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NOTES

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Portraits of Luis Villoro

Guillermo Hurtado

TRANSLATED BY KIM DÍAZ

FIRST PORTRAIT: THE HACIENDA

San Luis Potosí, México. A tall slim boy walks with his mother across the central square of an hacienda. The boy is just getting used to the geography and people from that place. Born in Barcelona, the son of a family who emigrated due to the Mexican Revolution, and who had been living in Europe for most of their lives. The mother and son come close to a group of peasants who wait for them with their hats in their hands and their heads tilted downwards. Villoro tells us:

All of them greeted me with great devotion because I was el patroncito, I was the son of their landlord. One of these Indians came to me with great reverence, took my hand and kissed it, this left a terrible impression on me, that this old man who was doing the hardest type of work in the fields and heat of the sun would come to me—a kid who had nothing to do with him, and respectfully kiss my hand. For me, this was at the same time an experience I felt to be deeply insulting, and which also made me feel an incredible amount of respect

for this person, this old man. This experience stayed with me throughout my life (I think my book) *Los Grandes Momentos del Indigenismo en México* (. . .) is due largely to the experience I had that day.¹

Villoro is referring to his first book, published in 1950, when he was twenty-eight years old. The subject of Mexican Indians, however, has preoccupied him throughout his life. And I say that it has preoccupied him and not merely been of interest to him because for him, this has to do with a problem that touches the most profound fibers of his being. Villoro does not lose sleep over the Indian as an abstract concept, but as a concrete human being. Villoro has extended this concern towards all those who suffer some type of exclusion, in other words, some type of injustice. The exercise of reason, and especially that of philosophical reason, has always been for Villoro the exercise of a life-giving type of reason. Villoro's more theoretical and abstract works have ultimately been preoccupied with the existential, the moral, and the political, in the best sense of this tarnished word. We could say that Villoro has always believed in the liberating power of reason. This is why he has sought to offer us a philosophical vision of reason—without falling into skepticism or nihilism—that is worthy of mankind. This is how we should understand, I believe, the original theory of knowledge that he offered in *Creer, saber y conocer*. When he proposed his revisionist definition of knowledge, and did away with the requirement of truth, what he meant to do was to articulate a concept of knowledge that would allow us to better understand the epistemic practice in its historical dimension, but above all else, to better understand the epistemic practice in relation to its political practice. This is why there is such a close relationship between *Creer, saber y conocer*, which was published in 1982, and *El Poder y el valor*, published in 1997. The epistemic ethics of the first book leads to the political ethics of the second book; the epistemic communitarianism of the first book leads to the political communitarianism of the second book. Within the philosophical work of Luis Villoro, which spans over six decades, one can observe an extraordinary continuity of what has preoccupied and motivated him. One could say that the principal themes of his work have been as follows: the metaphysical understanding of otherness, the limits and reach of reason, the connection between knowledge and power, the search for community with others, the ethical reflection of injustice, the advocacy of respect towards cultural differences, and the critical dimension of philosophical thought. To develop these themes, Villoro has traveled an enormous philosophical territory. The list of authors over whom he has written with authority is long: Machiavelli, Descartes, Rousseau, Marx, Dilthey, Husserl, Marcel, Wittgenstein, Rawls, et cetera. Villoro traveled promptly through the main philosophical currents of the twentieth century: existentialism, phenomenology, Marxism, analytic philosophy. He passed through all of these without stopping too long in any one of them, without falling into the subsidiary fervor of so many of our colleagues. We could say that in all of these years, Villoro has cultivated a balanced philosophical pluralism. For him, not one philosophy should be taken as the True philosophy; none should be turned into dogma. Nevertheless, he

has always insisted that not just anything can pass for philosophy, and much less for good philosophy. Genuine philosophy, according to him, should be the rigorous exercise of an autonomous reason, and above everything else, of reason in the service of life.

