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**“Living and Thinking with Those Dislocations”:  
A Case for Latin American Existentialist Fiction**

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When Albert Camus wrote in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) that “it was a matter of living and thinking with those dislocations” (532), he was urging steadfast commitment to one of the most formidable dislocations imaginable, the nonexistence of God.<sup>1</sup> In the language of metaphysical warrior Camus, to “revolt” is fully to embrace that stunning dislocation and to shoulder in full awareness and with passion the concomitant responsibility to make meaning of an intrinsically meaningless, or “absurd,” world. Camus holds out in solace that although revolt may entail endless burdens, it contains infinite possibilities. Among them lies the prospect that life “will be lived all the better” (*Myth* 535) if, accepting the lack of absolutes and givens, we confer meaning on the world in consciousness and good faith. In the familiar but always stirring words of Camus: “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (593).

What greater good can a liberal arts education address if it is to live up to its name? Well, maybe not a *greater* good but perhaps a more embodied, rooted one. For I wish to argue that as Latin American writers from the 1930s to the 1960s yield to the siren call of existentialism’s dislocations, alongside meditations on the human condition writ large they also advance agendas that have specific relevance to and viable transformative potential for their own particular locations. The value-laden revolts of Latin American existentialist discourse thereby present a notable instance of what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls “rooted cosmopolitanism.”<sup>2</sup> Appiah’s rooted cosmopolitanism mediates between the international or universal and the local or identity politics, attempting to keep the global and local poles in balance, to maintain equal regard for both. Qua rooted cosmopolitanism, Latin American existentialist fiction brings into play the core topics that this

volume of *Hispanic Issues* sets out to explore, thereby allowing me simultaneously to make a case for the literary corpus and for its role in a liberal arts education.

As do we here and now, during a period of multiple crises French humanist existentialism perforce reflected on the status of literature and framed an always already relevant defense of it. The trauma of World War II coincided with a crisis in philosophy that earlier Christian existentialism such as that of Kierkegaard had set in motion by shifting horizons from essences to living, evolving existence. That shift, a defining aspect of existentialism in general, delegitimizes ontologizing and in so doing puts fatal stress on philosophy bound up with ideals and absolutes. The renowned French philosopher Jean Hyppolite, invited to Argentina's first national conference on philosophy in 1949, declared that the crisis in philosophy had occasioned a turn toward literature: "Because existentialism is tied up in the indefinite analysis of human reality (and in that regard that analysis incessantly meets literature, which seems to be an integral part of existential philosophy) it involves a crisis in philosophy itself" (454). Literature proved to be uniquely suited to the needs of existential philosophy insofar as imaginative works can track individual lives in context, or, as Jean-Paul Sartre would say, in *situation*; address the total individual, including actions, thoughts, feelings, body, and becoming; breathe life into the choices that require a person to exercise freedom; and disseminate ideas to a non-specialized public in a human way—all matters vital to existentialism and much else.

The near fungibility between existentialist philosophy and literature engendered a mobile literary aesthetic that devalued surety and closure. With the freedom of characters *and* readers at stake, existentialist fiction forcefully repudiates the thesis-novel, the didactic novel, and the determinism of nineteenth-century realism and naturalism. While existentialism does want to convey a certain worldview, it is a postmodern one, one best served by complexity, indeterminacy and challenge, by questions rather than answers. "Thus," says Camus, "I ask of absurd creation what I required from thought—revolt, freedom, and diversity" (*Myth* 587).

Throughout contemporary Latin America, where literature typically had more currency than philosophy, fiction rallied to the existential call to arms. Latin America (both Spanish America and Brazil) bodied forth a robust existential literature that, tremendously prismatic as it is, needs some mapping out if we are to make sense of how Latin American literature thought with existentialism's dislocations and what that might mean for a liberal arts education. I would therefore suggest that an overview of Latin American existentialist literature cannot fail to note, first and foremost, that although not necessarily godless, it upholds the philosophical tenet of privileging and inflecting existence over essence. Second, most Latin American fiction of this nature pushes off from, and often pushes back at,

platforms that Western existentialist philosophy and literature supply. While one might discern a more autochthonous Latin American existentialism emanating from romanticism in authors like María Luisa Bombal and César Vallejo, the bulk of Latin American existential authors scan the terrain of Western existentialism and discover in it templates for the most diverse agendas. They play the vast field knowledgeably and expertly, with a special affinity for Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Søren Kierkegaard, André Malraux, and Sartre, as well as for the dimensions of the Spanish Generation of '98 and Marxism that align with existentialism.

