La raza cósmica / The Cosmic Race, bilingual ed. By José Vasconselos. Translated by Didier T. Jaen. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Pp. xxxiii+126.

A Mexican Ulysses: An Autobiography. By José Vasconcelos. Abridged and translated by W. Rex Crawford. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972. Pp. 288.

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Social reflection outside the metropolis has often come from activists who found themselves in a quiet moment—foreign study, exile, prison, house arrest. Sarmiento's *Facundo* came at one such low point, as did Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* and much of the work of Ali Shari□ati. Others wrote in the heat of active political engagement—Ramabai, Fukuzawa, and da Cunha, for example. But few wrote important works of social thought in the process of interpreting their own lives. One such was José Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos played an important and complex role in Mexican politics for the 20 years between the fall of the dictator Porfirio Díaz and the failure of his own bid for the presidency in 1929. In the same period, he wrote five sizable monographs (on Pythagoras, Hindustani thought, metaphysics, race, and native culture in the Americas) and pursued an erotic life of considerable complexity. While his most famous work is *La raza cósmica* of 1925, his autobiography illustrates his theory more effectively. For it is pervaded by a sensual aesthetic of individual life that is Vasconcelos's most striking contribution to social thought.

José Vasconcelos was born in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca in 1882, but his family moved almost immediately to Sasabe on the northern border. Vasconcelos's father was a minor customs official. His mother, who loomed large in his life, was the progenitrix, organizer, and sustainer of a large family. Some of Vasconcelos's early schooling was across the border, and he learned early both the English language and the hostile attitudes of the *yanquis*. In search of better schools, the family moved to Campeche, where Vasconcelos went to high school and was recruited to teach English to the pretty daughter of the principal, who became the first of his many erotic attachments. Vasconcelos finished preparatory school in Mexico City, attended law school, and became a practicing lawyer in 1905. In 1906 he married a hometown girl from Oaxaca, who had been his comforter at his mother's early death and whose ambiguous position in his multivalent life resurfaces often in his autobiography.

*Another review from 2053 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

Vasconcelos became associated with Francisco I. Madero's reform movement almost as soon as he took up the law. After the first of many exiles he returned to Mexico City when Madero took over from Díaz in 1911. Shortly after the battle of Ciudad Juárez, he met the founder of the Mexican "White Cross," Elena Arizmendi, who needed legal services (because of internal troubles in the organization) and had been referred to Vasconcelos by Madero. Arizmendi was smart and beautiful, an aristocrat but trained as a nurse, a supporter of the revolution but a lover of old regime niceties. Her first marriage had dissolved years before. She and Vasconcelos became lovers almost immediately.

Madero's assassination in 1913 sent Vasconcelos (and Arizmendi) into exile. From abroad he helped mobilize constitutionalists against the Huerta regime, then returned to Mexico in 1914 as minister of education in the Government of the Convention. The forces of Venustiano Carranza soon overthrew that government, and Vasconcelos again left Mexico, this time for five years. He spent most of this time in the United States, where he made a living as a writer and an international lawyer (his earlier legal career had been as a representative of a New York firm in Mexico City) and prepared for the inevitable turn of the Mexican kaleidoscope. After numerous temporary separations, he and Arizmendi parted for good in 1916. (Vasconselos maintained his wife and children in San Antonio throughout most of this period; his daughter was conceived about when the Arizmendi affair was beginning.) Carranza fell in 1920, and Vasconcelos returned to Mexico as president of the National University. Soon afterwards, he became minister of education. Afire with transforming zeal, he built schools and libraries throughout the country, worked for literacy among the masses and the Indians, and sponsored the arts—particularly the folk arts and the spectacular murals that remain world famous more than a century later. In 1924 he ran for governor of his native Oaxaca, was defeated (probably by force and chicanery), and again left the country. He returned in 1928 to run for president after Álvaro Obregón—the president-elect and one of the great strongmen of the 1920s—had been assassinated. In an election almost certainly managed by fraud and violence Vasconcelos was defeated, and the Partido Nacional Revolucionario consolidated its one party rule, which would endure under various names until 2000. During the election Vasconcelos took a new mistress, Antonieta Rivas Mercado, the estranged wife of an American engineer.

