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**CONTINGENCY
AND
COMMITMENT**

*Mexican Existentialism
and the Place of Philosophy*

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SUNY
P R E S S

Introduction

From Prejudice to Violence

tolle lege, tolle lege (take up and read, take up and read)

—Saint Augustine (1991, 187)

PREJUDICE

Simply, this book deals with an encounter with an event. The event is the brief, yet intense, emergence of el Grupo Hiperi6n (the Hyperion group), which, between 1948 and 1952, embraced a rigorous philosophical project meant to unconceal, bring to light, expose, and respond to the hidden and given aspects that make up the complex sociohistorical and existential reality that is Mexico. By “encounter” here I refer to my encounter with this event, with my reading of their texts, and my writing about their readings; this encounter was far from passive and “respectful” about those texts and those readings, but was rather an interpretative intervention with transformative intent, conditioned by whatever baggage is attached to my historically constituted, and circumstantially situated, I.

By “baggage,” of course, I refer to my historical, social, economic, and political context—my reliance on ideologies and prejudices, interests and desires, conscious and unconscious. I say this not in an effort to distance myself from any interpretative faults contained in what follows, but because I am painfully aware, at this moment, of my limitations as reader and author. For instance, the chapters that make up this book were

written in English (in San José, California) but meant for delivery in Spanish (in Morelia, Michoacán). Knowing that translation is inevitable forces me to hesitate before each word, as I think of its meaning and its Spanish equivalent, of its sound and its accent. I experience the limbo of uncertainty with each sentence. This is not an unfamiliar experience: my reality as a Mexican-American has always consisted in hanging on the dash that separates my family, traditions, and my last name from the culture and ideology that has nurtured me from birth. Similarly, the pauses in writing brought about by my worry over a future translation, as both languages compete for attention, reflect that double-consciousness constitutive of my identity as a México-American. This is my baggage, my context.

Much has been written in Mexico about the Mexican existentialists (Villegas 1979; Ruanova 1982; Bartra 1987; Hurtado 2006, 2007). The same is not the case elsewhere, especially in the English-speaking world where critically lauded and excellently representative anthologies of twentieth-century existentialism would fail to mention that José Gao, the Spanish exile and mentor to the Mexican existentialists of the 1940s, was the first to translate Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* from the German—a project complete in 1951—much less reference, even in the clutter of footnotes, the Sartrean-inspired works of Emilio Uranga or Ricardo Guerra. So it is not surprising that anyone, inside or outside Latin America, doing a thorough inventory of world philosophies would overlook the intense and committed existentialist movement (however brief) in Mexico halfway through the twentieth century. But if that someone, for historical, cultural, or in any way circumstantial reasons, were to encounter this movement and feel an immediate affinity to it, then chances are that the representativeness of the anthology would be questioned and a case would be made for the inclusion of certain key figures otherwise relegated to philosophical oblivion.

My encounter with the event of Hiperión is, therefore, conditioned by that double consciousness and the baggage of experience that brings with it expectations, desires, and hopes. Thus, my reading of Emilio Uranga's reading of Jean-Paul Sartre or Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for instance, will involve a degree of violence, as I force myself onto his reading with the full weight of *mestizaje*, demanding a strategy for coping with and overcoming those forms of thought that encroach upon my human potential. More generally, I encroach upon those interpretations of existentialism undertaken, presumably, at a time of crisis and urgency, looking for clues as to how a text was read and not to how closely that reading comes

to a "correct" or faithful interpretation. Correct readings interest me on a purely academic level. What interests me on a much broader, one could say existential, level is the value of those readings, and of the philosophy they occasioned, for life—mine and in general.

