra crítica*). He states: "If Christian axiology represents man's highest ethical stance, existentialism maintains that stance, but weans it from theology" (113).

God could be bracketed out and what remains of a Christianity divested of supernaturalism—that is, a post-metaphysical Christianity—advanced as desiderata for a postmodern Latin America. The existential repurposing of theology to this end, case studies of which I present in chapter 2 and chapter 5 vis-à-vis Mexico, lines up with what we now understand as postsecularism. Postsecularist Jürgen Habermas, for instance, emphasizes the need to invigorate modernity with renewed awareness of theologically based moral phenomena, translating them into a secular idiom accessible and useful to all citizens (Mendieta and VanAntwerpen 4).<sup>11</sup>

The translation of Christianity into a secular scripture that would work to the benefit of all citizens indexes existentialism's larger calling for



Latin America as, in my view, a *theater of values*. Existentialism provided a liberating force field, a critical opportunity to forge a situated value system that could mesh with yet stand apart from religion and, moreover, from nationalistic ideologies in countries prey to dictatorships and nationalistic propaganda (we may think of Juan Domingo Perón's Argentine popularism, 1946–1955).<sup>12</sup> An existentialism beholden neither to partisan ideologies nor to the state could constitute an independent realm, a clean slate on which to erect a national, rather than nationalistic, value platform. One might appropriately object that freedom and the positing of values are fundamentally at odds. Indeed, this is where Latin American "situations" put pressure on European existentials and lead to distinctive New World enactments of them. As identity, politics, and history exert their weight on Latin American existentialism, they shape it into a vehicle for an imagined community that can replace, or at least righteously supplement, an official imagined community.

By the same token, existentialism allows Latin Americans to salve two wounds of a militant nationalism, insularity and provincialism. While purveying agendas that have specific relevance to and viable transformative potential for their own locations, Latin Americans inscribe their works in a Western current that reimagines the human condition in toto. A Latin American existentialism in dialogue with its European manifestations reverberates into the domain of universals. All told, it effects a rooted cosmopolitanism that mediates between the international or universal and the local or identity politics (on rooted cosmopolitanism, see Appiah, ch. 6).

Eduardo Mallea's early *Historia de una pasión argentina* (1937) brings into a paradigmatic synergy a host of the factors that bear on Latin American existentialism. Mallea wrote the book-length essay in the midst of Argentina's "infamous decade," during which the country suffered a military coup, electoral fraud, the rise of fascism, and the incipient great economic depression. A Mallea writhing with despair for his nation opens the book with these lines: "After spending years trying to assuage my affliction, given the present state of my country, our country, I feel the need to shout out my anguish. This work is born of that anguish" (19). The supremely anguished Mallea immerses himself in the angst-ridden soul searching of Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard. Throughout the *Historia* Mallea layers Kierkegaard's searing moral conscience and summons to authenticity onto the Latin American antipositivist repertoire. Of signal consequence, he routes Kierkegaard's burning mindfulness into an overall assessment of Argentina, which means that almost immediately upon arrival in Argentina existen-

tialism consorted with identity discourse. Mallea evaluates the authenticity versus the inauthenticity of an Argentina that, akin to Kierkegaard's visible and invisible Church (*Practice* 211–24), the Latin American essayist limns as *two* Argentinias. He deplores the inauthenticity of a soulless, bourgeois, “visible Argentina” (that inheres mostly in the city), addicted to bad faith, materialism, progress, utilitarianism, conformism, arid erudition, and a lack of spirituality. Mallea entreats his compatriots to adopt as their model the authentic “invisible Argentina” (that inheres mostly in the countryside), characterized by sincerity, ideals, tradition, individualism, ideas, and genuine faith. With this, it is clear, Mallea embeds existentialism in the profile of Latin America that Rodó's *Ariel* had seeded.<sup>13</sup> Seven years after the military takeover of Argentina, Mallea engages existentialism for a resistant but apolitical secular scripture that carries a homegrown identity formation in tow.

