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**CONTINGENCY  
AND  
COMMITMENT**

*Mexican Existentialism  
and the Place of Philosophy*

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**SUNY**  
P R E S S

ordered, purposeful and logical. It is clear, to this reader at least, that the inflexibility of Portilla's philosophical temperament prevented him from appreciating the spontaneity of contemporary culture. That he failed to appreciate this spontaneity caused him to hold views that, *prima facie*, might seem totalitarian, or at least contradictory, such as the value of restricted freedom, or a faith in reason.

With that in mind, I close with *Pascal's Pensées*, in whose opening lines I find a fitting description of Portilla, the conflicted defender of modernity: "Man's inward conflict between reason and the passions. Had he reason only, without passions . . . had he passions only, without reason . . . , but having both, he must always be at war, since only by combating the other can he be at peace with the one: thus he is always divided against himself" (Pascal 1946, 7).

### THREE

## The Passion Dialectic

### *On Rootedness, Errors, and Appropriations*

The study of philosophy should not be pushed too much into detail.

—Plato (1871, 487)

Passion is essential to poetry, to literature, and, some would insist, to politics. Philosophy, on the other hand, must be free of passion; in fact, it must deny passion altogether; it must deny feelings and emotions, sentiments, or anything else that can be traced to the living, contingent, and accidental being that dare speak it. Richard Rorty characterizes this difference perfectly when he says that "the quarrel between poetry and philosophy [lies in] the tension between an effort to achieve self-creation by the recognition of contingency and an effort to achieve universality by the transcendence of contingency" (1989, 25). Under such characterization Mexican existentialists are poets and not philosophers, since their efforts are directed at recognizing and appropriating contingency for the benefit of self and community (see chapter 1). This would also mean that "philosophers" such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein are not philosophers either, since, Rorty says, "they have tried to avoid anything that smacks of philosophy as contemplation, as the attempt to see life steadily and see it whole, in order to insist on the sheer contingency of individual existence" (26). But humanity's consensus is that Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein *are* philosophers and that what they do *is* philosophy, which should mean that Uranga, Zea, and those hiperiones

who "avoid anything that smacks of philosophy as contemplation" in order to put it in the service of their contingent situation are philosophers as well, and what they *do* is philosophy. However, instead of their canonization in philosophy's grand narrative, Mexican philosophers have been relegated to anonymity and marginalization as a result of "philosophically" approaching the concrete situation of Mexican existence as they did, namely, in its particularity (or, with Plato in *Gorgias*, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, they "pushed" philosophy "into detail").

But, alas, the lure of the passion that refuses itself (philosophy qua rigorous contemplation of transcendence and universality) is too strong. The same philosophers who at one moment proclaim the situational nature of philosophy reveal philosophy as emerging from contingent existence, and thus, tainted by life experience, are inevitably *swayed* to return to philosophy its rightful role as the "attempt to see life steadily and see it whole." This movement to-and-fro of the philosophical is characteristic of the history of philosophy in mid-twentieth-century Mexico. I am not talking about indecisiveness before a choice of what philosophy should be but rather a hesitation to commit in the radical, and vital, way in which commitment itself is supposed to be assumed—a commitment described by the likes of Leopoldo Zea, for example.

In what follows, I will propose that what gives Mexican philosophy, as here understood, a distinctive flavor emerges from an internal struggle regarding its identity. Not surprisingly, philosophy's internal struggle reflects that of Mexican culture itself: a culture "generally"<sup>2</sup> defined by *mestizaje*, *zozobra*, or the oscillation between being and non-being, the Spanish and the indigenous, by contingency; a culture pulled in opposing directions by the cult of death (e.g., la Santa Muerte) and the cult of salvation (la Virgen de Guadalupe), and by a history of either submission to others (the colonial period) or outright violence against itself (the Revolution of 1910 or the narco culture of today). In philosophy, this internal struggle is reflected in certain commitments to the nature and role of philosophy: for instance, a commitment to objectivity versus subjectivity, universality versus particularity, the possible versus the actual, abstract versus concrete circumstance, existentialism versus conceptual analysis, and so on.

In order to highlight this perceived tension, I will proceed in a somewhat dialectical fashion. I will begin with Emilio Uranga's existentialist account of contingency, or the manner in which Mexicans experience this contingency, namely, as "zozobra," defined as a state of incessant swinging

to-and-fro between possibilities of existence in which Mexicans, according to Uranga, find themselves. As well as manifesting itself in particular approaches to life and world, my claim is that *zozobra* can also be grasped as an oscillation between preferences regarding the philosophical that, I insist, are characteristically Mexican—*zozobra*, that is, grounds and justifies the differing conceptions of philosophy that Mexican philosophers are prone to advocate at different times. Along with Uranga, Leopoldo Zea's philosophy represents one movement of this oscillation, as I show how he conceives philosophy as rooted, circumstantial, and committed to the spirit of a people.<sup>3</sup> This commitment is challenged, however, by what Zea calls "the imperial passion," which convinces philosophers, in the next swing of the existential pendulum, to deny the circumstantial basis for philosophy. I next examine the move in the 1950s to return philosophy to its privileged position as a "transcendence of contingency"—a move defended, ironically, by Uranga, Villoro, and Guerra, the core of the existentialist movement of the late 1940s; the task here is to illustrate the influence and pull of the imperial passion. Next, I look at Carlos Pereda's suggestion that when philosophy particularizes itself the way in which it did during the existentialist moment in Mexico, it is merely suffering from a "subaltern fervor." Pereda thinks that philosophy must not particularize itself in such a manner and that it must, instead, be a reflection on "everything." Pereda's critique is an extension of that leveled against el Grupo Hiperión by an earlier critic, Abelardo Villegas, who notices the contradictions in the existentialist project. Finally, in what we could think of as the return of the first pendular movement, I reconsider the value of Zea's original insight regarding the priority of circumstance together with his subsequent hesitation (manifested as an insistence on philosophy *sin más*). For the sake of argument, and to conclude, I appeal to Jacques Derrida's observations regarding the nature and future of philosophy, and suggest that there, in Zea's and Hiperión's readings and appropriations, is where philosophy truly achieves itself as philosophy *for all*.

## ZOZOBRA

Uranga's existentialist-inspired characterization of Mexican being as fundamentally contingent is a philosophical insight grounded on the history and circumstance of Mexico itself. With the first *mestizo* comes the first internal duality, the first tension, and the first conflict of identity. Mexico

becomes the land of contradictions, and these make their way into the depths of the Mexican psyche. Mexican art testifies to this, and so does Mexican poetry, where Uranga finds his Friedrich Hölderlin in the person of Ramón López Velarde.

It was pointed out in the introduction that Heidegger's encounter with Hölderlin gave the former pause and occasion for philosophy; Uranga's encounter with Velarde accomplished a similar feat. Indeed, poetry for Uranga provides direct access to the most inaccessible aspects of being: "what the poet reveals sets itself apart with an almost religious caution from the accessible dominions of thought" (1952, 76). In line with Rorty's characterization of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy, Uranga likewise recognizes that "poetry and thought [*pensar*] oppose each other" and, again like Rorty, laments that the "divorce between poetry and thought" has not been beneficial to either (76). The common assumption is that philosophy is "dry and narrow" while poetry is "stupid [*tonta*] and prejudicial," which leads to the shutting out of the poetic in the search for truth and meaning (76). As we have seen, however, the Mexican existentialist project, in all of its profiles, is unafraid to be prejudicial, for the health and future of those circumstances of which it is a reflection or toward which it is an intervention. But it is not poetry! That is, at the very least, our literary prejudices tell us that theirs is not poetry, even if a fundamentalist apostle of philosophy would charge his or her thinking as unphilosophical. This suggests that the divorce between poetry and philosophy is not as clear-cut as we would think. Uranga recognizes this, professing hope that his generation "begins to heal its myopia and it opens itself to the new conviction that poetry and philosophy communicate with each other through robust networks that only our narrow vision can make impalpable and subtle" (76). Thus, Uranga sees in poetry, and especially in the poetry of Velarde, the secret to the unraveling of the mysteries of existence, and especially Mexican existence. Velarde's poetry, he says, "will always be the final word in my ontology" (81).