Vasconcelos briefly awaited a popular uprising with which to claim the election that had been taken from him, but it never came. An embittered man, he again fled the country, for the United States, Panama, and then Paris, where Rivas Mercado—unwilling to countenance Vasconcelos's continued marriage—killed herself at the altar of Notre Dame Cathedral. Vasconcelos left Paris in 1933, wandering to Argentina and the United States

and writing his memoirs in a voice that rapidly became both pessimistic and conservative. In 1939 he returned to a Mexico in which he was no longer an important politician. His long-suffering wife died in 1941, and he remarried. He directed the National Library from 1941 to 1947, and thereafter the Biblioteca de México. He continued to write energetically, becoming a devout, even fervent, Catholic. He died in 1959.

La raza cósmica as usually read is merely the introduction of a much longer travel book. Three short essays on *mestizaje* (literally, cross-breeding) introduce much longer sections recounting Vasconcelos's 1922 trip through Brazil, Argentina, and Chile on an official mission of the Mexican government. Again Vasconcelos traveled with a woman—the internationally acclaimed Mexican opera singer Fanny Anitua. An erotic relationship is unproven but widely suspected.

The travel sections of *La raza cósmica* prefigure the style of the later autobiography, intermingling the personal and the abstract indissolubly. But the more abstract opening sections argue that Mexicans (and by extension the "hybrid" Ibero-Americans) represent a synthesis of all the great races of the past. These races are the black (or Lemurian), the oldest; the red (or Atlantean) and second oldest, ancestor of the current indigenous civilizations of the Americas; the yellow (about which Vasconcelos says remarkably little); and the white, among which Vasconcelos distinguishes the two great strains of Anglo-Saxons and Spaniards. Vasconcelos is not particularly committed to the details of this race system, although literal-minded readers of the early 21st century, for example, found him intolerably racist. The evidence is plain enough. He speaks at one point of "the Chinese, who under the holy counsel of Confucian morals multiply like rats" (p. 19), and he repeatedly speaks of blacks as ugly. But he also notes that "the mestizo, the Indian and even the Black surpass the White in an infinity of properly spiritual capacities" (p. 32). And certainly his sexual eye finds women of all races attractive: in *Mexican Ulysses* he lovingly tells the story of a four-day idyll with a beautiful black woman in Havana during his return from Lima, where he and Arizmendi have just had a stormy parting. However, while his nonracist sexual tastes seem to some to redeem his racial views, they at the same time suggest a sexual egotism repugnant to many women.

But in among all this mixture and ambivalence, what really matters to Vasconelos is that the Mexicans—not so much as they are but as they could be—(will) synthesize all prior racial types into a fifth race. As he put it in a lecture of 1926:

> From a purely intellectual point of view I doubt whether there is a race with less prejudice, more ready to take up almost any mental adventure, more subtle, and more varied than the mestizo or half-breed. I find in these traits the hope that the mestizo will produce a civilization more universal in its tendency than

> any other race of the past. Whether it is due to our temperament or to the fact that we do not possess a very strong national tradition, the truth is that our people are keen and apt to understand and interpret the most contradictory human types. (*Aspects of Mexican Civilization* [University of Chicago Press, 1926], p. 92).

Yet despite *La raza cósmica*'s subtitle of *el mestizaje*, little of its argument concerns miscegenation as a historical reality, unlike Gilberto Freyre's *The Masters and the Slaves*, written less than a decade later. And Vasconcelos would by the 1930s retreat into a position presuming the superiority of the unmixed *criollos* in Mexican culture.

The real heart of *La raza cósmica* is less *el mestizaje* than Vasconcelos's unrelenting hostility to the society and culture that he associates with Great Britain and the United States: sober rather than bold; calculating rather than risk taking; calm rather than passionate; commercial rather than aesthetic; mechanical rather than creative; pedestrian rather than grand. It therefore makes little difference that Vasconcelos's argument is pervaded by extravagant—even bizarre—historical interpretations: the conquistadors were creative visionaries, Napoleon "betrayed the cause of Latinity" by selling Louisiana to the Americans, contemporary Mexicans need to remember and avenge the defeats of the Great Armada and of Trafalgar. For at other times he calls the conquistadors "brigands," admires British commercial determination, and envies the Americans their relentless discipline. Nor does it matter that he calls the United States an Anglo-Saxon country when in 1920 over a third of its citizens were either foreign born or first generation, and those of Anglo-Saxon ancestry constituted about 3% of its population. Nor does it matter in the end that the "Anglo-Saxon" commercial world he seems so to despise is in reality a projection of the very Mexican world of Porfirio Díaz: commercial, scientific, exploitative, tawdry.