Because of these always already present expectations I cannot, in good faith as reader and author, adhere to the dogma that philosophy can or should be "pure." The most rigorous *epoché* cannot bracket or suspend my subjectivity, or those flaws in my character that will contaminate my readings. In other words, with Paul Ricoeur "I shall distance myself from . . . the ideology of the absolute text" (Valdés 1991, 47), and read philosophy through my circumstance, to paraphrase José Ortega y Gasset's paradigmatic insight in *Meditations on Quixote* (Ortega 2000), first published in 1914. My aim is to read not for the sake of reading but to read for the sake of problems posed in and by those circumstances. Thus, when encountering the Mexican existentialist, I read their readings unapologetically with a certain set of expectations—expectations for orientation, direction, or pause.

My readings into el Grupo Hiperión could be said to take their cue from the opening lines of Martin Heidegger's 1942 lecture course on Friedrich Hölderlin's poem "The Ister." In his introductory remarks, Heidegger announces the limitations of his own reading. These are, he says, "remarks" that accompany, or add, to the text itself; they may not be "contained in" the poem. These remarks, as additives to the textual encounter, are not *strictly* interpretative, but they are motivated by that encounter. Ultimately, Heidegger's thoughts arising from the encounter with Hölderlin's poetry serve as "pauses for reflection," as possible moments for interpretation and for philosophy. He writes:

What this lecture course is able to communicate are remarks on the poetry it has selected. Such remarks are always only an accompaniment. It may therefore be that some, or many, or even all of these remarks are simply imported and are not "contained in" the poetry. The remarks, in that case, are not taken from the poetry, are not presented from out of this poetry. The remarks in no way achieve what in the strict sense of the word could be called an "interpretation" of the poetry. At the risk of missing the truth of Hölderlin's poetry, the remarks merely provide a few markers, signs that call our attention, *pauses for reflection*. (Heidegger 1996, 2, emphasis mine)

Likewise, the remarks by the Mexican existentialists on the texts they encounter (by Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, or Heidegger) serve as “pauses for reflection,” for themselves as well as for me. Moreover, my own remarks on the readings of those readers, and their remarks on their own readings, are not strictly interpretative, as I will show. The readings (both mine and theirs) are points of departure, encounters that motivate thinking and, the hope is, philosophy.

Significantly, my claim throughout is that the readings here discussed—mine and theirs—are acts of *appropriation*. I suggest in what follows that appropriation, often defined as the act of taking possession of something without legal right, or to make one’s own without permission, occurs in the act of reading, and in particular, of reading philosophy. Appropriation is not assimilation, or mimicry, but a simultaneous taking and altering for the sake of some end. But the end of the taking—possession—of appropriation is not to preserve, it is not an embalming of what is possessed; rather, the end is transformation, of world or one’s place in it.

In philosophy, as with the specific case of Latin American thought, the danger with appropriation rests on the fact that past attempts to appropriate a text end up not with appropriation but with totalization. The read text, that is, totalizes the system that invites it in, it overruns and assimilates it (as was the case, for example, with nineteenth-century positivism [cf. Clark 2010]). Thus there is Jacques Derrida’s warning against what he calls the “cultural, colonial, or neocolonial logic of appropriation as expropriation” where one “loses one’s memory by assimilating the memory of the other” (2002, 10). In the act of reading, forgetting the distinction between appropriation—to make one’s own or put one’s own stamp on—and expropriation—where one allows what is properly one’s own (*propria*) to be seduced away (*ex-*)—can easily lead to the loss of one’s identity (one’s memory) in that act. The loss of oneself in the act of reading is further facilitated by what Paul Ricoeur calls “distanca-tion,” where the reader keeps a distance between text and life, refusing to place her own stamp or alter the text in any way, as the aim of reading—especially of reading philosophy—is thought to be complete objectivity (Ricoeur 1991, 87). Thus, appropriation is not distanciation or expropria-tion, both of which appeal to the logic of authority and objectivity; rather, appropriation, as Ricoeur puts it, has an “existential character,” projecting “the proposal of a mode of being-in-the-world,” revealing “new modes

of being,” which “gives the subject new capacities for knowing himself” (97).