So what does Velarde's poetry reveal? Uranga reflects on the following lines: "Weaver: weave into your thread / the inertia of my sleep and your confident illusion; / weave the silence; / weave the terrible syllable that crosses our lips but says nothing" (Uranga 1952, 85). Uranga's reading is penetrating yet telling. He writes: "the thread of life, that weaves in a zigzagging movement . . . is not woven by a logical or providential hand, but by a hand that is adventurous and random. The weaver is not wise and calculating of effects and conclusions; the weaver is the abandoned

inspiration of the accidental" (85). Pausing in several of Valerde's poems, Uranga reads them as revelatory of contingency, accident, randomness, and contradiction. Reading with Uranga, we can say that Valerde's poetry occasions a reflection of Mexican existence in a restless limbo of uncertainty and homelessness; or, said differently, the poems reveal Mexican life as situated in a nondialectic that nonetheless traps this worldly being in a perpetual movement, *woven* in and out, to-and-fro extremes. Pushing our reading even further, Valerde reveals Mexican *metizaje*—this vague mark of historical identity—as fluid and contradictory, and the Mexican as a perpetual immigrant, always in transit from one site to the next. Mexican being, in this account, is therefore not subject to a Hegelian-type dialectic, where one conception of identity is subsumed by the next in a process leading to a sublation of the first and, consequently, a richer, more robust sense of self. What Uranga is talking about is "an oscillating or pendular manner of being that goes to one extreme and then to the next, that makes both instances simultaneous and never annihilates one for the sake of the other" (82). Because of this pendular movement, Mexican character, or identity, cannot situate itself on either extreme, but locates itself, when it must, as perpetually in-between. The Nahuatl word for the in-betweenness of Mexican being is *nepantla*, a concept, Uranga boasts, that is the "purest cardinal category of our ontology" and not one "recklessly borrowed from the Western tradition" (81).

*Nepantla* refers to an ambivalent middle-ground that is neither *and* both of its extremes. It is the point at which contradictory forces converge, and from which they perpetually repel each other; *nepantla* is where contradictory forms of the human are condemned to perpetual simultaneity. Uranga lists a few ways in which *nepantla* has manifested itself in the history of Mexican thought: the convergence-repulsion of the "Christian and the indigenous," of "hypocrisy and cynicism," of "brutality and gentleness," of "fragility and toughness," and so on (1952, 82). *Nepantla* rests in the conjunction that ties the extremes together as its logical glue.

Uranga refers to this "logic of oscillation," where *nepantla* conditions the simultaneity of extremes, as "zozobra" (1952, 82). *Zozobra*, like other categories in Mexican philosophy, for instance *relajo*, does not lend itself to unproblematic translation into English. The *Velázquez* dictionary defines *zozobra* as "Uneasiness, anguish, anxiety" and a *zozobranete*, which would refer in Uranga's analysis to Mexican being in general, as "that which is in great danger; [a] sinking" (Velázquez, Gray, and Tribas

2003, 932). In Uranga, zozobra is a definitive characteristic of Mexican being, and it refers to a

not knowing what to expect, or what is the same, adhering to both extremes, an accumulation, a not letting-go [*im no soltar presa*], a grasping at both ends of the chain. The incessant play of to-and-fro . . . 'our lives are pendulums,' as López Velarde puts it. . . . But what zozobra contains, perhaps deeper than anything else, is a peculiar pain, the most private suffering. The inevitable wound found in this type of being that reveals zozobra is incurable. It is a wound that will not heal; a permanent wound. The immersion in the ordinary announces itself in the irrepres- sible screams that emanate when we touch, with our finger, that wound . . . indelible and bloody. (1952, 82)

We can certainly see how zozobra is a kind of uneasiness or anxiety, or the feeling of great danger. But this common way of understanding it does not do it justice. Clearly, this is an instance of Uranga appropriating Heidegger's notion of "angst," or existential anxiety, whereby the world itself appears as "unnerving" but the being that confronts that world cannot "let go" of it, holds on to it, all the while recognizing the permanence of this "private suffering." In Heidegger, Stephen Mulhall writes, "anxiety confronts Dasein with the knowledge that it is thrown into the world—always already delivered over to situations of choice and action which matter to it but which it did not itself fully choose or determine. It confronts Dasein with the determining and yet sheerly contingent fact of its own worldly existence" (2005, 111). Likewise for Uranga, zozobra confronts Mexicans who understand their accidentality, or their contingency, reminding them that life is constant suffering and perpetual struggle, that Mexican existence itself is played out in the horizon of accidentality where freedom and uncertainty reign, where choice and responsibility offers the only semblance of control.

In our reading, zozobra, as a "grasping at both ends of the chain," can help explain the oscillation, hesitation, and floundering of Mexican philosophers as they face a radically vital choice, namely, a choice that decides the nature of the appropriation and accomplishment of a philosophical commitment. If zozobra is an ontological characteristic found in the depths of being, then it must surely manifest itself in the realm of thinking, of thought, in the way in which Mexican philosophers communicate with the universe and in the way in which they conceive of

philosophy, if philosophy is to be a way to cope with the "indelible and bloody" reminder of their thrownness into that particular world in which they find themselves. As with everything defining the zozobranante (the historical individual who suffers zozobra), philosophy will likewise present itself in the guise of extremes: on the one hand, as universal and ahistorical and, on the other, as rooted and circumstantial.

## PHILOSOPHY AND THE IMPERIAL PASSION

### *A Philosophy of Uneasiness*

The narrative of zozobra, whereby Mexicans are understood through the concepts of accidentality, contingency, and oscillation, justifies the appeal to a philosophical articulation of human existence that emphasizes concreteness and circumstance, or that devalues objectivity and universality as alienating of real human concerns. Thus, for instance, Uranga's existentialism maintains that human existence is circumstantial, and as such determined in its freedom and its choices by a horizon of concrete, yet contingent, possibilities. Such an approach to the philosophical suggests that the purpose of philosophy is to reflect on one's own situational existence—and all that that implies—so as to achieve a genuine and authentic recognition of its history, its failings, and its future; if its determinations are found to be detrimental to the practice of freedom and human flourishing, philosophy would then prescribe change through certain acts of intervention, reevaluation, and transformation.

Given that conception of the philosophical life, the job description for a philosopher, bounded by possibilities and entrenched in a circumstance, would include the following:

The philosopher occupies a very determined place. He/she is surrounded by technology, concrete people, and indivisibly tied to a very specific past. This is called facticity. From this standpoint, the philosopher plans transformations, confronts the situation with an "ideal" that does not yet exist, but which serves to illuminate, in detail, the world to be changed. Ideas are not made but for certain facticities or situations. There are no situations in general nor ideals in general, but only . . . particular ideals related to particular situations. . . . *The philosopher who does not attend to his/her circumstance, and who does not propose a solution or ideal*

*for that circumstance, cannot rest easy. Our philosophy is thus uneasy, or has been uneasy.* (Uranga 2013a, 168, emphasis mine)

The “uneasiness” of philosophy reflects back to the uneasiness of spirit, of *zozobra*, in which a distinctive disquiet motivates transformative action. In this way, Mexican existentialism is also, and simultaneously, a circumstantial philosophy, a philosophy of facticity, a pragmatic/revolutionary philosophy, and a philosophy of commitment.