From here, Latin American existentialist fiction ramifies even further. Later we will survey an existentialist problematic common to Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay; for now I want to register that thanks to the intertwining of philosophy and literature, we find a highly distinctive construction of existentialism in Mexico. The influential philosopher Leopoldo Zea (1912–1993), who in 1948 “founded the Hiperión group dedicated to identifying the logic of Mexican history from the premises of existential phenomenology” (Morse 108), catalyzed a preoccupation with Mexico’s incomplete, inauthentic assimilation of the past that quickly became fundamental to Mexican identity discourse and penetrated several disciplines.<sup>3</sup> Resonating deeply with Zea’s concern for an unassimilated past that surges insidiously into Mexico’s present, Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1955) and novels by Carlos Fuentes, not to mention Octavio Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*) and some of his most celebrated poetry, enter the existential corpus. In Mexico and elsewhere, nonetheless, that body remains so plural that it lies beyond the scope of this article to do it justice or even to put all the names to it. So let me simply observe that according to the criteria I formulated above, the body of existentialist fiction unquestionably encompasses works by a host of Latin America’s most outstanding, most canonized writers of the mid-twentieth century: from Argentina, Julio Cortázar, Eduardo Mallea, and David Viñas; from Brazil, João Guimarães Rosa and Clarice Lispector; from Cuba, Alejo Carpentier; from Mexico, José Revueltas; from Peru, Mario Vargas Llosa; from Uruguay, Juan Carlos Onetti.

In view of the preceding statement, it may seem surprising, or superfluous, that I should be scoping out the basics of Latin American existentialist fiction and, moreover, deem that a challenging task. At a distance of a half-century from such an important phenomenon, one imagines, its corpus would already have been articulated and attained a high profile. Yet it is precisely my point that, unfortunately on various levels, this has not occurred. Dislocated by magical realism, the Boom, and the politicized post-Boom, existentialist fiction appears largely to have been edged off the curricular and scholarly map. How many courses do our institutions offer on it, as compared to the aforementioned movements? Naturally, we teach existentialism’s canonical authors, no doubt in spades,

but do we teach them under the auspices of existentialism? Or have their works been absorbed into the rubrics just mentioned or into feminism, identity politics, or politics? Symptomatic of the disregard and contributing to it is the lack of overarching scholarship on Latin American existentialist fiction. Articles on the existentialist dimensions of specific texts abound, but attempts to consolidate and elucidate the field per se seem to have stalled after the 1970s, which witnessed two lone book-length studies, albeit of limited range, *An Existential Focus on Some Novels of the River Plate* by Rose Lee Hayden (1973) and *Three Authors of Alienation: Bombal, Onetti, Carpentier* by Michael Ian Adams (1975). All told, I believe that the field of Latin American existential fiction has not been fully construed or constructed as such, hence my foregoing rudimentary efforts.

The title of Adams's book signals one plausible explanation for the relative neglect of the field, namely, an association with alienation that leads to a disheartening, unpalatable literature of doom and gloom. Considering the strong footprint of Dostoevsky, forerunner of existentialist literature, one can easily understand why its practices have been widely (yet far too narrowly) equated with pessimistic, unrelenting alienation, from God and from one's fellow human beings. Sartre's primer of existentialism, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," places Dostoevsky at the epicenter of the philosophical current, linking him to despair: "Dostoevsky once wrote: 'If God did not exist, everything would be permitted'; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence *forlorn*, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself" (emphasis added). What Sartre in his own work would term "forlornness" pervades Dostoevsky's seminal existentialist novel, *Notes from Underground* (1864), shaping it into a paradigmatic tale of crises and dislocations that bear anguish, bad faith, failure, nihilism, and desolation in their wake. Subsequently, Sartre, Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir felt so keenly the reading public's identification of existentialism with the pessimistic repertoire of forlornness that all three stepped up to defend it against claims of negativity. "Now, here there is not failure, but rather success," wrote de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, referring, as did the other two members of the trinity of French existentialist literature, to the possibilities for constructing the world that existentialism opened to "the human adventure" (12).<sup>4</sup>

However, the human adventure portrayed in signature Latin American existentialist texts can thwart even the most persuasive vindications of the movement. Assaulting their readers' sensibilities, the Latin American texts showcase ontologically deracinated individuals who flail around desperately and grotesquely in landscapes of loss. A flagrant example is Eladio Linacero of Onetti's *El pozo* (1939, translated as "The Pit"), Dostoevsky's underground man carried to a shocking extreme. As an adolescent, Linacero