### A Literature of Possibilities

In 1932 Ortega y Gasset's journal, *Revista de Occidente*, published Mallea's novella, *La angustia* [Anguish]. The Argentine author went on to write more than thirty volumes of fiction, as far as I know the first substantially existentialist Latin American literature. Well before Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), it can be said, Mallea had activated the special fit between imaginative works and existential philosophy that would catapult the former into a prime stage for the latter. Literature proved not merely to be apposite to existential philosophy, a lively paraphilosophical adjunct, but almost fungible with it. Camus remarks that it “would be impossible to insist too much on the arbitrary nature of the former opposition between art and philosophy” (*Myth* 570). Furthermore—as undoubtedly occurred to philosophers Beauvoir, Camus, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and so on when they spanned disciplines—creative endeavors are uniquely suitable to the designs of existential philosophy. An existentialist manifesto titled “Why Literature?” might include these bullet points, previews of what Mexican literature will bring to life for us:

- Literature can disseminate ideas to a broad, nonspecialist public in an accessible human register (as versus the forbidding lexicon of Heidegger et alia).
- Literature can dramatize individual lives as they evolve in concrete situations.

- Literature can encompass the total individual, including a person's actions, thoughts, feelings, body, and becoming. It can capture what Colin Davis calls the "density of lived experience" (150).
- Literature is a consecrated, powerful venue for privileged existentialist themes such as angst, agency, and responsibility.

Primordially, I believe, the manifesto would underline that literature can animate the exercising of freedom, and do so in free, open-ended ways. If back in 1959 Hazel Barnes christened creative ventures shot through with the subject matter of freedom, no less than with the freedom hardwired into artistic endeavors, a "literature of possibilities," the rubric has a distinct pertinence to Latin American fiction.

In saying this, I have in mind that existentialist fiction counts among its Latin American practitioners a raft of the hemisphere's most free-thinking and free-writing, salient mid-twentieth-century writers: Julio Cortázar, Ernesto Sábato, and David Viñas from Argentina; João Guimarães Rosa and Clarice Lispector from Brazil; Alejo Carpentier from Cuba; Rosario Castellanos, Carlos Fuentes, and José Revueltas from Mexico; Mario Vargas Llosa from Peru; Juan Carlos Onetti from Uruguay. As these authors engaged a literature thronging with possibilities, they collectively revitalized the discursive landscape in ways that Vargas Llosa's *Entre Sartre y Camus* [Between Sartre and Camus] (1981) retrospectively pinpoints. The book's essay "El mandarín" surveys what Sartre meant to young Latin American writers. According to Vargas Llosa, in the long run the French thinker helped pull them away from hackneyed folkloric tendencies as well as from a superficial regionalism laden with Manicheism and naturalism (116). Closer to the moment, Sartre enlivened them to projects beyond the fantastic literature then rampant in South America. Vargas Llosa caustically submits that Sartre unblocked South American writers, rescuing them from the preciosity of Jorge Luis Borges & Company: "Sartre could also save one from estheticism and cynicism. Thanks to Borges, back then our literature gained great imaginative subtlety, an extraordinary originality. But, as an influence, Borges's genius could be lethal: it produced little Borgeses, imitators of his affronts to grammar, his exotic erudition, and his skepticism" (117). If not, Vargas Llosa grants, as skilled a writer as Borges, Sartre taught a generation of Latin Americans that "literature can never be a game," that "writing was the most serious thing in the world" (117). The world, tangible worlds, thrummed outside

Borges's labyrinths, and, for Vargas Llosa, Sartre prodded Latin Americans to meet them with a situated, committed literature.<sup>14</sup>