SECOND PORTRAIT: MASCARONES

The photograph taken by a street artist captures him walking by the Ribera de San Cosme in the company of Emilio Uranga and Ricardo Guerra. All three of them are very young, dressed up in suits and ties, and carrying books under their arms. They are smiling, and it is evident that they are enjoying the conversation between them. I imagine all three of them entering the tall doorway of the house built in the eighteenth century known as Mascarones, and walking into the yard of the Philosophy Department. There they stop to say hello to their fellow students, but promptly walk into the seminar room. The students take their seats and await the arrival of their teacher; José Gaos makes his entrance, places his books on the desk, takes a breath, and begins speaking. The students observe a concentrated silence. This is not an ordinary class, nor a teacher like any other. Villoro has mentioned that the only teacher he acknowledges as such is Gaos. It is impossible to understand Mexican philosophy in the twentieth century without the teachings of Gaos, the philosopher *transferrado*. His students were, besides Villoro, Leopoldo Zea, Emilio Uranga, Fernando Salmerón, Alejandro Rossi, to mention only the most prominent among them. Villoro belonged to the generation of Gaos's students who called themselves El Hiperión, and who had their moment of major activity between 1948 and 1952. This group proposed themselves two ambitious goals: on one hand, to philosophize in a strictly professional manner, with the highest level of originality and rigor; and on the other hand, to philosophize from and about their surrounding reality, to philosophize about México, about Latin America, not as another academic interest, but rather with the goal of transforming this reality, of shaking this reality up, of liberating it. Villoro's large philosophical work is a testament to the strict fulfillment of both ideals—the criterion by which Mexican philosophy has been judged in the twentieth century. What distinguishes Villoro from the other Mexican philosophers of this period is that he has demonstrated more than anyone else that both ideals are not only compatible, but also complimentary. Unfortunately, this lesson has not been thoroughly learned and must be repeated. Villoro's message to Latinamericanists is that an engaged and liberating philosophy must also be professional and rigorous, and to analytic philosophers, his message is that a clear and rigorous philosophy which does not attempt to reflect autonomously, nor attempt to search for the relevance with its own reality, will be nothing more than a borrowed philosophy. This is how Villoro wrote about this in an exchange he had with Leopoldo Zea:

By "rigorous philosophy" one should not understand an academic type of philosophy, informed by the latest publications in English or German. It also does not mean an aseptic philosophy in the face of the motivating reality that the philosopher lives. Rigorous philosophy simply means a philosophy that with the exercise of proper reason, attempts to take to the logical

conclusion, the examination of received opinions and doctrines. A philosophy that does not stop at vague rationalizations or rhetorical figures, and which does not take borrowed opinions postulated by others without submitting them to questions. Rigorous philosophy is reflection that aspires to be clear, precise, and radical. In this sense, all rigorous philosophy is liberating, but its liberating work does not consist in postulating action or political indoctrination, but rather in questioning the received beliefs...²

Villoro has been one of the main proponents of professional and engaged philosophy in our countries. He founded the journal *Crítica* in 1967 along with Alejandro Rossi and Fernando Salmerón. *Crítica* sought to be a space for the new directions of Iberoamerican philosophy. The acclaimed philosophy from the journal was a clear philosophy, rigorous, of good technical stripe, close to the sciences, and without folklorist inclinations, nor Weltanschauung pretensions. In 1974, Villoro founded the Humanities and Social Sciences division of the Iztapalapa branch of the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. This was an academic experiment where philosophy was integrated with other disciplines. For the faculty constitution of the new department, Villoro hired analytic as well as Marxist philosophers. This speaks once again to his philosophical pluralism; but not so much to the pluralism of others, given that it did not take too long for the analytic and Marxist philosophers to begin quarreling. In any case, it is very revealing that many philosophers of all philosophical currents proudly declare themselves to be Villoro's students. And since Villoro has cultivated with the same type of quality other disciplines such as intellectual history, cultural theory, and political criticism, his significance has spilled over the narrow boundaries of academic philosophy. The Mexican historians, sociologists, and anthropologists who consider Villoro's work to have been inspiring and illuminating are not few. Those who had the good fortune to have attended his classes agree that he is the type of teacher who combines the qualities of the rigorous philosopher with those of the accomplished orator. Villoro has taken on the most difficult philosophical problems both in and out of the classroom with the qualities of clarity, intelligence, and passion that are so characteristic of him. These qualities manifest themselves in his writings. Villoro's philosophical prose is—let us emphasize this—a model of how to write philosophy in Spanish.