Leopoldo Zea is perhaps the most uneasy of our philosophers, if only for his unwavering advocacy of a philosophical narrative that does not shun circumstance (the poetic in Rorty). In “Philosophy as Commitment,” a lecture given at a Hyperion-sponsored conference in 1948 (it is not clear if it was part of the IFAL conferences), Zea insists that philosophy ought to be a reflection on, a clarification of, and a response to that contingent element of human existence that defines one’s factual identity—culture, history, social circumstance, and so on. He credits the French existentialists with promoting this approach but reminds us that the appropriation of it and application to the Mexican circumstance must be fitting and original. After all, Zea writes, “Sartre’s situation is not our situation” (1952, 34).

In order to make the case that philosophy is not only a reflection on universals, on necessity and possibility, or, again, a transcendence of contingency, Zea suggests that the meaningful in the philosophical will be that which speaks to our own existential predicaments; the philosophical revelation of the eternal and the transcendental is, one could say, the unsayable and, thus, the inapplicable or the useless. Moreover, conceiving philosophy as fitting, as useful, as a reflection on our own contingent situation reflects an awareness of ourselves that is historical and original. Zea writes:

The not wanting to take consciousness of our *situation* explains, in part, why we have not been able to achieve a philosophy that is properly ours, as other great peoples have done. To what should our philosophy have responded? What type of individual or what type of culture would it have *rescued*? What would have been the situation in which a philosophy would emerge? What would our philosophers philosophize about? One could answer: philosophy is universal and the philosopher can only commit to the eternal and universal. But answering in this way is not to answer at all.

Committing to the universal and eternal, without specifying at least one commitment, is not committing to anything. This is merely a subterfuge, a comfortable way to elude responsibilities. We can speak comfortably about the universality of the good, of value, of knowledge, etc., without implying an assumption of any commitment at all. (1952, 33)

So if it is to have value, philosophy must have a localized point of emergence, or a specified commitment, one rooted in a specific situation. Here, we read Zea privileging the local at the expense of the universal. In fact, to think of philosophy as a dogmatic concern with universals is “immoral” in the Sartrean sense, as it is to evade world-related responsibilities. A philosophy in the traditional sense, Zea maintains, is a philosophy of nothingness, since it says nothing and it commits to nothing; it is, ultimately, a “voice in the desert” (1952, 35).

Zea doubles down on this stance in 1951. Delivered at another Hyperion-sponsored event, Zea’s “Dialectic of Mexican Consciousness” is a Hegelian account of that combat for recognition that Mexican culture has been engaged in beginning with the conquest and colonization of Mexico by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. Everything significant to human existence and human dignity is waged in this battle, and history reveals that Mexico has been on the losing end for most of it. We can see the signs of defeat in the privilege enjoyed by Anglo-European races and Eurocentric thought, in the way in which these races and this thought promote themselves to the level of substance and essence, of arbitrators and measures of all that is good, decent, and rational. “What ought to be accidental,” writes Zea, “is elevated to the category of archetype” (1952, 194). Broadcasting of the archetype to the defeated and subjugated is the right and privilege of the victors in the historical struggle. The defeated, in turn, now demoted to less than human, to less than rational, *must* consume the archetype and order their lives according to its dictates. This is a transcendent imperialism that cuts across differences and goes to the heart of the spirit of a people. As Zea puts it: “Whatever does not fit [*encaja*] within the frame of comprehension of those that consider themselves privileged must be eliminated, or, at least, adapted to the terms of that comprehension” (1952).<sup>4</sup>

This applies especially to thought. “The points of view of the Western man,” writes Zea, “are given as the points of view of Universal man, that is, as the only points of view of man, if he desires the right to be called

as such" (1952, 196). Said differently, internal to the Western perspective are the limiting conditions of the nonhuman, namely, whatever is other to the archetype. "Everything that [western humanity] is, its culture, its history and its existence are, simply, the highest expression of humanity; whatever does not resemble that expression is relegated to the space of the subhuman, to barbarity" (196). In philosophy, barbarity appears in the form of concepts not organic to the Western paradigm, such as *zozobra* or "the being of the Mexican."

If philosophy is an expression of the Western confidence in its own authority, then any insistence on the circumstantial nature of philosophy is already a revolt against the archetype and a reconceptualization of philosophy itself. In other words, *insistence* on the affirmation of circumstance is already *resistance* to the hegemony of the colonizing power; but more than that, it is to take a stand and demand recognition of an existence and a worldview that does not fit, in some sort of idealistic isomorphic way, the proposed archetype. For instance, when Mexican philosophers propose "Mexicanness" as an existential (and ontological) category, it is done in full awareness that it might not pass inspection by philosophy's regulating authorities; however, it is done nonetheless, as an expression of subjectivity or, at least, as a demand for recognition. "Mexicanness," writes Zea, "far from indicating a diluting of the human comes to be its concrete expression. As concrete as the [European] that prejudices this world with categories proper to its own circumstance. The circumstantial, far from diluting, evidences that foundation common to all humanity" (1952, 202). On Zea's reading, then, the circumstantial approach to existence and philosophy that articulates it is the only humanizing approach, the only truly inclusive approach, in a world replete with perspectives, it embraces difference and accounts for similarity. While a philosophical commitment to universality is a commitment to nothing, a philosophical commitment to circumstance is a commitment to truths that matter to us, in the here and now.

Ultimately, the existentialist affirmations of contingency, accidentality, and the primacy of the Mexican circumstance run the risk of censure, as the Western archetype (empowered by imperialist urges) calls thought back to itself. Philosophers are faced with the dilemma (the so-called double bind) of adopting the archetype and in the process making *their* philosophical commitments irrelevant or affirming those commitments and in the process giving up the right to philosophy.

### THE IMPERIAL PASSION

Decades later, Zea reaffirms his commitment to a conception of philosophy as committed. According to Zea, the insight that Latin America is "beyond history" and "marginalized from the historical process" was instilled in him by the Spanish exile José Gao, who proposed that Latin America, as a whole, could "only participate in history by overcoming its marginalization" (Maciel 1985, 10). A symptom of this marginalization would be the insistence that philosophy, if it is to be anything at all, can only be that which transcends contingency. Overcoming marginalization thus requires the overcoming of the exclusive choice mentioned at the end of the previous section (the double bind), and an insistence on a return to origins, namely, the origins of thinking, of thought, of ideas, which is a return to one's lived experience.

These origins are not metaphysical or conceptual but material. The origins are history and geography (i.e., circumstance). Zea will always insist, despite his somewhat puzzling, yet popular, suggestion that philosophy in Latin America is "sin más," or nothing more than philosophy, on the connection of thought to history (1969). "To separate ideas from their circumstance," he explains, "is to remove philosophy from its history. For me, history cannot exist without philosophy, nor philosophy without history" (Maciel 1985, 11). This connection precludes a philosophy *without* particular attributes; that is, history will automatically add these attributes, such as the cultural schizophrenia belonging to a certain people whose experience of the colony left them searching for a stable identity. Attributes such as these will show up in what philosophers think about when they are thinking about "everything," in the way readers read, in their *enfoque*.