While Borges's ingenious *ficciones*, a mixture of literature and essay, aim to impart an electric charge of unreality, Latin American existentialist fiction delivers thunderbolts of reality.<sup>15</sup> Yet it falls neither into vulgar realism nor into didactic thesis-fiction. The aforementioned existentialist writers instead rely heavily, for example, on irony, dialogism, first-person narrators, shifting narrative points of view, and extreme structural complexity to infuse their creations with the flux of existential becoming. Beauvoir's "Literature and Metaphysics" (1946) catches the gist of these narrative maneuvers in contending that the metaphysical novel permits writers "to evoke the original upspringing [jaillissement] of existence" (*Philosophical Writings* 274), an organic jaillissement that can offset the clash between advocating freedom and prescribing values I referred to above. Sartre's *What Is Literature?* (1948) reinforces the freedom bound up in authentic literature, a counterforce to the deterministic thesis novel. Sartre writes that "reading is a free dream" (49); "it is false to say that the author *acts* upon his readers; he merely makes an appeal to their freedom" (159). Sartre and Beauvoir's maxims for the literary disclosure of existence predict Cortázar's novel *Rayuela* [Hopscotch] (1963), whose "Table of Instructions" leaves its audience free to choose between two reading itineraries—a reminder that existentialist literature paved the way for the experimentalism of the so-called Latin American Boom. Several authors participated in both currents. Writ even larger, existentialist literature fostered a postmodern esthetic. When existentialist literature does want to convey something of a worldview, it is a postmodern one, best served by complexity and challenge, by questions in lieu of answers.

However much it strayed from Borges, Latin American existentialist literature did keep faith with his battle cry in "El escritor argentino y la tradición" [The Argentine Writer and Tradition] (1953).<sup>16</sup> "We Argentines, we South Americans in general," Borges declaims, "can wield all European themes, wield them without superstition, with an irreverence that can have, and already has had, fortunate consequences" (273). Duly irreverent, the majority of Latin American existentialist fiction pushes off from, and frequently pushes back at, constructs that Western existentialist philosophy and literature supply. "There is no such thing as existentialism," professes Cortázar, "there are just existentialists" (*Obra crítica* 114). Latin American existentialist authors scan Western existentialism and discover in it templates for remarkably diverse agendas. They interpellate the vast terrain knowledgeably and expertly, with a predilection for Western writers who straddle

literature and philosophy (Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, the Spanish Miguel de Unamuno and, of course, Sartre).<sup>17</sup> Sartre may broadly appear to command Latin American existentialist literature, but in fact that corpus responds to a bundle of models. An agile, and as Borges enjoins, iconoclastic playing field, it mixes and matches at will.

Cortázar's breakthrough novella "El perseguidor" [The Pursuer] (1959) offers a window onto the irreverent, productive eclecticism of Latin American existentialist literature. Cortázar confessed that in "El perseguidor" he divorced himself from his former perfectly crafted, Borges-inspired tales, because "I was a bit sick and tired of seeing how well my stories turn out." Thus, structurally "El perseguidor" appears to meander; further, it parts ways with Borges to enter the turf of Jack Kerouac's exuberant, then-fresh Beat Generation novel *On the Road* (1957). Culture-spanning and cutting-edge, "El perseguidor" goes existential. Again in Cortázar's words, the novella tackles "an existentialist problem, a human problem." He adds: "I wanted to stop inventing and stand my own ground, to look at myself a bit. And looking at myself meant looking at my neighbor, at man" (Harss and Dohmann 223–24). Cortázar's resulting inquiry into a human problem revolves around the interactions between protagonist Johnny Carter, a visionary jazzman based on the North American saxophonist Charlie Parker, and narrator cum antihero, Bruno, a cerebral French jazz critic.

As each of the primary characters reaches out to the other, his other, the two are entangled in a love-hate battle fraught with Sartrean energies. Johnny, an existentialist Christ figure for the Beat Generation, pursues Bruno in a crusade to wrest him from bad faith, an emotion-squelching rationality. Transfixed and conflicted by the oracular jazzman ("this angel who is like my brother . . . this brother who is like my angel" [228]) who yearns to live permanently in an authentic *durée* [duration], Bruno pursues Johnny.<sup>18</sup> Bruno's narrative of the two men's relationship—"El perseguidor" per se—and Bruno's exploitative biography of Johnny on which the narrative comments are both infected with a Sartrean neurosis. They teem with the malignancies that according to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and attendant works characterize human relationships as we attempt to objectify the "other" who threatens our freedom. Disputes with this Sartrean philosophical complex, I note, become a fulcrum of Mexican existentialism. Objectifying, essentializing, and belittling the crusader Johnny, Bruno strives to reduce him to a thing, the Sartrean "in-itself." Bruno's misprisions betray the heart of Johnny's pursuit, his struggles to remain authentic, "faithful unto death" (as one of the novel's epigraphs declares) to his quest. Johnny's authenticity,

grotesquely troped in the saliva that runs out of his mouth when he talks and plays the sax, is a nausea that the jazzman confronts, expels, rejects.