convinces the innocent Ana María to enter a gardener's hut, cryptically reflecting that if she had not entered it "yo tendría que quererla toda la vida" (12) ("I would have had to love her my whole life" [27]).<sup>5</sup> Then, pinning Ana María down, twisting her breasts, and seeking the most odious caress (12), Linacero brutally violates her. This episode of sexual and textual depravity marks a watershed vacating of ideals and absolutes, a dislocation from essence to existence that effectively rebirths Linacero into a *cero*, a zero. Ana María dies shortly afterwards, but the decentered Linacero lives on in forlornness, unable to fill the void with a meaningful existence and shackled to a sordid urban reality he cannot transcend. Sábato's all-too-similar *El túnel* (1948, *The Tunnel*) perpetuates *El pozo*'s scapegoating of the woman—both novels tellingly name her María—in whom male antiheroes traumatized by the absurdity of life seek respite from ontological insecurity. *El túnel* locates the alienated underground man in Buenos Aires and imbues him with the Sartrean malady of objectifying the "other" who threatens one's freedom.<sup>6</sup> Thus afflicted, the novel's sadomasochistic protagonist, Juan Pablo Castel, subjects the woman he loves to the hideous psychological and physical abuse that ends in her murder and his literal and figurative imprisonment.

The tendency to dramatize imprisonment in a no-exit, no-answer forlornness permeates Latin American existentialist fiction, dragging it down and sometimes justifiably out of sight. Mallea's existentialist fiction, to my knowledge the first in Latin America to declare itself as such and during his lifetime the most important, offers a fascinating object lesson. Though editor of the literary supplement to *La Nación* of Buenos Aires from 1931 to 1955, author of thirty books of essays and fiction, and more lionized in the 1940s than Jorge Luis Borges, Mallea has to a considerable degree fallen off the critical map.<sup>7</sup> And not, I suspect, inappropriately. Mallea's monotonous, exorbitant novels (*Simbad*, for instance, runs to 750 pages), with their endless indictments of alienation from a mechanistic Buenos Aires and anguished protagonists uniformly incapable of escaping inauthenticity and solitude, steep their readers in despondency. Perhaps enticing because innovative when first introduced, Mallea's dismal narrative has not stood the test of time and may well have given existentialist fiction a bad name. Then again, an existentialist novel more appealing to current tastes by virtue of its Marxism and investment in Mexican identity, Revueltas's *El luto humano* (1943, *Human Mourning*), traffics in savage violence and hopelessness, in literally dead ends. Though taking as its prototype André Malraux's motivational activist novel, *La Condition Humaine* (1933, translated as *Man's Fate*), Revueltas's text focuses the revelations of their lives' *absurdity* that its characters attain in the moments before their deaths. The violence and social dispossession of post-revolutionary Mexico have brought them to a liminal space from which they may glimpse the possibility

of deliverance through collective action, but that possibility remains unrealized and effectively unrealizable in the fractured climate of the time.<sup>8</sup>

Why, then, amid such hefty disincentives, should we and our students live and think with Latin American existential fiction? The evidence already presented here encloses a number of answers to the question. It has foregrounded *interdisciplinarity*, the uniquely dynamic relationship of existentialist literature with philosophy. We have seen the *transnational* nature of that literature on multiple fronts, it being pan-Latin American, pan-Hispanic, and in dialogue with an array of Western literary models. Conversely, the potential for existential fiction to speak to the complexities of *local* Latin American realities has emerged, in theory (Sartre's insistence on lives-in-situation) and in practice. Indeed, Latin America owes to existentialism the advent of a literature that dislocates an entrenched rurally based regionalism and gives voice to the soul of South American cities, as manifested the works of Mallea, Onetti, and Sábato.

There are clearly powerful reasons to look beyond existentialism's dark side. Therefore, attending more closely to the local scene, I would like to explore the interface of existentialism and Latin American discourse, with an eye to existentialism's transformative power for writers and readers. That is, to suggest what discursive developments existentialism was singularly positioned to, and did, enable.

A foremost enabling aspect of existentialism lies in how it dovetails with anti-positivism, a colossal force in Latin America. Mechanistic, spirit-squelching European positivism infiltrated Latin America in the late nineteenth century and came to be associated with post-independence imperialism. Reactions against positivism spread throughout Latin America, to enormous effect. Anti-positivism spurred the genesis of twentieth-century Latin American philosophy and, as is better known, Latin American identity discourse, notably in the form of José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* (1900).<sup>9</sup> Almost needless to repeat, over and against the materialism, utilitarianism, determinism, science, and progress of the United States, Rodó posited humanism, spirituality, leisure, idealism, love, and honor as the salient values of Latin America. A partnership between existentialism and anti-positivism, which reacted against positivism's discrediting of religion, may appear quite unlikely. Nevertheless, existentialism so vitally opposed the valorizing of reason and determinism that positivism had championed as to allow common cause with anti-positivism—in fact, to allow existentialism to serve as a modern vehicle for anti-positivism.