For Vasconcelos wants to make a "spiritual leap," to rise above the specialists through "intuition informed by specialist data." He wants to paint a nonexistent but possible world, an alternative to the early 20th-century American/British commercial culture that engulfed his Mexico. The organized, disciplined, Victorian world of Spencer is what Vasconcelos detested—a world of "rules, norms, tyranny, from which it is necessary to escape" (p. 29). (Vasconcelos could be quite amusing; he once remarked, "What [Spencer] could not forgive Christ was his not having been British" [*Mexican Ulysses*, p. 42].)

But in particular, *La raza* rejects a world in which "matrimonial ties are imposed on people who do not love each other" (p. 29). Suddenly, we are in the middle of Vasconcelos's unhappy marriage to Serafina Miranda: "In the third period, whose approach is announced in a thousand ways, the orientation of conduct will not be sought in pitiful reason which explains but does not discover. It will rather be sought in reactive feeling and convincing beauty. Norms will be given by fantasy, the supreme faculty. That

is to say, life will be without norms, in a state in which everything born from feeling will be right" (p. 29).

Here, after 10 years of philosophical reflection, Vasconcelos's passionate affair with Elena Arizmendi has become a world historical trend. "Above scientific eugenics, the mysterious eugenics of aesthetic taste will prevail. . . . Marriage will cease to be a consolation for misfortunes that need not be perpetuated, and it will become a work of art. . . . Sincerely passionate unions, easily undone in case of error, will produce bright and handsome offspring" (*La raza*, pp. 30, 31). This emphasis on physicality (and on an aristocracy of beauty) is indeed inherent in Vasconcelos's concept of the new race: "As an instrument of this transcendental transformation, a race has been developing in the Iberian continent; a race full of vices and defects, but gifted with malleability, rapid comprehension, and easy emotion, fruitful elements for the seminal plasma of the future species" (p. 37) The essence of this new race is its preoccupation with beauty:

> Fortunately, such a gift, necessary to the fifth race, is possessed in a great degree by the mestizo people of the Ibero-American continent, people for whom beauty is the main reason for everything. A fine aesthetic sensitivity and a profound love of beauty, away from any illegitimate interests and free from formal ties, are necessary for the third period, which is impregnated with a Christian aestheticism that puts upon ugliness itself the redemptive touch of pity which lights a halo around everything created. (*La raza*, p. 38)

One finds in *La raza cósmica* little about the new *caudillismo* of Vasconcelos's Mexico. The conquistadors are admired ("There is no Anglo-Saxon writer who does not admire Hernán Cortés"; *Mexican Ulysses*, p. 141), but we hear nothing of Carranza, Huerta, Calles, and Obregón, who have teased Vasconcelos with the lesser trappings of power, then shunted him quickly aside when the need arose. Perhaps the focus on a personal, aesthetic paradise was forced on Vasconcelos by this dangerous political world that would crassly but effectively destroy his political pretensions in 1929.

Since the Vasconcelos of *La raza* writes an ostensibly political theory that in practice consists of prescriptions about the individual and his experience, one expects that his autobiography will embody these views in every line. This expectation proves correct; the autobiography practices what the ostensibly theoretical works preach. In the English translation, the four original books of memoirs (almost 2,000 pages) are abridged to a volume of around 300 pages and given the title *A Mexican Ulysses*, a slight modification of the title of the first volume of the full work. The original Spanish (*Ulises criollo*) referred not to a Mexican nationality but to the racial status of *criollo*, a Mexican putatively of purely Hispanic ancestry. For by this time, race transcended nationalism for Vasconcelos. Yet

race for Vasconcelos most often meant culture rather than genetics. The travel sections of *La raza*, with their plain admiration of Brazil and Argentina, had already made that fact clear.