Conspicuously stocked with Sartrean moves as it is, “El perseguidor” does bring another existential interlocutor into the conversation. Cortázar’s discovery of his “neighbor” also involved a gravitation towards the Algerian Camus, whose affirmative, non-nihilistic attitudes the Argentine author praised. Camus, Cortázar writes in his 1950 essay “Situación de la novela,” “progresses from proud negation to confrontation and ultimately to connection” (*Obra crítica* 285). Cortázar threads “El perseguidor” with nods to Camus, from the Arab neighborhood where Johnny lives, setting of his and Bruno’s final showdown, to descriptions of Johnny as plague-ridden.<sup>19</sup> More momentously, Cortázar associates his tragic hero with that of Camus, Sisyphus. In Bruno’s estimation: “the efforts Johnny has made to change his life, from his failed suicide attempt to using marijuana, are what one would expect from someone as lacking in greatness as he. I think I admire him all the more for that, because he’s really the chimpanzee who wants to learn to read, a poor guy who hits his head against the wall, isn’t convinced, and *starts all over again*” (252; emphasis added). As usual, Bruno resists Johnny’s greatness. The paradox that is Johnny—nearly divine/agonizingly human—lies outside the binary categories of the ultra-logical jazz critic, so Bruno not only objectifies but also animalizes and infantilizes Johnny. Bruno’s jaundiced perspective aside, the quote evokes Camus’s rendition of Sisyphus. Camus refashions the classical Sisyphus who each day hauled a boulder up the mountain, only to fall back to its bottom and start over again, into an emblem of a conscious revolt against absurdity. In consciousness, Camus’s Sisyphus accepts his travails, knowing “the whole extent of his wretched condition” (*Myth* 591). “This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile . . . One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (593). The French existentialist’s Sisyphus chooses to live, with passion and joy, in a godless world.

What, then, is the Sisyphian condition of Cortázar’s Johnny? Simply put, Johnny plays his music and makes his God (“Perseguidor” 264)—evanescently. His music hurls Johnny into a sublime, hyper-authentic state, which evaporates when he ceases to play. Thereafter, Johnny lands back in a world of complacent reason that he singlehandedly labors to redeem from bad faith. Described as hauling a boulder (or a cross), constantly gesturing into the air, Johnny has assumed a Sisyphian mission. However, unlike Camus’s hero, *Johnny is not happy*. Camus writes: “From the moment absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all. But

whether or not one can live with one's passions, whether or not one can accept their law, which is to burn the heart they simultaneously exalt—that is the whole question" (*Myth* 510). Johnny lives in the shadow of just that question and, sadly, collapses under the burden of his Sisyphean task. His lonely battle with time and inauthenticity kills the jazzman, who drinks and drugs himself to death. Johnny wants to be saved from his becoming, Christ-like vocation, and misery. Hence the other epigraph to the novella, "Oh make me a mask," with its evocations of Wormwood from Revelation 8:10–11, which reads: "And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters. And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter" (*Bible*). Johnny, both biblically inflected and a living personification of the absurd ("un absurdo viviente"; "Perseguidor" 249), is that star. He crashes and burns. A Sisyphean martyr, Johnny is heroic and authentic but not happy.

Johnny's sorry state leads us to the unfortunate critical state of affairs I mentioned at the outset of this chapter and, as we will see in a minute, may well explain it. Namely, that despite the abundant possibilities built into Latin American existentialist literature, the body of works has not received its due. Displaced by Magical Realism, the Boom, and the Post-Boom, existentialist fiction appears predominantly to have been edged off the critical map. Canonical writers aligned with Latin American existentialism, obviously, still garner attention. Nevertheless, scholarship tends to absorb them into the rubrics just listed, or into feminism, identity politics, or politics per se. The big-picture story of Latin American literary existentialism, I repeat, has mainly gone untold. While some articles do address the existentialist dimensions of specific texts, as far as I can tell attempts to consolidate and elucidate the field per se stalled after the 1970s, years that witnessed two book-length, albeit limited, studies, *An Existential Focus on Some Novels of the River Plate* by Rose Lee Hayden (1973) and *Three Authors of Alienation: Bombal, Onetti, Carpentier* by Michael Ian Adams (1975).<sup>20</sup> The latter book's foregrounding of alienation returns us to Cortázar's Johnny. Lonely and undone, the character points to a likely explanation for the genre's relative neglect: a widespread tendency to equate existentialism with alienation and negativity, which has produced a disheartening literature eminently capable of alienating the reader.