Contesting determinism as well as ontologizing, existentialism liberates. It underscores the sovereignty of human agency, which includes our freedom to create the world under any circumstances, however oppressive. The Argentine philosopher Carlos Astrada (1894–1970), who studied with Martin Heidegger and introduced his work to Argentina starting in 1933, quickly grasped and capitalized upon the emancipatory promise of

Heidegger's *dasein* (understood as "being-in-the world"). Astrada's "humanism of freedom," formulated in various works, espouses a view of "man" as forging his essence from his existence in a concrete socio-historical setting.<sup>10</sup> The humanism of freedom then proposes to rescue and affirm the "full man," an individual who activates all his immanent human capabilities, his full *humanitas*. Astrada's framing of existentialism makes patent not only its message of hope for Latin Americans subject to disenfranchisement but also its role in paving the way for subsequent activist philosophies such as liberation theology and the philosophy of liberation.

In like manner do the liberating energies of existentialism radiate into Latin American literature, where they carve out a space for an engaged fiction, a *literatura comprometida*, sited on home grounds. Engaged Latin American existentialist fiction, often related to Marxism (we think of Carpentier, Revueltas, Vargas Llosa, Viñas, and other members of the Argentine *Contorno* group), renounces the constraints of a predominantly decontextualized fantastic literature. At the same time and despite its Marxist leanings, by drawing on the mobile literary aesthetic I described at the outset, the newly engaged literature avoids the constraints of socialist realism. With respect to politicizing, though, the transformative thrust of existentialism for Latin America resides primarily in the issues that it launches onto the literary scene. The recent uptick of interest in existentialism in the U.S. has brought front and center its pertinence to so-called third-world issues. As Lewis R. Gordon, whose investigations of existentialism and African thought have spearheaded the resurgence, observes, "Existential philosophy addresses problems of freedom, anguish, dread, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation" (7). Gordon and his followers especially credit Sartre with carrying these issues into the praxis of social activism.

Sartre, fittingly, has great purchase on Latin American existentialist fiction, but so does Camus. In Camus Latin Americans would encounter both an existential model and a kindred soul. To wit, when in the essays of *Entre Sartre y Camus* (1981) Vargas Llosa reflects on his change of allegiance from Sartre to Camus, he ascribes it to the kinship between Camus's projects and those of Latin America. He details Camus's Spanish connections; his commitment to nature, friendship, honor, and anti-totalitarianism; and, principally, the French author's covenant with the margins due to his upbringing in colonial Algeria.<sup>11</sup> Vargas Llosa also discusses the empowering features for his milieu of existentialism in general, affording a striking example of how a Latin American intellectual reads the movement. Among other things, he calls attention to the new literary paths, away from a picturesque regionalism and an inimitable Borges, and, more so, the beacons for navigating the labyrinths of culture, politics, and life (120) that he and his compatriots gleaned from existentialism.<sup>12</sup>

To the foregoing roster of the transformative implications of existentialism for Latin American culture I now want to add, and devote the rest of this essay to unpacking, one last matter, the question of *values* as treated by major writers of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. What follows wishes to bear out the claim that existentialism offered Latin American intellectuals a critical opportunity to forge an affirmative value system, one that could stand apart from religion and, given that it emanates from countries that had recently undergone the displacement of democracies by dictatorships, from nationalistic ideologies in the bargain. Building on other traditions, the value system contributes to Latin American identity politics. Gaining sustenance from Western existentialism, and theologically and ideologically non-aligned, it reverberates into the territory of universals. Here, then, the two poles of rooted cosmopolitanism converge. And thus from here—counter-intuitively enough, from the absurd world of existentialism—materialize lessons in values particularly apposite to a liberal arts education.<sup>13</sup>

As a case in point and a window onto the value system at issue, let me relate a conversation that took place last spring in my course on Latin American existentialist fiction. We had just read Guimarães Rosa's "A hora e vez de Augusto Matraga" ("Augusto Matraga's Hour and Turn"), a transparent existentialist rewriting of Christ into a flawed mortal who rejects asceticism, embraces the sensuous bounty of life, and fulfills his saintly destiny on earth instead of in heaven. Recognizing that "Augusto Matraga" added yet another figure to the reinflected Marys, Christs, and saints that had been populating our South American readings, a disconcerted student commented that for existentialist literature, it sure did harp on religion.<sup>14</sup> The student's comment prompted, and prompts, consideration of the monumental dislocation from the religious to the secular that had long characterized the Western drive toward modernity but that remained freighted and labored in twentieth-century Latin America. There, where Catholicism still overwhelmingly prevailed, writers aligning themselves with Christian existentialism would maintain God as a possibility and/or dramatize the questioning of religious values, keeping the religious and the secular palpably in view. "Augusto Matraga" enacts both options. Whence another attraction for Latin American writers of Camus, who fashioned parables like *The Plague* and *The Fall*. *The Plague*, for instance, tenders the pivotal question of "Can one be a saint without God?" (225). Viñas's prizewinning short novel, *Un dios cotidiano* (1957, *An Everyday God*), Lispector's celebrated stories, "A imitação da rosa" and "Amor" (1960, "The Imitation of the Rose," "Love"), and, as I will examine later, Cortázar's classic "El perseguidor" (1959, "The Pursuer"), tackle that very question, purposefully debating rather than resolving it.<sup>15</sup>