In *Mexican Ulysses* we see Vasconcelos in the full round: his intellectual life, his political vicissitudes, his family and erotic lives. The only thing veiled is the (well-known) identity of Arizmendi, who is called Adriana throughout the book. (I follow that convention here.) Not surprisingly, given the conflicts involved in the various parallel lives of Vasconcelos, the "aesthetic unity" proclaimed in *La raza* is often absent. For example, in the commentary sections of *Mexican Ulysses*, Vasconcelos often argues that great thinking and sexuality do not go together. He repeatedly announces plans to forsake women and pursue a monastic life. (Adriana's departure from Lima inspired a "half-dream" of Jesus [*Mexican Ulysses*, p. 131], and curiously enough Adriana herself at one point left him in New York for a convent in San Antonio; he later arrived at the convent—with his wife—to extract Adriana and go off with her again). But Vasconcelos's monastic projects never succeed. More important, the distinction of thought and sexuality in these moments of tension does not fit Vasconcelos's theory of esthetic monism, which not unexpectedly dates from the midpoint of his passion for Adriana and which insists on the absolute unity of experience. The beginnings of his great loves—the first passages with Sophie in Campeche and the first transports with Adriana in Mexico City—celebrate such unity of experience. To be sure, it dissolves at times. Vasconcelos at one point in the New York Public Library gives Adriana a copy of Plato to "keep her entertained" (*Mexican Ulysses*, p. 117) while he reads the church fathers; he actually has contempt for her intellectual abilities (p. 80). Yet although he is secretly glad when she finally leaves him in Lima, even their parting insults show an almost allegorical tie of the personal and the theoretical (*Mexican Ulysses*, p. 128). Vasconcelos accuses Adriana of wanting to show off her legs in the new revealing fashions of New York, while she tells him she will marry a gringo, because Latin men don't know how to treat women. The hypersexuality Vasconcelos has so often admired in Adriana is now an insult, for she had by this time read widely in Ellen Key and other feminists and to accuse her of mere sexuality was the supreme slur. For her part, the threat to marry one of the *sajones* stabbed the very heart of the racial theory Vasconcelos would set forth in *La raza*. (She did indeed marry a gringo in 1918, but the marriage foundered quickly.)

This idealized underlying unity of ideas and sensuality was however bound together in Vasconcelos—explicitly in his self and implicitly in his theories—with the absolute self-involvement that could lead him to write 2,000 pages of autobiography in the first place. Even the most cursory reading of *Mexican Ulysses* will persuade the reader that Adriana is for

Vasconcelos simply an instrument of his own experience ("What I sought in Adriana was her unique, irreplaceable quality of being for all eternity part of my destiny"; *Mexican Ulysses*, p. 131). As such incidents make clear (and as became plain when a biography of Arizmendi finally appeared in 2010), it is Vasconcelos's life whose aesthetic monism was at issue, not the shared life of a mutual relationship. There is no persuasive theory of mutuality in his writings on aesthetic monism, no sense that a profound relation with another would involve the merging of not one but two complex subjectivities and that this would involve compromise, an activity Vasconcelos identifies with the despised *sajones*.

In the works reviewed here Vasconcelos thus did not resolve the inner contradictions and antisociality of aesthetic monism. It remains an interesting but incomplete evocation of a line of social theory running from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* to Friedrich Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* and Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. But *Mexican Ulysses* provides a profound if sometimes sobering view into an aesthetic concept of life as Vasconcelos lived and theorized it, and *La raza cósmica* sketches a culture whose social characterology might sustain a society of such people. These are real achievements, even if, as in the conclusion of his Chicago lectures, Vasconcelos acknowledged that they were dreams rather than actual expectations:

> Many of our failings arise from the fact that we do not know exactly what we want. . . . Democracy and equal opportunities for every man has been the motto of the great American nation. Broadness, universality of sentiment and thought, in order to fulfil the mission of bringing together all the races of the earth and with the purpose of creating a new type of civilization is, I believe, the ideal that would give us in Latin America strength and vision. (*Aspects*, p. 93)

And fittingly, it was as a dreamer that he described himself:

> My race is grave, profound, and moves itself to tears in the intense sweetness of prayer. It also has known how to laugh, but with the Cervantesque laugh that lashes out at the inadequate execution of the highest aims, the ineptitude of reality in accommodating itself to our dreams. After all the failures of Don Quixote, the ideal remains still most high and glorious. Humor, by contrast, is the uncontrollable triumph of Sancho Panza. I have spent many years in the Anglo-Saxon countries, and I am fed up with *sanchopancismo*. (*El monismo estético* [Mexico City, 1918], p. 8)

Vasconcelos will always be a thinker of controversy—not for him the serenity with which Don Quixote so often meets his reverses. But the controversy is worth having and the dreams are worth dreaming, flawed as they so often seem. For these books confront us with central dimensions of cultural difference, underscored by the passion Vasconcelos so much admired.