

Journey with a Philosopher Poet

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Two Roads to Ignorance: A Quasi-Biography, by Eliseo Vivas, *Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979.*
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ELISEO VIVAS is a breaker of molds. He is a philosopher who has the audacity to take poets seriously; a conservative who deserted liberalism and a flirtatious Marxism; a metaphysician who abandoned naturalism when it was in its prime, all decked out in artificial Answers to Perennial Questions. Through all these twists and turns Vivas has evidenced a commitment to "the truth as it has been given me to see it"—which is to say (as must be the case with any honest man) haltingly, fleetingly, and heavy with doubt. His path has led him to ignorance, which, being Socratic, is essential wisdom. The journey has been at times painful and is strewn with the corpses of discarded beliefs, debunked myths, old allegiances, and former "friends" who regarded Vivas' shredding of convictions as a form of desertion, a personal affront, or a threat to their own sense of worth.

This book describes the journey. Several chapters have appeared in *Modern Age* during the past year or so in the form of separate essays, but they make even better reading in the context they were designed to fit: a book that is unusual and in its way highly original. Ostensibly a story about Alonzo Quijano, the author's alter-ego, the format provides a vehicle that permits Vivas the flexibility to mix fact with fancy and philosophy with poetry. The result is a fascinating chronicle written in Vivas' inimitable, highly charged style that reveals something about Vivas, but even more about the world in which he lives: a world in which many so-called lovers of wisdom turn out to be high priests of the goddess Ego, more committed to career and to their own particular version of "The Truth" than they are to the disinterested pursuit of

knowledge; a world in which "conservatives" sometimes exhibit more concern about preserving their wealth than they do their culture; a world in which academia is rank with petty jealousies and backbiting among pathetically small men and women; a world in which learning must go on *despite* the proselytizing of would-be "teachers"; a world in which "tragedy is an essential element." The description has a familiar ring to it. This is not only Vivas' world; it is our world as well.

Vivas spends the first several chapters of the book dealing with Alonzo's life, for the most part, and then shifts his attention to the level of Alonzo's intellectual development. The transition is made nicely by means of a careful critique of Marxism, leading him to a sustained examination of naturalism, which "claimed to give an account, consonant with the sciences, and therefore in harmony with the spirit of the age, of the whole range of human experience. . . ." Alonzo discovers gradually that naturalism is inadequate, "indifferent to some aspects of experience, that it is myopic or utterly blind toward some, and that it misunderstood others." Chiefly, naturalism discounts value, mystery, and the tragic dimension of human life; it cannot account for conscience and the miracle of human creativity. Alonzo's careful and sympathetic reading of the poets made it impossible for him to return to the perspective of John Dewey and other neo-positivists and see anything but distortions and half-truths. "An adequate philosophy," concluded Alonzo, "one equal to the requirements of a whole man, not of a man with vision dimmed by scientific faith and Pelagian optimism, should have something to say about the cluster of values and dis-values that men cannot successfully turn their face from."

It is relatively simple to direct arrows at the enemy camp from a distance, but Vivas has for many years aimed blows at naturalism from within the enemy camp. Vivas' criticisms

of naturalism are systemic. His charge that naturalism rests on "faith" is especially interesting precisely because the naturalist regards faith as something unseemly—something one does not discuss in polite company. But surely Vivas is correct: the naturalist *assumes* that his methods will rout out the previously unknown—given enough time—and display it for all to see. This assumption is obviously a matter of faith, since there appear to be a number of blind alleys and pitfalls along the way to absolute naturalistic certainty, and it may not be humanly possible to avoid them. One example of this faith is the "missing link" that anthropologists have sought for years. The presence of this faith alongside the other clinical elements of the naturalistic account of man's origins comprises a blatant systemic flaw in the naturalistic account of the descent of man. Vivas puts it as only he can:

There are all kinds of men, and women, too. You have to learn to live with them—No, not with them, but next to them. Some put their faith in the classless society and some in free enterprise; some in the commissars and some in the New Deal; some in Mao and some in the Mau-Mau. The Simbas put it in *dawa*. If men have faith in *dawa* and in figurines, why not in naturalism? Surely what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander? But it isn't. Naturalism repudiates faith and claims to be founded on scientific evidence. What is *dawa*? you ask. Let me tell you. If you rub it on you, bullets can't touch you.

The Freudian and Darwinian animals reside in a world of fact but also in a world of value. And above all else, it is the naturalist's rejection of value that led to Vivas' rejection of naturalism and the development of his axiological realism.

Vivas' rejection of naturalism went hand in glove with his rejection of liberalism: his conviction that values have "status in being" involved him in the philosophy of conservatism, since the values that constitute culture are values that must be preserved by that culture or it cannot survive. In his discussion of

the "ontic hypothesis," then, Vivas expresses his deep personal concern that his prior commitment and the commitment of so many others to liberalism and the cult of progress had been in large measure responsible for the terror and brutality that arose out of Europe in the 30's and 40's. "What had happened then? Hard as it was, he had to acknowledge to himself that until then he had emphasized the evil and had not looked at the good that actually abounded around him, that he had seen nothing but evil, and had deluded himself that in the place of evil, perfection or something close to it could be placed; it was hard to acknowledge that evil cannot be done away with. . . ." Thus do the threads of Vivas' critique of naturalism and liberalism come together with his axiological realism and his conservatism. The "ontic hypothesis" is the only hypothesis capable of giving an adequate account of human experience, and the hypothesis involves, for Vivas, a commitment to value and its preservation wherever possible.

There is much here to interest the philosopher and the student of twentieth-century American thought. But this book is primarily a biography, albeit an intellectual biography, and the question of whether as such it is *merely* personal must give the reviewer pause. The author's intellectual struggles are his own. But they resemble in all important respects the struggles of any honest thinker to find a defensible position from which to view his world. And it is this resemblance, made clear by the author's exemplary descriptive powers, that allows Vivas to escape the snare of self-indulgence. Clearly there is a personal and at times a caustic dimension to this book. Vivas occasionally discharges thinly disguised broadsides at foes who have crossed his path with sinister aspect and venom in their hearts. But these people are like the people we meet every day: "Maxie Waxie" is a specific personage, but he is also a token of a type we have all met and despised. In delivering these volleys, to be sure, Vivas indulges himself at the expense of the timid reader. But at the same time he uses these occasionally powerful emotional elements and blunt language to help him produce results that are

both graphic and revealing. Vivas does not flinch or hold back as he strips away layers of pretense, and some will doubtlessly find this unpleasant and distasteful. But upon reflection one must admit that there is important truth here, and in the end it is the book's relentless commitment to honesty, coupled with the author's abiding love of wisdom and eminently readable prose style, that raise the book to the level of the exceptional.

Two Roads to Ignorance: A Quasi-Biography is a book that informs and enlightens while at the same time it engages us fully. The final chapter alone would warrant the book's purchase, as it is superbly written and at times deeply moving. Like the book as a whole, it especially marks the philosopher-poet Vivas as an exceptional man—if we didn't know that already.