In creating similes or existentialist facsimiles of religion, Latin American writers devise secular scriptures that position values to stand on

their own, to advance non-religious goals. And if the above-mentioned authors (at times) treat the question of sainthood inconclusively, they and others do not hesitate to advocate certain ecumenical values unequivocally. In fact, Cortázar, Guimarães Rosa, Lispector, Mallea, Onetti, and Sábato, leading writers from the deep south of South America, all advocate two specific values. The point is worth underscoring: writers of quite different stripes working from diverse models, they all militate for the same two values. The first value they propound assails the monopoly of reason by privileging *feeling over thinking*. Sábato's conviction that Western existentialism fills the gaps in a scientific logic that is “ajena a todo lo que es más valioso para un ser humano: sus emociones, sus sentimientos de arte o de justicia, su angustia frente a la muerte” (*Uno y el universo* 31) (alien to everything most important for a human being: our emotions, our sense of art or justice, our anguish about death) captures the pith of the matter. The second value that the fiction writers promote is *community*. They agitate not for a given brand of nationalism but, in keeping with the emphasis on emotion, for a generalized sense of human community, human connections. Problematic as the move from the individual to society at large was, say, for a Sartrean existentialism predicated on individual freedom and choice, South American writers step right into the breach, privileging solidarity.<sup>16</sup>

South American authors gear their existentialist fiction toward community and emotion because the two values accord, first and of course with their personal beliefs, but second, with the time-honored concerns of their locales. One can easily, for example, detect the imprint of anti-positivism on the South American existentialist program. However, to comprehend more fully the scope and homegrown stuff of that program we must return to Mallea. Mallea's book-length essay critiquing the state of his country, *Historia de una pasión argentina* (1937), establishes that almost from its arrival in Argentina, existentialism synchronized with identity discourse. The author's diffuse, incipient existentialism, which derives mostly from Kierkegaard and the Spanish Generation of '98, molds the *Historia* into a polemic on inauthenticity versus authenticity in Argentina. Mallea deplors the inauthenticity of a soulless, bourgeois, “visible Argentina” addicted to bad faith, materialism, progress, utilitarianism, conformism, arid erudition, and a lack of spirituality. He urges his compatriots to adopt as their exemplar the authentic “invisible Argentina” characterized by sincerity, ideals, tradition, individualism, ideas, and genuine faith. With this, it is clear, Mallea not only weds existentialism to Argentine identity but also interpellates existentialism for the exact force field that Rodó seeded in *Ariel*.

Mallea's triangulation of Rodó, Argentina, and existentialism comes out unmistakably when, for example, the *Historia* declares that in the rural citizens of invisible Argentina who possess a strong sense of community, “residía sobreviviendo una causa espiritual eminentemente argentina, un

sentido de la existencia. Privativo de ellos, propio y auténtico” (87) (there remained in them an eminently Argentine spiritual cause, a sense of existence. Exclusively theirs, belonging to them and authentic [72]). Amalgamated, the three broad components form the stage on which Mallea exalts emotion and pillories reason. The word “passion” in the work’s title echoes throughout the book, acquiring a string of meanings. Besides the Passion of Christ (and Mallea’s rather outrageous self-hagiography), there is the passion that the author wishes to inspire in his young compatriots, à la Rodó (20), by means of impassioned rhetoric and by the glorification of love itself as the prime mover of the world (51). Mallea trains his passion on an invisible Argentina that he repeatedly depicts as a woman, sexualizing his quest for authenticity and thereby dignifying as virile the emotions that dominate his book. Reason, by contrast, he excoriates as an unnatural, false goddess who obstructs love and inspires moral stupidity; believing as he does in the superiority of faith over reason, Mallea here declares reason a mere handmaiden of the spirit (164–65). To salvage intelligence, Mallea decouples it from reason and yokes it to virtue and passion. “My thinking is a passion,” he declares with Kierkegaard (53).

Seven years after the military takeover of Argentina, Mallea tactically establishes a resistant yet apolitical secular scripture for his country.<sup>17</sup> The South American works that I will briefly survey in conclusion propagate values in stream with those of the *Historia* (and *Ariel*) and replicate Mallea’s tactical finesse. They “exhaust the limits of the possible” (epigraph from Pindar to *The Myth of Sisyphus*) by resiting the sphere for change from political action in a strict sense to the micro-level of human actions that can take place regardless of the nation-state’s disposition. Deviating from Malraux, Sartre, and de Beauvoir, they eschew large-scale political action. As the literary works instead define revolution in terms of an individual’s self-actualization from which benefits for all may conceivably accrue, the imagined community of existentialism replaces the community that nationalist propaganda imagines.