THIRD PORTRAIT: EL COLEGIO NACIONAL

El Colegio Nacional occupies the building of the old Convento y Colegio de la Enseñanza in the center of Mexico City. Since its founding in 1943, el Colegio only had space for twenty members, but in 1972, President Luis Echeverría doubled this number. Rumor had it that the expansion of el Colegio was Echeverría's strategy to coopt intellectuals who had distanced themselves from his regime after the massacre of 1968. No one, however, could have suggested this explanation when Villoro arrived in el Colegio on November 14, 1978. His incoming presentation infamously titled "Philosophy and Domination" is one of the strongest defenses of the critical role that philosophers ought to adopt in the face of political power. I cite the last words of this magnificent discourse. Villoro tells us:

Philosophy is the disruptive activity of reason, and we can find reason at the limit of all scientific thought. Philosophy is not a profession; it is a form of thought. The type of thought that laboriously attempts again and again to conceive without ever actually achieving, that which is different, that which is removed from any society that claims to have a hold on reason. That which is different, that we never quite achieve, which is always sought through wonder and perplexity, is truthfulness in the face of prejudice, illusion, or lies, authenticity in the face of alienation, freedom in the face of oppression.³

I look at Villoro's photograph reading his discourse. It is the image of a mature man, firm, in full capacity of his faculties, master of an enormous intellectual and moral prestige. This is a man who, had he wished to, could have taken leadership of the Secretaría de Educación Pública or any other position of this magnitude. If he did not, this was due to the loyalty he felt towards philosophy, understood not as the placid life led by the university professor or petite bourgeoisie researcher, but as a permanent criticism of political power. Not only of the government's power in its functions and of the economic groups allied with it, but also of that smaller but not any less vicious political power that is exercised among the opposing parties and intellectual circles. Even though Villoro is a man of declared leftist politics, he has never defended any type of orthodoxy, not any type of leadership, as many of his other comrades have done. This is because for Luis Villoro, being a leftist does not mean one adopts a particular ideology; instead, it means to assume a moral posture that consists in adopting a disrupting attitude in the face of any oppressive power. This attitude is tied to an epistemic position that could be qualified as an anti-dogmatic fallibilism, and an understanding of reason as a type of dialogical plurality. This is why Villoro has stood up against the leftist ideologies and utopias that have been used to tyrannize people and exterminate dissidents. Villoro has never been a card-carrying member of any political party, in the sense that Ortega meant, but he has always been the type of man who is engaged with what he believes to be the best causes. Villoro formed part of a renowned group of intellectuals who, in the decades of the fifties and sixties, sought to restore the Mexican political system from its extremes. As already mentioned, his involvement in the student movement of 1968 was pivotal, and he has supported the political campaigns of various leftist parties. Outside of the country, his important role in UNESCO should also be remembered. But the relationship that he has had with the political movement that emerged in 1994 with the Indigenous uprising in Chiapas is unparalleled. Villoro believes that the neo-zapatistas have traversed a hopeful route to political reform without committing the mistakes of traditional leftist movements. The democracy that Villoro has in mind is a direct democracy, deliberative, exercised among small communities—towns, work unions, neighborhoods—in which the assembly takes decisions by consensus, and in which the structures of domination and exclusion have been dismantled, or as the Mexican Indians say, "se manda obedeciendo," one commands by serving. It seems to me that two political currents dovetail in Villoro's thought that ultimately respond to two very

deep aspects of his personality. On one hand, we can find a liberalism that confronts any and all types of oppressive authority, and on the other hand, a communitarianism that attempts to dissolve the egoism of the individual person. The possible tensions between these two currents are very well known by us: On one extreme the hegemonic power of the community has the potential to suffocate the individual person, and on the other extreme, the defense of individual rights puts a limit to communal sovereignty. Villoro's political philosophy attempts to bring together these two currents, although I am not sure how successful he has been. In any case, one ought to emphasize that he has sought a synthesis in order to overcome these tensions.