The negativity of "El perseguidor," tempered by the grandeur of Johnny's quest, pales in comparison to that of other signature South American exis-

tentialist texts. Utterly engulfed in doom and gloom, the human adventures they portray resound with the sense of abandonment that Sartre extracts from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879): "Dostoevsky once wrote: 'If God does not exist, everything is permissible.' This is the starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and man is consequently abandoned, for he cannot find anything to rely on—neither within nor without" (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 28–29). The propensity to dramatize imprisonment in a no-exit, no-answer state of forlornness permeates Latin American existentialist fiction, dragging it down and sometimes justifiably out of sight.

In that regard Mallea's existentialist fiction serves up a curious object lesson. An editor of the Buenos Aires literary supplement to the newspaper *La Nación* from 1931 to 1955 who exercised a "benevolent dictatorship on Argentine literature" (Rodríguez Monegal, *Narradores* 251), Mallea was more lionized in his time than Borges himself. Yet, as the Modern Language Association International Bibliography attests, Mallea has by now to a considerable degree faded from view. And not, one might reckon, unfairly. His monotonous, exorbitant novels (*Simbad*, for instance, runs to 750 pages), with their endless indictments of alienation from a mechanistic Buenos Aires and anguished protagonists incapable of escaping inauthenticity and solitude, steep their readers in despondency. Perhaps enticing because innovative when first introduced, Mallea's dismal narrative has not stood the test of time and may have given existentialist fiction a bad name.

Two urban South American existentialist novels that have justifiably retained their currency nonetheless so brutalize the reader's sensibility as to render the texts ineluctably abhorrent. Fueled by Dostoevsky's prototypical existentialist novel *Notes from Underground* (1864), the texts showcase deracinated individuals whose futile struggles with an absurd world reap heinous violence. Eladio Linacero of Onetti's novella *El pozo* [The Well] (1939) carries Dostoevsky's underground man to a shocking extreme. As an adolescent, Linacero convinces the innocent young Ana María to enter a gardener's hut, musing that if she had not entered it "I would have to love her for the rest of my life" (12). Then, pinning Ana María down, twisting her breasts, and seeking the most odious caress (12), Linacero hideously violates her. This episode of appalling sexual and textual depravity marks the character's vacating of ideals and absolutes, a dislocation that effectively rebirths Linacero into a *ceró*, a zero. Ana María dies shortly afterwards, but Linacero lives on in forlornness, unable to fill the void with a meaningful existence and shackled to a wretched urban reality he cannot transcend. For its part,



Ernesto Sábato's harrowingly similar novel *El túnel* (1948) perpetuates *El pozo's* scapegoating of the woman (both novels tellingly name her María), in whom male antiheroes impossibly seek respite from ontological insecurity. *El túnel* locates the alienated underground man in Buenos Aires and afflicts him with the Sartrean malady of objectifying the other, exacerbated into a lethal poison. The novel's sadomasochistic protagonist Juan Pablo Castel subjects his lover to the abuse that tragically culminates in her murder and his imprisonment, literal and figurative.

Such doom and gloom texts rife with disincentives can thwart the most compelling vindications of Latin American existentialist literature. It would be as abusive as the texts themselves to downplay the violence that the two authors wreak on their female characters. The drives of Latin American existentialism, though, prompt us not to dismiss out of hand even thoroughly repugnant texts—because they may have a different story to tell, one that participates in the theater of values discussed above. And that, I would argue and will illustrate, turns out to be the case for Latin American existentialist literature. When we attempt to tease a value-rich story out of Onetti and Sábato's novels, as well as the preponderance of Latin American existentialist literary texts, they yield pleas for *emotion and community*. In other words, an antipositivist privileging of feeling over reasoning and an appeal to a transvaluated Golden Rule, which “El perseguidor” has already evinced, pervade works by leading writers. Writers of tremendously varied persuasions working from diverse templates, they militate for the same two incentivizing values.