Revisited from the perspective at hand, two doom-and-gloom texts discussed earlier look quite different, as different as does Mallea’s fiction when one factors “invisible Argentina” into the mix.<sup>18</sup> That is, Onetti’s *El pozo* and Sábato’s *El túnel* prove to be gesturing fervently toward emotion and community, lamented as desiderata not achieved. Onetti’s novella sets its sights on ways *out* of the underground, those being writing, love, and communication. Linacero proposes to write the story of a soul (9), a story based not on events but on dreams and emotions because events “son siempre vacíos, son recipientes que tomarán la forma del sentimiento que los llene” (29) (are always empty, they are the receptacles that will take on the shape of the feeling that goes into them [31]). Nonetheless, he ends up mired in events, reduced to narrating failed loves and failed acts of communication. Linacero’s accounts of his attempts to communicate with the prostitute Ester

and the poet Cordes, significantly enough, occupy more than half the novella. Meanwhile, the text floats the hope of overcoming alienation through communal effort in the person of the Marxist Lázaro (Lazarus), an activist whom Linacero grudgingly acknowledges as a superior human being (45). That Lázaro brands Linacero a failure (37) motivates the images of night imperiously hurling the protagonist downstream that close the text and leave the poignance of Linacero’s defeat emblazoned on the reader’s mind.

A near twin of *El pozo*, *El túnel*, too, issues an indelible plea for community and emotion. Castel, as he states at the beginning, recounts his crime in a last-ditch bid to reach out to his fellow human beings for understanding (12). Authentic ties with others have heretofore eluded him for reasons that the confession reveals: an emotional cripple, Castel incorrigibly resorts to logic in a bad faith effort to rationalize his feelings and thereby to subjugate the threatening chaos of love. Leading to misunderstanding and eventually to murder, cerebration stands Castel in the worst stead. One can hardly envisage a more scathing indictment of reason. More subtle but still cutting is the indictment of Sartrean existentialism folded into *El túnel*, an unforgiving mise-en-scène of Sartre’s notion that hell is other people. As I noted a few pages ago, following Sartrean lines Sábato has his protagonist objectify María and rob her of the freedom that jeopardizes his own. Sábato’s criminalizing of Castel implicates and incriminates the French philosopher, exposing his picture of human relations as pathological, downright lethal. From beginning to end, Sábato’s protagonist cries out for the emotional and interpersonal capital that Sartre could not provide. Camus, on the other hand, could. Though laden with Sartrean constructs, *El túnel* so markedly invokes Camus’s *The Stranger* (1942) that Sábato’s novel first appeared in English with the parallel title of *The Outsider*.<sup>19</sup> The name of Sábato’s protagonist may likely, if ironically, allude to *The Plague*’s Dr. Castel, who invented a vaccine against the disease.

Cortázar’s short story, “Las puertas del cielo” (1951, “The Gates of Heaven”) confirms that *The Plague* possesses the wherewithal to remedy alienation and to fortify South American values. Cortázar imports into his story the joyous moment of communion between disparate individuals that occurs in Camus’s novel when Dr. Rieux (a native of Oran) and Jean Tarrou (an outsider) go swimming. As the insider and the outsider plunge into the water and swim side by side, they experience a strange happiness (232) and “are conscious of being perfectly at one” (233). The intertextual episode of Cortázar’s story heightens the polarization and the stakes. In it, the lawyer Marcelo surmounts the imprisonment in thinking that bars him from pure feeling and merges with his opposite, the authentic, emotional, working-class Mauro (see *Bestiario* 134–37). Sitting with Mauro in a *milonga* dance palace shortly after the death of Mauro’s wife, a former dance hall girl, Marcelo remembers a day that he dove into a swimming pool and came face-

to-face with another swimmer. At this Camus-inspired moment, Marcelo manages to break out of intellectualizing and into a mystical doubling with Mauro that brings the immense happiness of friendship and of knowing without rational understanding. Together (at least as Marcelo experiences the incident), the doubles chimerically resurrect Mauro's wife and restore her to her dance hall heaven.

While the joyous trance soon fades and Marcelo reverts to reason as the story shuts down, Cortázar's novella, "El perseguidor," submits its protagonist to a process of constant becoming. Jazzman Johnny Carter—J.C., an existentialist Christ figure—endures continuous dislocations from thought to trance and back. His music catapults him into an authentic state outside rationality and time, which evaporates when Johnny ceases to play. Johnny then lands squarely back in the world of reason that he puts his heart and soul into redeeming from bad faith. His refusal to betray authenticity and his rhythm of in and out, up and down, equate Johnny to Sisyphus. Camus writes: "Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He *is*, as much through his passions as through his torture" (*Myth* 590). Johnny, "un absurdo viviente" (249) (embodiment of the absurd), lives in revolt.