As we have seen in the case of Mexican existentialism, a concern with the Mexican "situation" or circumstance was ever-present, because that situation or circumstance is recognized to be in crisis, in constant struggle with itself. "Mexico" as a historical, sociopolitical entity is a historical and existential worry, one that defines identity and organizes thinking. Philosophers assume this worry because it is their responsibility *as* Mexicans. Zea relates in an interview how the North American philosopher Charles Hale charismed him for delving into his own (Zea's) historical circumstance, into his own "something," as he attempted to analyze the history of philosophy in Mexico. Hale's critique was that Zea's analysis

could not possibly be objective. "I find this view utterly unacceptable," Zea responds. "It would mean that North American scholars could not be objective about their own history" (Maciel 1985, 12).

Indeed, the notion that only someone *outside* a particular circumstance can be objective about what happens *inside* that circumstance must mean that European historians have never been objective about European history or that "American" philosophers have never been objective about "America." The subtext of Hale's suggestion, however, is that Mexican culture is historically immature and thus incapable of producing minds with the profundity required to be properly objective. Hale's paternalism, familiar to thinkers whose point of departure is marginality or peripheral existence, demands objectivity at any cost, even if that means the erasure of difference. The subtext says that one must not speak from the depths of one's inner turmoil; furthermore, that inner turmoil cannot be spoken by those who suffer it. One must wait to be told what one is suffering and how one suffers it by others who have earned the authority to do so. But as philosophers and, more generally, as persons, even Socrates would agree, the capacity to look at ourselves critically and profoundly is not something that requires permission from an external authority and it is certainly not a capacity that we are willing to sacrifice. As Zea points out, "we are *all* influenced by our realities and circumstances" (Maciel 1985, 12, emphasis mine), and this means that objectivity of the kind demanded by Hale is, while certainly paternalistic and impractical to those suffering *inside* their circumstance, at the very least ignorant of the value and power of self-knowledge and self-critique.

Zea suggests that the pressure to achieve objectivity at any cost is a manifestation of what he calls an "imperial passion" (Maciel 1985, 12). I say "suggest" because Zea himself does not explicitly define the imperial passion. He does say, however, that only North Americans (of which Hale is an esteemed representative) seem to want to ignore the influence of their own realities and circumstances by practicing a passionless detachment from them, and expecting others (especially others they see as inferior or subservient) to do the same, an expectation of obedience that can only be described as imperialist. That is, they (North Americans and, we could say, peoples for whom colonialism and imperialism served a great historical and cultural benefit, in other words, the West) aim to cultivate their own version of what is good and right by imposing the specifications for achieving that version that they have convinced themselves involves a detached, passionless perspective. Ironically, the

promotion of a passionless approach to the problems of existence, Zea suggests, is motivated by passion (of the imperialist kind, but nonetheless a passion). Thus, this desire for objectivity at any cost turns out to be more than a manifestation of a need to impose values on others; it is the passionate refusal of a passion. Philosophy that emerges from this tension (for instance, the whole of Western/Eurocentric philosophy) is a testament to a passion that refuses itself.

At this point in the oscillation (in the zozobra of the philosophical itself), we notice that the omnipresence of the imperial passion in the universe of thought leads to various reactions among lovers of wisdom. Some, like Zea, recoil at the thought of giving in to the demands for pure, untainted (and alienating) objectivity, while others embrace it, believing that to *alter* philosophy in any way is to degrade it or annul it.

#### THE PASSION THAT REFUSES ITSELF

We can say that the arrival and appropriation of existentialism in Mexico encouraged a conception of philosophy that made sense to those for whom Mexico itself, as life-world, was in existential crisis. In response to the crisis, readings of existentialist texts prejudiced those concepts, ideas, or analyses that could serve as "tools" (Uranga) or "occasions" (Portilla) for a reorientation of individual and communal life. Philosophy itself, as we have seen, was reimagined to serve the needs of the circumstance from which it arose (Mexico). Philosophy was placed in the service of culture, of history, of a particular and specific kind of human existence and a particular and specific circumstance, "lo mexicano."

However, what I have been suggesting throughout this chapter is that the tendency to reimagine philosophy as other than its archetype can also be attributed to a specifically Mexican sensibility, a manner of being particular to Mexicans, namely, zozobra or the zozobran character of Mexican life, manifested as a "pendular" duality that defines Mexicans as perpetually oscillating between existential and historical commitments to either the indigenous or the European, or simultaneously both and neither. Or, to put it in terms from the previous section, we can say that the Mexican philosophical sensibility oscillates between the passionate and the passionless. When passionate, it flies in the face of the archetype; when passionless, it flies in the face of the circumstance.

Given this constitutional turmoil, it is not surprising then that once-passionate existential philosophers like Viloro and Uranga would come to deny philosophy as commitment and circumstantial (that Guerra denied this conception of philosophy is not surprising at all, as his lecture on Sartre attests [see chapter 1]). This denial comes a decade after the IFAL conferences, and it takes the form of a critique of Hyperion's teacher and mentor, José Gaos.

José Gaos conceived the history of philosophy as a series of failures to arrive at truth. This led to skepticism about what philosophy could achieve. Oswaldo Ruanova summarizes Gaos's skepticism: "Just as the most illustrious thinkers contradict each other . . . and just as ideas lose their validity . . . just as 'patricides' abound since Aristotle negated his teacher Plato, readers come to question which among the philosophers has the truth. They all do, and none of them do" (1982, 19). This kind of skepticism gave way to the notion that the truth that matters is not found outside human life but within it, proximal to it, constitutive of it. "If it was not possible to find constancy in philosophy," Aurelia Valero notes in summary, "then it was necessary to look for it in the subject, in the philosopher" (2012, 11). This meant a return to biography, or better yet, to autobiography and to the person who is its subject. Gaos calls his philosophical approach "*personalismo*." Through personalismo Gaos attempts to return philosophy to the realm of the concrete by conceiving the person as the "most fundamental reality" (1947, 212). This means that what is given as "universal" will always merely be universal for us, finite and contingent beings, that truth will be significant only in the realm of a person's life, and thus, that the search for truth must focus on that life as the fundamental reality. Gaos writes: "The traditional conception of the relation between truth and man, of the grasping and possession of the former by the latter, holds that the authenticity of truth lies in its universal transcendence of all finitude . . . that to apprehend truth man must transcend his finitude. . . . [But] it is necessary to insist that it is precisely as a finite being that truth in its universality is given to man" (212). In other words, philosophy is revelatory, but only of (and for) our finitude and in virtue of our limitations. According to Valero, "we must learn to live under the notion of [as Gaos put it] 'the individual's historical solitude in the midst of his own time'" (2012, 11).

The critique of Gaos by his students and mentees represents a moment in the oscillations and hesitations of Mexican philosophers toward the demands of philosophical history. Gaos's students object to

"personalismo" on the basis that philosophy ought not to be rooted in such precarious foundations, that philosophy deserves more than what Gaos is giving it, namely, a false start. Philosophy of this hue cannot achieve the sort of objectivity desired, namely, transcendent objectivity, and remains trapped within the confines of a finite subject. We see in this criticism of Gaos the turn toward a conception of philosophy that shuns rootedness in circumstance and lived experience and toward a conception of philosophy as ideally situated and concerned only with the universal and the eternal; we see a turn toward an allegiance to pure philosophy, what fulfills the desire of the "imperial passion" mentioned by Zea.