Revisited as players in a theater of values, Sábato's *El túnel* and Onetti's *El pozo* shape shift arrestingly. Their characters' dire perversion resonates with that of Dostoevsky's patently flawed underground man and demands to be construed as ironic. Read in the supple mode they betoken, the two River Plate novels gesture fervently to love and human solidarity, loudly berated as goals not achieved. Sábato's novel, a melodramatic gloss of Onetti's short but highly cryptic text, voices their shared message at its start. Castel announces that he recounts his crime from his jail cell in a last-ditch petition to humankind for understanding: “I'm moved by the faint hope that someone will understand me, EVEN IF ONLY ONE PERSON” (12). Authentic ties with others have heretofore eluded him for reasons that his ensuing confession thunderously exposes. A Castel incapable of dealing with emotion, we learn, has unshakably resorted to logic in the bad faith effort to rationalize his feelings and subjugate the threatening chaos of love. Foreclosing love and breeding a crime of passion, his logic has ravaged

human ties. It is hard to imagine a more scathing denunciation of reason.

*El túnel's* predecessor, *El pozo*, orchestrates the problematic of emotion and community by focusing ways *out* of the underground, the trifecta of writing, love, and communication. Linacero proposes to write the story of a soul (9), a narrative based not on facts but on feelings and dreams, because facts “are always empty, they are receptacles that will take the shape of the emotions that fill them” (29). Unable to implement this new poetics of the emotions, his account ends up mired in events, reduced to narrating failed loves and failed acts of communication. Linacero’s exposition of his unsuccessful attempts to communicate with the prostitute Ester and the poet Cordes, significantly enough, occupies over half the novella. Meanwhile, the text floats the hope of overcoming alienation through communitarian efforts in the person of the Marxist Lázaro (i.e., Lazarus), an activist whom Linacero grudgingly acknowledges as a superior human being (44). That Lázaro, together with Linacero’s other two interlocutors, brand him a failure gives rise to the exquisite images of night overpowering the protagonist that close the text.<sup>21</sup> Leaving the poignancy of Linacero’s defeat engraved on the reader’s mind, they unmask the magnitude of his loss, the irony latent in his apparent resignation to it.

Socratic irony, Kierkegaard observes, can follow two protocols. One “can ask without any interest in the answer except to suck out the apparent content by means of the question and thereby to leave an emptiness behind.” Or, “one can ask with the intention of receiving an answer containing the desired fullness” (*Concept of Irony* 36). Onetti and Sábato’s ironic texts clearly opt for a fullness that bespeaks desired values. The values at stake, it is important to register, need not always find expression in irony or in doom and gloom. Those who identify existentialism with unrelenting horrorscapes need only look, for example, to the Brazilian João Guimarães Rosa.

Guimarães Rosa envelops the eccentric new saints of *Primeiras histórias* in a buoyant, positive aura. Literalizing the existentialist absurd, Guimarães Rosa mounts comic spectacles that glorify madmen, the antithesis of reason. The hero of “Tantarum, My Boss,” reminiscent of Don Quixote, jubilantly roars through the countryside on an ostensible expedition of madness and death. The nameless protagonist of “Much Ado” climbs a palm tree at the hub of a public square. There he performs a metaphysical burlesque, stripping naked and shouting wild pseudo-Nietzschean aphorisms. Nevertheless, both he and Tantarum deviate from Nietzsche’s superman, for the two heroes advocate not elitism but community. Society pursues these madmen, who, imbued with the courage Guimarães Rosa reveres, pursue society right back.

Mesmerizing, they entice the masses, win disciples, and grow community along with their selves. When the flailing protagonist of “Much Ado” loses courage and potency, the furor of the masses revives him; Tantarum’s antic marauding ends in a Last Supper, a communal celebration of life that is a fitting last act for the life of the saintly protagonist. Guimarães Rosa, in sum, lets us picture Sisyphus happy *and* ensconced in a Latin American value system.