Still, as distinct from Sisyphus, the forlorn Johnny collapses under the burden. His lonely struggle against time and inauthenticity kills Johnny, who drugs himself to death. A Sisyphian martyr, Johnny is heroic and authentic but not happy. Conversely, Guimarães Rosa envelops the eccentric new saints of *Primeiras Estórias* (1962, translated as *The Third Bank of the River*) in a buoyant, positive aura. Literalizing the existential absurd, Guimarães Rosa mounts comic scenarios that glorify madmen, the antithesis of reason. The hero of "Tarantão, meu patrão" ("Tantarum"), reminiscent of Don Quixote, jubilantly roars through the countryside on an ostensible mission of madness. The nameless protagonist of "Darandina" ("Much Ado") climbs a palm tree in the middle of a public square. There he performs a metaphysical burlesque, stripping naked and shouting wild pseudo-Nietzschean aphorisms. Yet both he and Tarantão part ways with Nietzsche's superman in that the two heroes foster not elitism but community. Society pursues these madmen, who, endowed with the courage that Guimarães Rosa holds on high, pursue society right back. Spectacular and mesmerizing, they seduce the masses, gain disciples, and grow community along with their selves. When the protagonist of "Darandina" briefly loses courage and potency, the collective uproar of the onlookers revives him; Tarantão's marauding culminates in a Last Supper, a communal celebration of life and a fitting last act for the life of the saintly protagonist.

Although the serious, mysterious stories of Lispector's *Laços de família* (1960, *Family Ties*) rarely indulge in humor, they richly engage the comedic outcome of reintegration with society that vitalizes Guimarães's existentialism. In achieving the familiar reintegration, Lispector's female protagonists go against the grain of a different literary script. For the

epiphanies that jolt the women from mechanical, complacent lives of family ties into authenticity bode the *rupture* with constraining ties that characterizes legions of feminist works, from Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) on. In the spirit of the South American existentialism that we have been witnessing and of Camus, she will probe her characters’ returns home in a state of magnified consciousness (it is during the “hour of consciousness” of his return down the mountain, Camus writes, “that Sisyphus interests me” [*Myth* 590]). Lispector’s stories deal with the “outing” of the self, the move from an authentic but solipsistic vision of self and freedom born in epiphany to the unleashing and actualizing of the self in the home.

Home ineluctably attracts the characters because, simply put, that is where the heart is. In “Amor,” when Ana returns home from an epiphany in the botanical garden that leaves her realizing that it is easier to be a saint than a person (27), she clutches her son, entreating the child not to let her forget him (26). Ana’s *cri de coeur*, which pits family ties against freedom, encapsulates the existential dilemma inherent in the characters’ returns home. Precisely because home is where the heart is, home and family ties are the supreme test of selfhood, freedom, and authenticity: an awed, trembling Ana discovers in her own kitchen (28) the same secret activity that had catalyzed her epiphany in the botanical garden. Acknowledging the largely conventional roles that fell to Brazilian women of her times and honoring the validity of emotional family ties, Lispector refuses to box her characters into an EITHER (freedom, authenticity)/ OR (family ties) situation. Instead, she allows mobility and plurality. Lispector’s female characters therefore may strive to infuse family ties with authenticity, as does the Ana who suddenly loves her son “com nojo” (26) (“with loathing” [44]; literally, with nausea).<sup>20</sup> Lispector’s characters may also, pragmatically and effectively, shuttle back and forth between conventional and more authentic forms of being. “Amor” concludes with an exquisite intimation of dialectic as Ana snuffs out the flame of the day’s romance with authenticity, too intense to sustain. If for the “instante” (30) Ana has no world in her heart, other days, other flames will surely follow. Lispector has stated elsewhere, “I think that literature is not literature, it’s life, living” (qtd. in Moser 227).

Much as the Sisyphian rhythm just described puts us in mind of “El perseguidor,” we cannot help but recognize that Lispector has contrived a feasible, compelling means for her heroines to withstand the pressures that felled Johnny. More importantly, all of the South American writers that we have surveyed, other works of Cortázar among them, have instantiated a rooted value system that delivers positive ways of living and thinking with the dislocations of revolt. Against the odds and against doxa, they have shown us how to picture Sisyphus happy. And that, arguably, is the best reason to include them in a liberal arts education.