In the introduction to *Filosofía y vocación*, her edited collection of "seminar papers" written by Gaos, Guerra, Alejandro Rossi, Uranga, and Viloro, Valero gives us a window into the historical moment when the aforementioned "denial" takes place. The seminar takes place in October 1958 in Mexico City and deals with figures from the history of modern philosophy; Hegel, Husserl, Kant, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Feuerbach are discussed. However, as the seminar gets underway, José Gaos steers the discussion toward the nature, function, origin, and limits of philosophy itself. As one of the most important philosophical figures in twentieth-century Mexico, the Spanish exile, we assume, feels entitled to move the discussion along lines that will promote his own philosophical proclivities. There is the suggestion that Gaos expects his students to expand on his definitions and explanations of what philosophy is and what it is not. However, in a dramatic twist, we find that his students have transcended the master and no longer find his theories on the matter sustainable. (As reader and, ultimately, spectator to this back-and-forth, I feel deeply for Gaos, the teacher; I can sense his renunciation as his students resist and critically challenge his personalismo; I can sense his defeat, or, as Valero suggests, the recognition of his irrelevance, or of his tragic failure as teacher and guide.)

A main point of contention between the master and his pupils has to do with what philosophy is not. According to Gaos, as mentioned earlier, philosophy is not revelatory of universal, timeless truths and ideas; at best, what philosophy and its history has revealed is that truths and ideas are never stable and always historically situated and thus susceptible to challenge and change. But the biggest reason for objecting to the master has to do with the lack of objectivity that Gaos's personalismo seems to imply. Personalismo suggests that "philosophy has found itself incapable of fulfilling its promise" of delivering certainty, truth, and objectivity,

and thus, if any “truth” will be found it will be located in the philosopher and himself (Valero 2012, 14). The students object to this conclusion, and point out that a return to the subject is a defeat for philosophy, since what personalismo delivers us into is the philosopher’s psychological makeup, his personal desires, arrogance, and fears, which is no place for truth. Philosophy ought to be objective, and the way to achieve objectivity is to remove the philosophical from the passions of subjective life—that is, the way to purity and truth is via restraint, detachment, and distance.

Uranga, having proclaimed years earlier that “el grupo Hiperión can be defined as a dialogue with Gaos” (Valero 2012, 18), where the latter influenced both the questions asked and the answers given, was here particularly critical of his teacher’s stance. Uranga now suggests, as Valero writes, that the “motives of the philosopher have nothing to do with the work” of that philosopher (18). Uranga puts it thus: “Between a philosopher’s ideas and his life there is nothing more than equivocal relations, two worlds that touch each other only accidentally, by a misunderstanding, by a confusion” (Valero 2012, 59). The suggestion here is that philosophy, as a world apart, is free of the contingencies and accidentalities that plague the thinker that thinks it. But more important, the life of the philosopher has “nothing to do” with the philosophy that philosopher reveals. Uranga continues: “There is no bridge between idea and life, and any contact produces a short-circuit and, as a result, darkness” (59). Thus post-Hiperión Uranga would say that zozobra does not influence a philosopher’s thinking.

According to Uranga, then, philosophy is pure contemplation, free, even, of a human echo, or the contamination of a human language. But is this conception of philosophy humanly possible or desirable? Is philosophy without motives something that can be achieved—if achievement itself is a result of human will? Or, is the philosophy that we *do* achieve condemned to “misunderstandings” or “confusions” and “short-circuits” that will necessarily befall it when it comes into contact with the life of the philosopher? Despite what Uranga says here, in the seminar and to his teacher, I doubt that he can consistently hold philosophy to such high standards. After all, a “Mexican” philosophy is certainly motivated by personal ambitions and driven by crises immediately related to the philosopher. Thus, I take Uranga’s “critique” here as a description of the ways things stand for a being plagued by zozobra and an intimacy with finitude (i.e., “accidentality”). In other words, we want philosophy to be free of us, and thus pure and eternal, but we also know that it speaks

through us and to us and that, because of this, it is condemned to suffer our shortcomings and our limitations. Ultimately, Uranga has a more modest (or human) proposal of what philosophy ought to be. It is not personalismo, which locates it in the subject, but, we can say, an *interpersonalismo*, grounded always already in an intimate intersubjectivity: “Philosophy for me is not a topic for a solitary pursuit but a matter of conversation, of a communication of life-in-common; a web that spreads itself out like a bridge between an I and a you [*un yo y un tú*]; a secretion erotically fostered by the human relation” (Valero 2012, 65). In this, my violent incursions into the Mexican philosophical mind, I am interpreting Uranga’s somewhat cryptic passage to mean that philosophy is an emanation, floating in the ether of the superstructure but grounded on the interrelations of people, who give birth to it in acts of love for one another and their specific, temporally determined, life-world. So it is not a lonely endeavor, traced to autobiography or individual life; it is a communal struggle meant for all—or at least the “all” that forms that specific human community.

In only this sense, Gaos’s personalismo has it right: the lofty aspirations of philosophy have fallen short, and all we can hope for is what we can give ourselves, namely, philosophy in communion. Nevertheless, Uranga here seems to distance himself from his previous philosophical stance, one in which an “autognosis” of subjective life would reveal the characteristics of Mexican being, and more toward a conception of philosophy where detachment is valued, even if that detachment is not the radical detachment of a Kant or a Plato.

As the seminar progresses and evolves, Luis Villoro questions the notion of philosophy as the product of human, intersubjective eroticism. In other words, Villoro thinks philosophy is completely other to the situated human condition (a blatant denial of his position during the existentialism conferences of 1948). “Philosophy,” he now writes, “consists, in essence, in placing in question, making doubtful, and *disconnecting* the natural world order to which motives and demands belong” (Valero 2012, 71, emphasis mine). In this sense, Gaos’s personalismo is not philosophy at all, since it goes against the essence of philosophy by doing precisely that which is prohibited by that essence, namely, *connecting* the world of motives and demands on it.

Villoro’s rejection of personalismo is also a rejection of existentialism and circumstantial philosophizing. It is a return to “pure” philosophy, especially to a presuppositionless philosophy that begins with doubt

and ends with truth. In this reading, the crises of human life would be a presupposition and so would history and personal struggle. Ideology, that which informs a life-world, would likewise serve as a prejudice. So philosophy begins in the detachment of doubt. It arises, Villoro suggests, from a letting-go of the demands that we make on it, and allowing it to emerge with its own questions. That is, we cannot demand that it enter our existential space and “save” us. Villoro writes: “Philosophy as a form of life involves the detachment of worldly life purposes and, consequently, a disinterest for demands and those purposes. . . . Philosophy cannot, in essence, fulfill the vital demands of the natural attitude. Everyday life cannot judge philosophy, when the latter consists precisely in judging everyday life” (Valero 2012, 72). Just like that, philosophy flees from the realm of the social and into its own inner sanctum where it cannot be burdened with our worldly crises. If it comes, it comes on its own accord, and not when we want it or need it.

