

Carlos Vaz Ferreira: A Review of His Collected Works

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IN OFFERING TRIBUTE to Vaz Ferreira the government of Uruguay has appropriately linked his writings¹ to the history and aspirations of the nation as a whole. Uruguay is a synonym for political democracy and social progress in Latin America. Vaz is the philosopher who, for more than a half century, gave intellectual substance to the forms in which his country went about fashioning the most stable political system in the Continent. His *obras* register the agonies no less than the achievements of Uruguay: the attempts to ease tensions between classes, races and ideologies (VII:23-39, XI:158); the battle for economic and social emancipation of women (IX:17-66); the legal stabilization of the rights of individuals and the limits of public authority (X:64-65). In brief, Vaz records the national effort to bring nineteenth-century European liberal ideologies to twentieth-century Latin America.

It is not simply the frequent references to John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer that recalls the flavor of Victorian liberalism. Vaz reproduced, with modifications, the content of the Victorian ethos: the primacy of the individual free conscience; the limits of federal regulation; and the measurement of progress in individual rather than social terms. But to this, Vaz grafted on the pessimism of the *fin de siècle*. He questioned the soporific identification of human

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¹ *Obras de Carlos Vaz Ferreira, Homenaje de la Cámara de Representantes de la República Oriental del Uruguay*. Montevideo, 1957. I. Ideas y observaciones (pp. 192); II. Los problemas de la libertad y los del determinismo (pp. 250); III. Moral para intelectuales (pp. 210); IV. Lógica viva (pp. 296); V. Sobre la propiedad de la tierra (pp. 366); VI. Sobre la percepción métrica (pp. 158); VII. Sobre los problemas sociales (pp. 122); VIII. Conocimiento y acción (pp. 180); IX. Sobre feminismo (pp. 194); X. Fermentario (pp. 216); XI. Algunas conferencias sobre temas científicos y sociales (1) (pp. 360); XII. Algunas conferencias sobre temas científicos y sociales (2) (pp. 232); XIII. Sobre la enseñanza en nuestro país (pp. 248); XIV. Lecciones sobre pedagogía y cuestiones de enseñanza (1) (pp. 270); XV. Lecciones sobre pedagogía y cuestiones de enseñanza (2) (pp. 216); XVI. Lecciones sobre pedagogía y cuestiones de enseñanza (3) (pp. 294); XVII. Estudios pedagógicos (pp. 272); XVIII. Incidentalmente (Algunas cartas, discursos y notas) (pp. 172); XIX. Correspondencia entre Unamuno y Vaz Ferreira (pp. 104).

goodness and social progress, or the ability of systematic metaphysics to illumine all problems of men. And if it can be argued that his open philosophy placed him in a constantly equivocal position (something Vaz would justify rather than deny), it should be noted that the real option to Vaz's liberalism and pragmatism was not modern conceptions of mass democracy, but massive totalitarianism and élitist *realpolitik*. Thus to dismiss Vaz as a philosophic ghost haunting our century is to ignore the fact that the nineteenth-century conscience of the *honnête homme* has made a profound contribution to the theory and practice of Uruguayan democracy.

Vaz Ferreira was born in 1872 of mixed Spanish and Portuguese ancestry. In familiar pattern, he graduated as a lawyer from the University of Montevideo in 1903. At the same time, he pursued a career of study leading to a degree in philosophy (dual careers being permissible in most Latin American universities). From that time on, Vaz remained connected with the University. Until the time of his death in 1958, he was Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Science; a Faculty he helped to create. His thought reveals the anti-systematic character of those philosophers who, at the turn of the century, revolted against the narrowing confines of both religious and positivist currents. The "universal personalidad de pensador," rather than any categorical exposition of ideas, was held to be the essential cement of philosophy (X:90-91). He wrote extensively, not only in the technical problems of philosophy, but also on education, politics, sociology, mathematics and psychology. In this, Vaz was a descendant of the Enlightenment tradition, viewing philosophy as a method of illumining the hidden recesses of life in its full variety.

Vaz remained, throughout his life, convinced of the Bergson-James theses on the pluralism of the universe and the plethora of human options in such a world. "We live on a planet whose origin and whose destiny we do not know" (III:192). However, Vaz distinguished himself from *fin de siècle* pragmatism by a stubborn belief that rationalism is consistent with pluralism. "Humanity, through reason, learns little. But through experience it learns nothing" (X:60, 190). Basically, Vaz employed a Socratic dialectic, not to prove Bergson's *élan* or James' equation of belief and truth, but as the legitimate end of philosophic knowledge. Vaz searched for a perspective rather than for a position. "El paralogismo esencial," the opposition and interrelatedness of freedom and coercion, physical and psychological events, past and future, the free spirit and the causally bound nature, the experiential and the rational, all line his thought.