## Notes

1. In the original French in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 71: “Il s’agissait de vivre et de penser avec ces déchirements . . .”
2. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, especially chapter six, and *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*.
3. For instance, from this period see Zea’s *Conciencia y posibilidad del mexicano* and *América como conciencia*.
4. Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*, as should already be evident, rose to the defense of existentialism in 1942; in it, we also read that one “does not discover the absurd world without being tempted to write a manual of happiness” (592). Both chronologically and substantively, de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) closely follows Sartre’s renowned apologetic, “Existentialism Is a Humanism” (1946), though de Beauvoir has more to say about collective action than does Sartre. All three authors refer to Dostoevsky.
5. Page numbers in brackets here and elsewhere refer to the published translations of the works cited in my bibliography.
6. Sartre lays out his inhospitable picture of human relations as fueled by bad faith in part three, chapter three of *Being and Nothingness*, “Concrete Relations with Others,” especially sections I and II of the chapter. For an intelligent analysis of the insufficiency of Sartre’s thinking vis-à-vis Sabato’s *El túnel*, see *Una aproximación a Ernesto Sabato: antropología y estética en sus ensayos y en sus dos primeras novelas, “El túnel” y “Sobre héroes y tumbas”* by Rosamaria Ernst-Elvir.
7. The waning of scholarly interest in Mallea, as attested by the MLA bibliography, has not impeded publication of new editions of his work. However, the Cátedra edition of *Todo verdor perecerá* appears to have revived distaste for Mallea’s fiction rather than renewing interest in it. For instance: [www.revistaaleph.com.co/component/k2/item/100-eduardo-mallea-una-pasion-argentina](http://www.revistaaleph.com.co/component/k2/item/100-eduardo-mallea-una-pasion-argentina), and [www.barcelonareview.com/20/s\\_critica.htm](http://www.barcelonareview.com/20/s_critica.htm). See John H. R. Polt’s *The Writings of Eduardo Mallea* for a useful, early yet judicious, treatment of the author; its chapter four contrasts Mallea’s existentialism to that of Sartre.
8. Death-centered scenarios abound in Latin American existentialist fiction. One thinks of María Luisa Bombal’s *La amantada*, Carlos Fuentes’s *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, and the arguably existentialist *Pedro Páramo*.
9. In *Contemporary Latin-American Philosophy: A Selection*, editor Aníbal Sánchez Reulet asserts that the present philosophical movements of Latin America stem from a nucleus of founders in Argentina (Alejandro Korn), Mexico (Antonio Caso), Peru (Alejandro Deustua Escarza), and Uruguay (Carlos Vaz Ferreira) who polemicized with positivism. Sánchez Reulet states that “they were the first in their several countries to dedicate themselves wholly to philosophy” (xiii). More recently, Jorge J. E. Gracia and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert echo the assertion in their *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century: The Human Condition, Values, and the Search for Identity* and inventory the distinct reactions against positivism of philosophers in various countries (15–19, as backed by copious selections from anti-positivist works).
10. On Astradas’s humanism of freedom, see, for instance, his *Ser, Humanismo, existencialismo, La revolución existencialista*, and *Existencialismo y crisis de la filosofía*. Guillermo David’s massive *Carlos Astrada, la filosofía argentina* tracks

the trajectory of Astrada’s eclectic thinking and contains extensive bibliography on the author.

11. See, in *Entre Sartre y Camus*, the lucid, revealing essay, “Albert Camus y la moral de los límites” (79–108), first published in Mexico in *Plural* (1975).
12. See, in *Entre Sartre y Camus*, especially “El mandarín” (115–135), first published in Lima in *Caretas* (1980).
13. In the desire to promote the teaching of existentialist fiction, what follows centers on some of the authors’ shorter, more manageable works (e.g., stories by Guimarães Rosa rather than *Grande Sertão: Veredas*).
14. I thank Zachary Bleckner for this particular lesson and everyone in COLT 1420F for many others.
15. Viñas’s *Un dios cotidiano* received the Guillermo Kraft Prize in the year of its publication.
16. Hazel E. Barnes has addressed at length the problematic question of individualism versus collective action in Sartre. See the second chapter of her *An Existentialist Ethics*. In the chapter entitled “Engaged Freedom” of her *The Literature of Possibility: A Study in Humanistic Existentialism*, Barnes professes that Sartre did overpass from solipsism to solidarity and equates him (somewhat over-emphatically) to Camus.
17. Emir Rodríguez Monegal notes the “pathetic” irony that Mallea’s apolitical “invisible Argentina” had features in common with Perón’s nationalism, which in fact incited the *Contorno* group’s early reaction against the author of *Historia de una pasión argentina* (“Eduardo Mallea visible e invisible,” in *Narradores de esta América*, vol. 1).
18. Mallea’s fiction, unfortunately, tends to keep the heartening “invisible Argentina” rather too invisible.
19. *The Outsider*, translated by Harriet de Onís, was published in New York by Alfred A. Knopf in 1950. Camus so admired *El túnel* that he had it translated into French and published by Gallimard in 1956.
20. The inverse may obtain in that weak characters, like Laura in “A imitação da rosa,” may default on authenticity.

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