Villoro’s post-Hyperion conception of philosophy situates it in a realm beyond, as something supranatural and, as such, concerned only with objects and events untrainted by natural existence. This conception was already at play in the IFAL lectures, as evidenced in Villoro’s unremarkable paper on Gabriel Marcel, mentioned in chapter 1. In that discussion, I suggested that Villoro was already working within a Husserlian framework where the Grundfrage was operative. Here, ten years later, the Husserlian influence is much more pronounced. In fact, Villoro’s conception of philosophy bears a striking resemblance to Husserl’s as described by H. L. Van Breda in 1951, where the phenomenological method of philosophy is seen as the only “authentic” mode of philosophy and, consequently, as the only means for an authentic existence. Van Breda describes Husserl’s conception of philosophy (the “phenomenological reduction”) as “the only possible way to escape the inauthentic existence of the natural attitude” (1979, 124) where contingency and accident reside. A philosopher, on this conception, is one who forces the detachment and does so as a matter of duty. Gaos, on this account (as well as the situated philosophical project of el Grupo Hiperi6n), did not measure up; he was not a (and they were not) philosopher(s). Van Breda concludes: “The philosopher—by definition the man who tries to know the origins of everything given and who is at pains to live an authentic life—ought to exercise the phenomenological reduction, if he does not want to betray his calling. [Philosophy] is thrust on his freedom in a categorical and imperative way” (1979, 125). It is clear that at the time of

the 1958 seminar, Uranga and Villoro alike felt the pressures of this calling, the pressure to reign in philosophy and align it with its traditional definition. They felt the calling of the imperial passion.

But perhaps the seminarian that more deeply feels the pressure of his calling is Ricardo Guerra. He seems to suggest, rather straightforwardly, two things: first, that philosophy is not a choice but a “manner of being” that, somehow, chooses one; and second, that it is wholly objective in what it investigates, from whence it arises, and what it reveals. About the first he says: “Philosophy has revealed itself to me, gradually, as a ‘necessity,’ as a ‘manner of living,’ as a ‘manner of being.’ Not as a possibility among others, involving decision and joy, but precisely as ‘what must be done,’ ‘what must not be otherwise,’ ‘what demands the renunciation of. . .’ without yet knowing the value or significance of such a ‘renunciation of. . .’ [‘*Lo que nos exige renunciar a . . . sin conocer an el valor o significaci6n de esta ‘renuncia a . . .’*”]” (Valero 2012, 46). Here, Guerra seems to echo Van Breda’s assertion that philosophy is thrust on one’s freedom in a categorical way and that authenticity depends on being its servant. Van Breda’s and Guerra’s suggestion that philosophy elects one as its vehicle, so to speak, sounds deterministic and, to certain ears, oppressive. But it is an oppression that leads to freedom—at least the freedom from living in the deceptions and the unjustified beliefs of the natural attitude. The important thing to notice about Guerra’s characterization of philosophy as an imposition from nowhere is that philosophy becomes impersonal, wholly and completely detached from the circumstance, from origin, and from history. Yes, in this picture, philosophy is pure, but it also becomes vacuous and, as Gaos puts it, “arrogant.”

Naturally, this leads Guerra to promote philosophy as the passion that refuses itself, or the impassioned passion for objectivity and purity: “Philosophy is not a subjective problem, nor is it a personal confession. . . . It is not a will to power [*voluntad de poder*] nor an instrument or means for something that is not itself. Any relationship with philosophy that is founded on the kind of interest just mentioned can only get us, in the best of cases, nihilism and skepticism” (Valero 2012, 48). In this way, the student reproaches his teacher by suggesting that the teacher’s personalism cannot get us anywhere except where we, duty-bound philosophers, should not be, namely, as advocates for nihilism and skepticism. So, if philosophy is not subjectively rooted, then its ground must be objective and alien to the “confessional” nature of subjective life. What grounding philosophy (and what comes with it, presumably truth and knowledge

and authenticity) in personal existence cannot achieve its universality, historicity or uprootedness, which is what Guerra, seemingly falling in line with his "calling," wants this that has thrust itself upon him to be.

My reading now bears witness to a complete swing of the pendulum, to a pronounced moment of zozobra. It swings from Uranga's *Hiperión*, from Gaos, Zea, and the insistence on the circumstantial nature of philosophy and the philosophical (on a passion that affirms itself). It swings to post-*Hiperión* Villoro and Uranga; and to Guerra, who under the spell of a "calling" unflinchingly presumes that philosophy is free of such earthly attachments (earlier I called it a "passion that refuses itself" because this conception of philosophy is certainly passionate, but it desires not to be). At this moment in the oscillation, a Mexican philosopher will surely hesitate before philosophy and doubt his or her place in what Carlos Pereda (2006) calls "the Headquarters of Thought," where philosophy comes home.

#### SUBALTERN FERVOR

What I refer to as the internal struggle characterizing Mexican philosophy can be traced to an external expectation of what philosophy is. Before this expectation, Mexican philosophers hesitate. In the temporality of that hesitation, philosophers either rush to meet the criteria that the "is" demands and has historically demanded, or they pursue a path of resistance, where the "is" is challenged, and instead of philosophy demanding something of the philosopher, the philosopher demands something of philosophy itself. The second of these options, however, traps one in a double bind. Demanding something of philosophy will require appropriation of existential insights arrived at by someone from a different historical and cultural situation (for instance, Mexican thinkers reading Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on embodiment). But when this takes place, philosophical pronouncements resulting from this appropriation are chastised as derivative. When appropriation is lacking, and the thinker refuses to go outside his own sphere of ownness, the thinking is accused of being unphilosophical. There is no way out of this double bind. There is only avoidance: that is, one must not hesitate.

But hesitation before the demands of philosophy is unavoidable, especially for subjects for whom philosophy represents the highest achievement of Western culture and against whom this achievement was utilized

as a tool of subjugation, a tool branded with the insignia of conquest and imperialism. Consequently, hesitation before the demands of philosophy has led to a perceived lack of a philosophical tradition belonging to those subjects, dwelling as they are in historical spaces formed by Western power, namely, Mexico and elsewhere in the "underdeveloped world."<sup>5</sup>

The Mexican philosopher Carlos Pereda (2006) has recently diagnosed what he calls the problem of "invisibility" in Latin American philosophy. He bears down on three "internal causes" that explain why philosophers in Latin American and Mexico have hesitated before philosophy, or why Mexican and Latin American philosophy has not confidently affirmed itself as philosophy; and why Mexican and Latin American philosophy has not received the attention it so desperately craves. These three causes are "subaltern fervor," "craving for novelty," and "national enthusiasm" (2006, 193). All are, says Pereda, "vices of our arrogant reason, results of our colonial heredity" (193). All three vices, he argues, are present in Mexican philosophy and contribute to that tension between, on the one hand, the desire for universality in philosophy and, on the other, the insistence on rootedness, circumstance, or, as he terms it, regionalism (2007). The results of these inherited vices of colonial heredity are manifested in the stalling of the philosophical project in Mexico (and Latin America) and are, in large part, responsible for the unresolved tensions regarding what philosophy *ought* to be and *how* it ought to do. Pereda offers a way out of "our arrogant reason"—the way out has to do with emulating the style and purpose of the Latin American "essay"—but not before declaring the greater portion of existing philosophical thought and the most productive moments in the history of that thought victims of these vices.

Relating to our present theme, it is worth noting that according to Pereda's account, Mexican philosophers who became "impassioned existentialists" were merely suffering from the "subaltern fervor" that affected "impressional youth" of the time, who then went on to endlessly repeat its "formulas" without question (2006, 193–194). However, and against Pereda, I emphasize that these impassioned existentialists did more than mimic the French school; their readings aimed to go beyond what was given in the text through acts of, sometimes, violent appropriation. In other words, while some readings were certainly lax or passive and hinted at mimicry (e.g., Guerra's reading of Sartre during the 1948 IFAL lectures), those we have considered were not, and were aimed, rather, at liberation and self-knowledge (such as Zea's, or los hiperiones Uranga's and Villoro's).