## Mexican Platforms

Mexico’s lived context of concern, its Dasein, propels the country into the electric arena for value formation, existential philosophy, and existentialist literature to which the rest of my book attends. The staggering dislocations and transformations Mexico underwent in the twentieth century occasioned rigorous self-examination, *prises de conscience* that furnished an especially auspicious climate for existentialism. As Mexico’s proliferating limit situations, testing grounds for authenticity, gear existentialism’s enabling positives to local agendas, they accomplish what Camus requires of absurd creation: “I ask of absurd creation what I required from thought—revolt, freedom, and diversity” (*Myth* 587).

Revolt, freedom, and diversity flow from twentieth-century Mexico’s unique historical circumstances, a motor of all the texts we will consider. All the texts site themselves in a panorama that has its own rhythms, its own pressure points. And the dynamics of the panorama, as our works articulate them, invariably launch from a ground zero, the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). According to conventional wisdom, the Mexican Revolution awakened a sleeping giant. A Mexico splintered into regions, classes, ethnicities, and ideologies came together to overthrow Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship. This the Revolution unquestionably accomplished, in tandem with mobilizing social reform. Notoriously chaotic, awash in bloodshed and factionalism, the Revolution did not in any case master or slake the forces it had released—an unfinished business that fell to subsequent regimes. Mexican scholar Ana Santos Ruiz well expresses what innumerable others have concluded: the Mexican Revolution “was a disruptive, chaotic, and violent event, which only later was apprehended, delimited, and parsed into phases, with the aim of making it intelligible, neutralizing its unrestrained violence, and constituting a new social pact” (426). Then and now Mexican rulers invoke the originary moment of the Revolution, construe it by their

lights, and claim finally to realize its goals. The colossus lives on under the guise of what officials tend to vaunt, propagandistically, as a permanent revolution (Hurtado, “Dos mitos” 275).

President Plutarco Elías Calles’s administration (1924–1928) arguably enacted the first monumental recycling of the Revolution. With the alleged intent of continuing the Revolution while restoring law and order, Calles egregiously broke faith with the 1910 insurrection. His administration slacked off redistribution of land to peasants, suppressed labor movements, and encouraged foreign investment. Further, instead of restoring stability, Calles rekindled chaos. Attempting to limit the power of the Church, he sparked the bloody Cristero Wars (1926–1929) that reaped some 90,000 casualties. Outlawed by the zealously anticlerical president, defended with bloody fanaticism by its adherents, the Church suffered devastation on every side. At the end of the Cristero Wars and his formal regime, ostensibly to unite the divergent sectors of the Revolution, Calles institutionalized it. He established the PNR, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario [National Revolutionary Party], forerunner of the PRI, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional [Institutional Revolutionary Party] that maintained a hegemony over Mexican politics until 2000. The PNR then became a weapon for the shadow regime Calles implemented through his handpicked successors. True to the letter of the law prohibiting reelection but not to its spirit, in the era now known as the “Maximato,” “Jefe Máximo,” or Supreme Chief, Calles stealthily controlled Mexico behind a series of puppet leaders who generally did his bidding: presidents Emilio Portes Gil (1928–1930), Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930–1932), and Abelardo Rodríguez (1932–1934).

President Lázaro Cárdenas assumed office in December of 1934 and at long last shut down the Maximato. In June of 1935 Cárdenas reorganized his cabinet, purging it of Calles loyalists. He dispatched Calles to exile in 1936. The strongly left-leaning Cárdenas went on to institute sweeping changes that honored the reformist objectives of the Revolution. He distributed more land than all of his predecessors combined and organized much of the redistributed land into collective agricultural *ejidos* that paralleled Indigenous agrarian structures. To aid the Indigenous peoples, Cárdenas founded the Departamento de Asuntos Indígenas [Department of Indigenous Affairs] and vocational schools. Mexico was to be for Mexicans, so he took the bold step against imperialism of nationalizing the foreign-owned oil industry in 1938. Cárdenas similarly supported organized labor and revamped Calles’s PNR into the PRM (Partido de la Revolución Mexicana [Party of the