With that said, I would like to stress that the readings here discussed appropriate lessons without losing what is truly one’s own, namely, one’s history and one’s identity—Mexican thinkers will not lose their memory, nor will I (they are not expropriations). These are not passive readings that will leave the text unharmed (as with distanciation); they are done without permission and legal right, and so free to be creative and enhancing, loving and violent.

Ultimately, then, my purpose here is not to add to the current exegesis of existentialism in Mexico but rather to explicate a manner of confronting Mexican existentialism. Like the Mexican existentialist confrontation with French existentialism, or John Dewey, or with the strict demands of Eurocentric philosophy, my confrontation with Mexican existentialism is structured by certain ideological prejudices that I cannot ignore: a desire to read on behalf of my circumstance and in my own time, in other words, a desire to appropriate.

VIOLENCE

Because appropriation is at play, mine will be a violent reading. The possibility of violence when reading is due to two factors: first, a text is always circumstantial—that is, it is contextualized, and thus limited, by the physical signs on the page, by the time and place of its authorship, and by the author’s intentions; and second, reading is a *taking* and *altering*. Thus, in the act of reading, the reader forcefully inserts herself into a *context*, into an environment that the text creates out of meanings and signs, and seeks fulfillment for her own reading intentions. Sigmund Freud notes in his “Misreadings” of 1901 that “the reader . . . reads into [the text] something which he is expecting or with which he is occupied” (1975, 160). Simply put, she reads more than what is written; she reads her expectations and desires into the text. For these reasons, José Ortega y Gasset, in a posthumously published essay, “The Difficulty of Reading” (1959a), suggests that reading is ultimately a utopian task, the process of which requires either a violent act of reading *in* or the more difficult act of suppressing this tendency and practicing “renunciation.” Renunciation is demanded by the text itself, he says, because the reader has exhausted

into a modernity (or even past it) that, it was widely believed, had left it behind. The means to do this was philosophy, and particularly existential philosophy and phenomenology, which they appropriated not as followers of a fad (although that was a criticism leveled against them) but as responsible members of a struggling community of persons whose sense of self had been irreparably shaken by a history of violence, conquest, colonization, and revolution. While the moment of Hyperion only lasted four years, from 1948 to 1952, their legacy has remained in the philosophical consciousness of Mexico, as evidenced by a recent surge in publications, specifically south of the border, dealing with their methods, projects, influence, and significance. The present text aims to join this conversation while simultaneously adding to the growing literature on Latin American philosophy in the United States.

My approach to the interpretation of the existential philosophy of Hyperion is one that assumes that reading is always purposeful and not “innocent.” Thus, Hyperion’s reading of the French existentialists, for example, is not a straightforward reading but one intended to teach something transformative—something vital depends on that reading. Members of Hyperion certainly did not mean their study of existentialism (or phenomenology or existential Marxism) to be strictly an academic exercise. Hence, each chapter attempts to showcase the ways in which philosophy is appropriated and the power that this appropriation can bestow not only on the particular reader but on an entire generation of thinkers. In order to bring Hyperion to bear on the twenty-first century, a running theme of the proposed manuscript is that there is something to be learned from Hyperion’s project—a lesson, or lessons, for Latino/a life in the United States, in particular, but also for the lives of those on the fringes of contemporary, postmodern or postcolonial, economic, political, cultural power.

ONE

Existentialism as Pause and Occasion

The Appropriations of el Grupo Hiperión

The 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.¹

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 [*enfocajes*] regarding existentialism, *guided toward* . . . the realization of a concrete analysis of the manner of being of the Mexican" (Uranga 1948, 224, emphasis mine).² 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 *enfocajes*—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 Macgregor'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

Stares, 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 from 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 [*bombrea*]," 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 Maegrégor 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" (Maegrégor 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 relation 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 exegetis, 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 entoque. 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 metaphysical 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,"³ 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 ordinary lived experience [*vivencia ordinaria*] of Mexican-ness should serve to measure and calibrate the meaning of Mexican-ness 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).⁴

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.⁵

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