Pereida's indictment of the impassioned existentialists can be narrowed down to his own views on what philosophy ought to be, namely, a rootless, unbounded, detached "delving into everything" that owes nothing to anyone, not even Europe or Eurocentrism (2006, 2011n10). According to this account, attachment of the Mexican existentialist to "Mexican," "existentialism," and Europe (France or Germany) betrays philosophy on all counts.

But the notion that philosophy is, as Pereida says, a "delving into everything" seems to suffer from a performative shortcoming, namely, that in delving into everything one must delve into something. Not to mention that "everything" seems even more abstract than saying that philosophy is a transcendence of contingency. Indeed, delving into everything assumes the possibility, and necessity, of a God's-eye view. But perhaps all that Pereida means is that philosophy ought not to concern itself with somethings, and that philosophers ought not to be so ready to jump on philosophy bandwagons when they come rolling by. Again, I do not think that this is what Mexican existentialists were doing at all. The real issue, I want to insist, is that there is a palpable tension here, one that swings the passions either to the side of those who see philosophy as "delving into everything and nothing" and those that see it as always "delving into something."

#### FROM HESITATION TO CONTRADICTION

The urge to return to the material foundation of thought and to there find its justification is not without its problems. As I show in chapter 1, Urenga and Villoro both aim, at the IFAL conferences, to bring philosophy to bear on the crises of the particular situation that is the home of their philosophizing. Likewise, Zea affirms philosophy's circumstantial nature and insists that commitment to universality does not get us anywhere at all. Does this mean that universality is not desired? In other words, are the Mexican philosophers forsaking universality for the sake of the particular—everything for the sake of something?

Abelardo Villegas (1979) argues that the urge for rootedness that motivates the circumstantial philosophy of *los hiperiones* leads to contradictions (this is an argument continued by Hurtado 1994). The ideology of circumstantialism, according to Villegas, traps Mexican philosophy in the prison of its own conceptual schemes, making philosophy useless to

address the crises it is supposed to address, such as the crises of liberation, transformation, or human flourishing; which require concepts not bound to the circumstance—transcendental, or universal, concepts. To insist on the circumstantial, that is, situational, nature of philosophy "has taken [Mexican existentialists] to a fundamental aporia: the sterility and uselessness of a pure self-contemplation" (Villegas 1979, 180). In other words, philosophers, conscious of themselves as philosophers, find themselves only thinking about a minute, restricted, and isolated portion of the universe with a limited, and restricted, set of conceptual resources. This would certainly appear immediately contradictory to any conception of the philosophical, as presented and understood historically, since philosophy must rise above the squalor of the particular and to the lofty heights of abstract purity. Villegas argues that contradictions arise when these philosophers, conscious of their own "deficiency," are forced to employ concepts with "universal validity" such as "responsibility and commitment," which apply not only to Mexicans but to all human beings (180).

There are two critiques here: first, that Mexican existential philosophy is pure self-contemplation and is thus caught in a "fundamental aporia"; and second, that grounding that contemplation on circumstance leads to conceptual contradictions, as they must use universal terms to address particular concerns.

Regarding the first critique, Villegas, of course, is assuming that Mexican existential philosophers (especially those of the Hyperion group) do not desire or care for universality at all. The "aporia" then arises because Mexican philosophers only care about their own thinking, their own crises, and their own destiny. I think this is a false characterization of the circumstantial project in general and of *los hiperiones* in particular. If Mexican existentialists only desired pure self-contemplation, then why call it a "philosophical" project? They call it a "philosophical" project because they are attempting to join a conversation from which they have been left out; they call it "philosophy" so as to dialogue and commune with the history of philosophy; they call it "Mexican philosophy" so as to assert their difference and their authenticity before an other that resists difference and otherness. Pure self-contemplation does not give itself a name that places it in dialogue with an other contemplation. So there is no aporia.

Regarding the second critique, Villegas's suggestion, that in appealing to universal concepts like "responsibility and commitment" philosophers contradict their initial circumstantialism, assumes that circumstantialism

is a relativism or an absolutism itself. It is not. In fact, the circumstance is a point of departure to the "universal"—moreover, circumstantialism does not take a position on either relativism or absolutism. The claim is that we must begin with the circumstance and aspire to say meaningful things that help us all, not that our sayings must always remain in the moment of that saying. What Zea suggests above is that committing oneself to universality from the start gets us nowhere. Ortega, whose circumstantial views inform Zea and Gaos, laid the groundwork for such a view, writing in *Meditations on Quixote*: "Through our circumstance we communicate with the universe" (2000, 41).

Thus, Villegas's suggestion that philosophers who pledge allegiance to their situational existence contradict themselves when they use concepts, such as "responsibility" or "humanity," is merely nit-picking, since commitment to the circumstance does not prohibit one from aspiring to those lofty heights of purity and cleanliness. What Zea and the Mexican existentialists of the IFAL conferences recognized was that this aspiration could not fulfill itself on principle, since an aspect of their makeup would always accompany their thoughts; said differently, and somewhat brusquely, some element of our life experience will always dirty the clearest of our ideas. Ultimately, I do not think that Villegas's critique succeeds in demolishing the ambitions of a thinking that seeks its philosophical credentials in the circumstance of its own emergence.

The charge that Zea's and Hyperion's project was doomed because, as Villegas puts it, "we cannot speak without essences" (1979, 214) seems like a shot in the dark. Of course one cannot speak without essences! And neither can we read without them or live without them. As Merleau-Ponty writes in his preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*: "our existence is too tightly caught in the world in order to know itself as such at the moment when it is thrown into the world. . . . Our existence needs the field of ideality in order to know and conquer its facticity" (2013, xxviii). Similarly, Uranga and Zea must conduct their philosophical business using the currency of ideality if what they say is to mean anything at all, for themselves or for us (as future readers). This does not take away from their project of self-understanding; all it does is offend philosophical purists who find using such currency the sole business of abstract thinking. But even if we grant that an appeal to essences is the proprietary right of a universal philosophy uprooted and detached from concrete circumstance, I agree with Wolfgang Iser, who in conversation with Derrida says, "a universal is not something free-floating; basically, it

has to fulfill a function. It is invoked when something has to be assessed. . . . Thus it becomes entangled in a particular situation which may split a universal into those features that are relevant for the purpose" (Derrida 2002, 49). Thus, even the universalist use of universals is suspect. We cannot speak without essences, but then essences cannot be spoken without a life purpose that, as Iser notes, will split them to fit the need, or the crisis in which an entangled subject may find herself.

#### EMBRACING THE OSCILLATION: FROM ZEA TO DERRIDA

Beginning in the early 1940s, Leopoldo Zea embraces the notion that the origins of thinking (material and existential) accompany any philosophizing and, moreover, that one's circumstance can not only be an object of philosophical study but also influence the manner of thinking, the *énoque* of philosophy itself. Famously, Zea's 1942 article, "¿Existe una filosofía en nuestra América?" proclaims that Mexican or Latin American philosophy is not something other to Western philosophy or to philosophy broadly conceived. In an effort to call attention to a philosophical tradition in Latin America, that is, in a world that history testifies should not have the right to such a prestigious tradition (as it is defined and constructed out of violence, death, genocide, colonization, marginality, rape, exclusion, revolution, machismo, zozobra, and economic dependency), Zea insists that philosophy, in that complex set of circumstances, is simply that: philosophy, "pure and simple," or, as he puts it elsewhere, "sin más" (1969).