FOURTH PORTRAIT: LA MEZQUITA AZUL

The blue mosque has six narrow minarets and a cascade of domes and semi-domes that make it look even taller than it is. Luis Villoro scans the interior, illuminated by dozens of blue glass windows and hundreds of small lamps that hang from the roof. Around him is a multitude of prostrated men who recite their prayers. Villoro admires the building like any other tourist; even so, a deep emotion overtakes him. Something bigger than him compels him to kneel down. He narrates the experience he had that moment:

I am aware that I am one of many, small, insignificant in the ocean of worshipping humanity (...). My voice gets lost among the voices of all the other men. It is the entirety of humanity that every so often crosses over to that other space of full otherness. But my vanity is still present. I am aware of myself and register my words. I realize I'm thinking about what I will do, maybe, write about this moment. So I pray: "Please remove my pride, let my immense pride be destroyed, have my egoism be erased once and for all. And only at that moment did I feel, only then I saw truthfully. Everything had forever turned transparent, everything was pure, (...) everything is well. The 'I' had been lost, small, trivial, forgotten. How amazing! Let this be, then! Let the all be all, let the all be one!"⁴

But when the experience ended, when Villoro's 'I' returned to take its place in the world, what Villoro feared when he dissolved in the chorus of prayers, took place. Villoro not only narrated his experience, but he also teased it apart with a brilliant ruthless analysis. The essay, titled "La Mezquita Azul," was published in 1985. In this and other writings, Villoro has formulated to himself the questions of what the divine may be, how we may come to know it and speak about it, and what consequences one's experience of the divine may have for our lives. Villoro does not believe in a personal God, but he does believe that mankind lives facing what is an absolute Other. Of this otherness, one cannot speak, but one may offer a meaningful silence. This philosophical place of Villoro's is nourished by sources as diverse as the Upanishads, Buddha, Eckhart, Otto, and Wittgenstein. For Villoro, the encounter with radical otherness demonstrates to us that in the end, the 'I' is only an illusion and this is a good thing. But it seems to me that here is another tension in Villoro's thought. On one hand, he complains about the 'I', of any 'I', his and that of others, but on the other hand, he believes that the vital encounter

with other people, who are also I's, is not only the source of morals, but also the source of our lives. In some way, Villoro had already discerned this antinomy in one of his first writings, "Solitude and Communion," published in 1949. There, Villoro tells us:

Love moves us to appropriate another, but, at the same time, it demands that the other remain independent; for if for one moment the other stopped being unyielding, the loving engagement would disappear; it would no longer be two different beings face to face, but only one in solitude. Similarly, the subject desires to give himself completely but, nevertheless, love is only sustained by what remains original of him in the face of the other, by what remains of his intact safeguard, by what remains of his intimacy: that which remains in solitude is only maintained by communion. And it is this way, that the fullest communion has latent in its bosom the most profound solitude.⁵

If the "I" is an illusion, then so is love; but it seems that Villoro's heart refuses to accept such cold conclusion. At this point, a comparison with Octavio Paz may be revealing. Paz, influenced also by Asian thought, affirmed that the 'I' is a shadow of the personal pronoun, but he also refused to accept that love is a mere illusion. The comparison with Paz—in spite of all of their differences—may help us to emphasize a common characteristic of the thinkers of that generation, and this is that even though they were forever disillusioned with the utopias of modernity, they continued thinking that a rationality that is more modest and sensible towards the intimate fibers of life could mark a change for humanity in these dreary times.

FIFTH PORTRAIT: ESCUELAS PÍAS

Madrid, October 1st, 2007. In the site that the Escuelas Pías de San Fernando used to occupy, which today is a modern university center, Villoro listens to a tribute about his life and work. Suddenly the speaker is silent. He will have many more things to say, many more, but he hopes that his respectful silence will also be significant.

NOTES

1. Luis Villoro, *Los Grandes Momentos del Indigenismo en México* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1950).
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3. Luis Villoro, *El concepto de ideología y otros ensayos* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007).
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5. Ibid.