In Vaz' sense, it is futile to claim truth for a single position without being isolated from other streams of knowledge. Vaz' dialectic philosophy differs from eclecticism in that it is perspectively unbound, striving for wholeness through knowledge rather than categories derived from various metaphysical systems (VII:103-107). This position is given particular emphasis in his instrumental logic that searches out operational rather than formal criteria for a "living logic" (IV:219-242). Nor does Vaz restrict his dialectical pluralism to abstract considerations. He always remained cognizant of his rôle as educator. This belief in the practical nature of a living logic served as a link between practice and morality. It is the root task of education to establish this relationship.

Although this concept of education as the presentation of moral dilemmas proved a healthy antiseptic to dogmatism, it presents difficulties of another kind. Vaz's view had a soporific side, in that it led to posing questions in terms of paradox without indicating that non-paradoxical solutions are ever possible. For example, Vaz' statement that "the distinction between psychic phenomena and material phenomena is the most fundamental that exists in the realm of science" (I:113) enshrines a dualism no less dogmatic than the monism it seeks to overthrow. Likewise, his attempt to relate determinism to facts and free will to ideas (II:205, 216, 242) is a further canonization of mind as a property beyond empirical determination. The principle of knowledge is itself called into question by Vaz as "a dilemma without end" (I:163). The younger generation of Latin American philosophers, influenced by new currents in the physical and social sciences, have sharply contested the dogmatism of philosophies of paradox. Vaz' own list of polarities, which include a theory of aether and a theory of matter, merely illustrated the pre-Hertzian stage of science, and does not constitute proof of a dialectical pluralism.

This points to the larger fact that Vaz never escaped the hold of nineteenth-century modes of European thought. In his book, *On The Ownership of Land*, this traditionalist mould is most pronounced. The serious discussion of Henry George and Herbert Spencer, often with telling criticisms, reveals Vaz' distinct inability to overcome the problem which is the bane of Latin American philosophy, mimesis. Vaz is not examining these older thinkers as a historian of ideas, but as one who is himself in the throes of their ideas and prejudices.

Latin American philosophy, for all the herculean efforts of men like Vaz to forge a unique expression satisfying the cultural aspirations of their life, has remained dependent on European models for

its intellectual sustenance. Historically, the main bastion standing between Latin American philosophy and an exaggerated imitativeness, has been folk thought. However, not even nationalism has been able to prevent the transformation of folk-images into art-images, magic into European religion, and regional mythology into cosmopolitan philosophy. The comparatively late 'modernization' of Latin American social structures created a double effect: it reproduced in accelerated fashion the tendency of systematic philosophy to oust inherited folk and religious expressions, and no less, to focus attention of the leading minds on the types of philosophizing prevalent in societies that have already gone beyond Latin America in material achievements. Thus mimesis is not mere imitation, but a frantic search to keep pace with the advanced civilizations of Europe and now North America.

The tyranny of philosophic tradition rather than any specific objections to Vaz' humane outlook, is what has led to sharp criticisms of Vaz' confidence in the all-embracing nature of philosophy. What has arisen in the post-World War II period is a two-pronged critique of a heritage. On one hand, Latin American academies have witnessed a rapid spread of European existentialism with a distinctly radical filtering agent, in which rationalist philosophic ideas no less than bourgeois political commitments are submitted to withering criticism. From the other side has come criticism of philosophies which give advice to all manner of men on all subjects without even knowing the right questions, much less the correct answers. Here the type of view Vaz held is criticized for not realizing that modern science has changed the function of philosophy from that of metaphysical queen to one of logical guide.

However, before Vaz is peremptorily dismissed as an intellectual fossil, it might be noted that new currents in Latin American philosophy are no less mimetic and imitative of European styles than older traditions. Dilthey, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre for the existentialists; and Wittgenstein, Carnap, and Reichenbach for the philosophers of science, inform the new currents just as assuredly as Comtian positivism and *fin de siècle* vitalism were the prevalent styles of discourse in nineteenth century Latin America. Here, Vaz Ferreira, more clearly than his modernist contemporaries, realized the dangers lurking in imitativeness. For whatever the extent of Vaz' own indebtedness, indeed inability to extricate himself from nineteenth century French philosophy, he remained conscious of the need to preserve individualism in and of Latin America. He did not explicitly assert the existence of a Latin *weltanschauung*, rather he

offers a style of philosophizing—a talking directly to men rather than of men; a concern with the profane and ordinary no less than with the sacred and metaphysical; and a desire to preserve the values of the Hispanic inheritance as a unique binding element in culture.

Vaz was sharply critical of poets and literati who spoke of a “new Post War literature” as a functional concern for Latin Americans who never really suffered the agonies of international conflict. He had the same attitude toward composers who uncritically adopted European modes of classical music without giving thought to their own folk culture. Likewise, Vaz was uncommonly bitter in denouncing the South American’s propensity to imitate not only or even primarily the ideals of others, but their mannerisms; as if the Latin American must be consciously mimetic to be modern (XI: 207-214). Here I think Vaz makes out a strong case for a pluralistic attitude to culture that has as its aim not the denial of the universality of knowledge, but the individuality and historically conditioned differences of the peoples of the world. Vaz employed the concept of individualism as a bulwark against any sort of cultural imperialism, and as the cornerstone of a mature social philosophy.