In that early essay, Zea warns against a restricted philosophizing that ends where it begins, namely, in the Latin American circumstance. While the Latin American circumstance is indeed the origin of philosophy (for Latin Americans), it should aspire to address broader human concerns, thereby contributing to universal philosophy as such (Zea 1942, 77). However, even by addressing itself in this way, it nonetheless retains its characteristic Latin Americanness: "We should not consider that which is American as an end in itself, but as a limit of a broader end. From here the reason why all attempts to do (Latin) American philosophy with the sole pretention that it be (Latin) American will have to fail; we have to intend to do philosophy pure and simple, and the (Latin) American will emerge as an additional element [*hay que intentar hacer pura y*

*simplemente filosofía, que lo americano se dará por añadidura]*" (77). Of crucial importance in this passage is the notion that one ought to simply philosophize, and what is Latin American, or Mexican, will emerge organically in that process. This means that, in the case of a Mexican philosophy, what makes Mexican philosophy "Mexican" will be those aspects of the Mexican circumstance that are always already attached to Mexican thinking, as definitive features of a lived experience that is historically and culturally unique. And these "attachments" will not "arise by themselves," as a famous translation of this passage has it,<sup>6</sup> but will come *with* it. To say that they arise by themselves is to leave much to chance—they might not arise at all! But what Zea suggests is that they will arise whenever the Mexican philosopher philosophizes.<sup>7</sup>

However, in spite of Zea's observation that "lo mexicano" would attach itself to philosophical thinking done in or from the Mexican circumstance, the call for philosophy "pure and simple," or "sin más," has become a rallying cry for commentators who, like Villoro and Guerra in the late 1950s, or Villegas and Pereda later on, find "Mexican" or "Latin American" to be derogatory adjectives when paired with "philosophy." The view, representing the latest pendulum swing in the passion dialectic of philosophy, insists that we should look no further than thought itself to judge its philosophical merits, that material conditions or existential crises do not matter to what is to count as philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

The notion that philosophy, if it is to call itself philosophy, should deny motives, passions, and the contingency of existence, and dwell in the realm of the pure, the passionless, and the eternally stable, reflects, ironically, the passion of a Eurocentric thinking that desires to protect its copyright against the potential infringements of other thinkings and other thoughts that wish to commerce under philosophy's pretensions. Zea's thought, as well as the appropriations of the Hyperion group during the time of its emergence, represents such infringements.

In fact, Gaos, the existentialist Zea, and the philosophers of the IFAL conferences, in challenging Western logoi in acts of reading and appropriation, most authentically represent philosophy. In the last decades of the twentieth century, Jacques Derrida defended such challenges to philosophy as traditionally conceived. "A philosopher," he writes, "is always someone for whom philosophy is not *given*, someone who in essence must question the self about the essence and destination of philosophy. And who reinvents it" (2002, 4). This sentiment could be a direct critique of post-Hiperión Villoro and Guerra (as seen above), who dogmatically

adhere to the view that philosophy is given, both as a gift from nowhere and as a gift with its own direction. On the other hand, Zea and Gaos question its destination and, simultaneously, its origins.

My reading into that moment in the history of philosophy when Mexican philosophers hesitated before the Eurocentric conception of philosophy and identified it with a quest for self-awareness also reveals it as a moment that precipitated the fracturing of philosophy's Eurocentrism, of its stranglehold on its own mythology.<sup>8</sup> Derrida says that bringing about a more democratic access to philosophy, without the fear of censure that comes with speaking against it, "is not a matter promoting an abstractly universal philosophical thought that does not inhere in the body of the idiom, but *on the contrary* of putting it into operation each time in an original way and in a nonfinite multiplicity of idioms, producing philosophical events that are neither particularistic and untranslatable nor transparently abstract and univocal in the element of abstract universality" (2002, 12). Indeed, in spite of, or rather, because of, the inner struggle that historically defines Mexican identity, philosophy was "put into operation each time and in an original way." Zea, Gaos, and Los hiperiones sought to produce "philosophical events," whether for themselves or for all humankind, that were neither "untranslatable" to other contexts nor "abstract," which would make them useless to the Mexican circumstance. They sought to produce events that mattered and were translatable, not to a universal and eternal interlocutor but to a concrete reader in a concrete circumstance and a determinate time (for instance, myself, as a reader situated in their future).

## CONCLUSION

A circumstantial philosophy, one grounded on the crises and emergencies of vital experience, promises liberation from the "arrogant" idea that we can escape from our enclosures and be genuinely universal. The apparently universal truth that "all men are mortal," for example, cannot escape the ether of our immediate circumstance; everything that points to its validity is in certain proximity to me. I am convinced that all men are mortal, ultimately, because history is replete with corpses. And I read this history; and I hear this history; and this history establishes a pattern that, based on my limited life experience, has not been proven wrong. People die all the time, and I am certain that I will, too. I have no pretension of

immortality. But that too, my belief in my own death, is intimate and enclosed within me, as is my desire for wisdom and my many crises of identity.

And here lay the tensions and the heartbreak: pressured by the illustrious history of philosophy to think universal ideas; convinced by argument and the presumed elegance of clear thinking that big thoughts are pure and unsoiled by the dust of circumstance, Mexican philosophers eventually found it necessary to deny the human ground to philosophy. Encouraged by smart men to aspire to great heights and think of possibilities and not actualities, as the latter can only trap us in provincialisms that will not translate into invitations to the great philosophical conversations that await all men of dignity, Mexican philosophers have found it necessary to deny their own history and their own circumstance.

But how far into the abstract can we go, Mexicans, Latino/as, or otherwise historically constituted philosophical beings? My readings suggest that we cannot go far enough or deep enough to fulfill the condescending aspirations of the Western ideal of philosophy. On this note, I close with a thought William James attributes to his mentor, Louis Agassiz, who says that "one can see no farther into generalization than just so far as one's previous acquaintance with particulars enables one to take in" (James 1999, 240). And so, if reason is to be of any use, it is better to focus it on the proximal and the urgent and begin our philosophy from that place. In this sense, the existentialist violations of philosophy carried out by Gaos, Zea, Uranga, and Villoro should not be condemned to oblivion, as they have been thus far.

## FOUR

### The Mexican/American Challenge to Philosophy

*Uranga and Dewey*

The brief, yet passionate, detour in which philosophy passes through a "Mexican existentialism" and emerges once more to join its pretentious path toward eternity is due, most of all, to the interventions and interrogations occasioned by a purposeful, deliberate, and prejudiced reading of French existentialism. Mexican philosophers, such as Uranga and Villoro, Zea and Portilla, brought into their particular readings certain expectations, structured as *enfiques*, that were to benefit Mexican existence in different ways: by reconnecting meaningful thinking to the Mexican reality, by reconceptualizing the stakes for philosophical investigation in the nation (understood in a particular historical vernacular and defined by certain historical events), or by recalibrating the philosophical *enfique* itself. The recalibration of the philosophical *enfique*, consequently, reveals the operative conception of philosophy at work in these readings. While this revelation does not come until after the "moment" of existentialism had passed (when the pendulum swung toward a conception of philosophy that can be called "traditional"), the reason why philosophy (and its particular readings and appropriations) was valued as a cognitive practice ultimately lay, I insist, on the fact that it was read into the Mexican circumstance and made to answer for the crises belonging to this particular historical entity and its people. That is, philosophy