In his profound belief in philosophy as a cultural force, Vaz gave expression to the love of the arts characteristic of the aristocratic and bourgeois strata in Latin American society. When reference is made to the specifically Hispanic spirit, what is usually denoted is the superiority of the life of art over the dehumanized life of technique. As a consequence, Vaz was critical of those theories of art evolved in sociological terms of crisis, decadence, periodization and revolution. His own catholic attitude was that art is a profound expression and summation of the total human experience.

Artistic progress is said to exhibit peaks and valleys rather than crisis and rebirths; the connection of art to social change is to be examined specifically before general correlates are offered. Art is further an experience marked off from ordinary experience by its moral qualities. It gives rise in each man to the good as well as the true. The beautiful in art is equivalent to the good in life (X:162, I:66-97). This definition derived from Guyau and Spencer, proved particularly antiseptic in a climate of warring ideologies that placed art at a tendentious level. I should think that Vaz was critical of the sociology of art, more as an outcry against its reduction to a political instrument, than as a consequence of a serious examination of this branch of esthetics. Vaz exhibited no knowledge of the scientific sociology of art developed in Germany by Lukacs, Hauser and Rennert. In effect, he counterposed art as a moral experience

with art as a social force; a perfectly harmonious set of considerations in an atmosphere less charged with making art a center of metaphysical speculation.

When Vaz dealt with moral issues, he was no less critical of those who spoke in Rousseau-like terms of degeneration. He viewed the material culture as increasing both the quantity and quality of values. Whereas in former ages, we have specialists in matters of morals, today, more people are becoming aware of moral alternatives. The very existence of options in a world of chance makes humanism a position rather than a posture. However, ordinary men still tend to take their morals as institutionally given. It remains true today, as always, that the forging of new vistas is a task for an intellectual élite, that is, for those sufficiently disturbed by the dominant values of society to effectively challenge them. What lends anguish to moral men is that they are, at one and the same time, individualists and citizens who feel a responsibility to the larger social community.

The man dedicated to public service whose personal beliefs clash sharply with a dictatorial political system; the patriotic soldier opposed to war on humanist grounds; the newspaperman forced to write daily opinions on subjects he feels ill-equipped to handle; the lawyer called upon to defend clients whose interests differ from his own—these illustrate for Vaz, the principle of the pluralistic dialectic, the openness of life and the polarities through which this openness is expressed in practice. (III:52-115). The basis of moral progress is thus the further expansion of material opportunities and the humanization of such opportunities so as to make possible a wider circle of ethically directed minds. Morality is the sincere attempt to understand the place of man in a cosmos open in both the present and the future (III:192). This is a viewpoint made popular in this century by Unamuno, with which Vaz' emphasis on the humanization of material life as the path to the ethical, has much in common (XIX: 17-61).

The importance of education, the perpetuation in Latin American philosophy of the Enlightenment search for the master key of social progress in knowledge, is reflected in the fact that five volumes of Vaz' *obras* are devoted to problems of education—from pedagogic techniques in the secondary schools to the role of students in higher learning. The centrality of education in Uruguay shows itself in three chief ways: its connection to the governmental machinery, its role in disseminating culture to the community, and the university as a center of political activity and advanced ideas about the running of society. The experience Vaz records reads like a prototype for

Uruguay's contiguous republics, Argentina and Brazil. In educational philosophy there was the parallel replacement of neo-scholasticism by the Comtist-positivist vision of the university as a community of scientists. This was followed by the rejection of "scientism" and "theologism" alike in favor of a middle way course. In Vaz' educational philosophy this takes the form of having the heart of the university the scientific and technical faculties, while its soul was to remain distinctly philosophic and literary. Vaz was the driving figure in making the Uruguayan educational system a dynamic investment in the future. Exaggerations in pedagogic techniques, striving for learning through memory, false theories of objectifying all learning, floss in textbooks and instruction, oversimplifications in subject-matter, authoritarian modes of learning and teaching, these are all carefully scrutinized and rejected in favor of democratic alternatives (XVII:107-210). Considering the extent to which Latin American schools are still dependent on rote learning and the supreme authority of the lecturer, Vaz' pedagogical philosophy can hardly be considered a series of antiquarian documents.

The collection of the major writings of Vaz Ferreira in a uniform and well printed edition is an event which is to be greeted with approbation by historians concerned with the human figures involved in shaping the Uruguayan experience, and no less, by the philosophical community in North America which has an obligation to examine and evaluate Vaz' attempt to fuse pragmatic and rationalist traditions.